

THE CLOUDS OF SATURN

A Novel By

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Prologue

The sun is a variable star. Changes in solar output have sent glaciers marching toward the equator every fifty thousand years or so. The last such episode took place in late prehistoric times and coincided with the displacement of Neanderthal Man by the Cro-Magnons. Nor has Modern Man been immune to the effects of the sun's variability. During the Little Ice Age of the Sixteenth through Nineteenth Century, a minor reduction in solar output caused the harbors of Iceland and Greenland to be blocked by ice for 6 months out of every year. At least one Viking colony starved to death because of the climatic change.

It was not until the first decade of the Twenty Second Century, however, that humanity realized the true extent of Sol's variability. Beginning in 2102, the sun was wracked by a series of solar flares. As such, outbursts grew more frequent and violent; astronomers began to reexamine their long held beliefs about the nature of the sun. It was with understandable horror that they realized Sol was about to enter a period of long term instability. Projections called for the sun's output to increase gradually for several hundred years. While minor on the scale of the universe, the change would render Earth uninhabitable within a century. If nothing were done to stop it, the Mother of Men would become a twin to Venus -- a hothouse planet on which liquid water no longer existed.

Faced with extinction, the human race directed its considerable resources toward saving the home world. No possibility was overlooked. Many research efforts were launched in a period that became known as the Golden Age of Pure Science. Despite their best efforts, the scientists could find no practical method for bringing the errant star to heel. After decades of study, Earth's leaders reluctantly concluded that humankind would have to abandon its ancestral home. They began to search the Solar System for a place of refuge.

The haven they chose was not one many would have guessed.

Chapter 1: The Battle of New Philadelphia

Lars Sands lay in his acceleration couch and watched the dawn as *SparrowHawk* raced eastward at a thousand kilometers per hour. Dawn on Saturn was always spectacular, but never more so than on a battle morning. As the sun climbed the sky, it quickly transformed the world from a black and silver etching to a blue-white panorama of air and cloud. Lars watched as the rays of the sun chased azure shadows from the deep cloud canyons, and turned The Arch overhead into a pale ghost of its former self.

“Message coming in from *Delphi* .”

Sands glanced toward his copilot. Halley Trevanon was a brunette in her early twenties (Standard Calendar). Halley possessed a wide mouth, full lips, green eyes, and a scar that bisected her left eyebrow. She was scanning the sensor readouts that told them what ships were in their vicinity.

“Patch him through,” Lars said.

The communications screen on the instrument panel lit to show Dane Sands’s smiling face. Dane was Lars’s younger brother, and Halley’s fiancé.

“Hello, *SparrowHawk* ,” Dane said. “Get enough sleep last night?”

“You know damned well we didn’t!” Lars muttered back. Dane was serving aboard the New Philadelphia flagship, *Delphi* , some two hundred kilometers to their west. It was his task to act as liaison between *SparrowHawk* and her New Philadelphia employers. Like them, he had been at his post since just after Second Midnight when the first sighting reports had come in.

Five thousand kilometers to the east, a New Philadelphia scout had reported an unknown aircraft moving west at high speed. Although there had been no positive identification, the commodore commanding the New Philadelphia fleet had ordered his heavier-than-hydrogen craft launched. In the three hours since, *SparrowHawk* and the other ships of the fleet had been on guard for an approaching enemy. Despite their efforts, they had detected nothing.

“I’ve got some news for you,” Dane answered. “It looks like last night was a false alarm. *Dakota* may have suffered a sensor glitch caused by atmospheric conditions.”

Lars nodded. Saturn’s thick atmosphere of closely packed hydrogen atoms did strange things to radar performance. Eddy currents and vertical convection cells created ghosts that looked like the wake of a fast moving aircraft. Such mistakes were common.

“What are our orders?”

Dane glanced at something out of camera range. “I show you two hundred kilometers east of *Delphi* .”

“Correct.”

“Why don’t you work your way back in this direction? If nothing has shown up by the time you arrive, we will take you back aboard. You should be here in time for breakfast.”

“Understood,” Lars said. “We’re turning now.”

He pulled his control to the left and back slightly, sending *SparrowHawk* into a gentle turn. As he did so, Dane Sands asked, “How’s my girl?”

“Excited, and a little scared,” Halley responded. Like Lars, she was encased in an environment suit, with her helmet visor up. Should the ship be holed, she could seal her suit in a matter of seconds. The other four crewmen aboard *SparrowHawk* were similarly attired.

“Don’t wear yourself out,” Dane said. “The high command here is still hoping our show of strength will cause the Alliance to back off. We know their fleet left Cloudcroft three days ago, but we still have no evidence that they are coming here.”

“Do you really think that, my love?”

Dane flashed her his most lopsided grin. “That’s the way we’ve been betting all along, isn’t it?”

Larson Sands said nothing. Over the past few weeks, he had started to wonder if their bet had been a wise one. The Delphis were expert geneticists who had long pursued the dream of engineering a life form that could live in the upper Saturnian atmosphere. Rumors that they had developed a viable organism had reached the Northern Alliance, causing it to invite New Philadelphia to join them. The invitation had been couched in terms that caused the Delphis to look to their defenses.

As was the case with most independent cities, New Philadelphia could not afford a full time navy to challenge the larger, more powerful Saturnian “nations.” Rather, they maintained the core of a fighting force that could be rapidly expanded in time of trouble. In addition to a few customs ships, they had turned one of their large air freighters into a powerful flagship and mobile base. To supplement this fleet, they had sent recruiters throughout the northern hemisphere looking for privateer ships and crews.

The Sands brothers and Halley Trevanon had met the Delphi recruiters in a bar aboard Pendragon City. Lars still remembered the plump songstress who belted out *The Ballad of Lost Earth* while the Delphi recruiters made their pitch. Afterward, Dane Sands had argued in favor of taking the job. He had thought it easy money, a simple show of force to convince the Alliance that their gain would not be worth the cost.

It was an argument that had the benefit of history on its side. For if there was one thing all the cloud cities of Saturn shared, it was their vulnerability to attack. When a single fanatic with a bomb could send an entire population plummeting into the crushing pressure of the lower atmosphere, those who ruled thought long and hard before challenging their neighbors. If faced with a large enough opposition force, the Alliance would forego its claim on New Philadelphia lest they place their own cities at risk.

Larson Sands and Halley Trevanon had been less certain about the job, but neither had voiced a strong objection to wearing the New Philadelphia livery. At the time, *SparrowHawk*’s fusion reactors had been more than a standard year past recommended overhaul. Worse, the ship’s half-dozen crewmen had not been paid in months. They had needed the money too badly to say no.

That had been three months ago. For some time after their arrival aboard the Delphis’ capital city, it had appeared the diplomats would resolve the dispute. A week earlier, however, the Alliance ambassador had broken off negotiations. The New Philadelphia high command had also received reports that the Alliance fleet had sortied.

New Philadelphia responded by launching their own fleet. They had sent ships east along the North Temperate Belt flyway to interpose themselves between New Philadelphia's three cities and the Alliance. Their presence there was both a challenge and a warning. While it would be a simple matter for the Alliance to bypass the Delphi flagship and her covey of fusion powered aircraft, to do so would leave their own cities open to attack. If they were serious about annexing New Philadelphia, they would first have to seek out the New Philadelphia fleet and destroy it. The Delphis hoped to inflict enough damage that the Alliance would lose interest and go home.

As *SparrowHawk* came westward, it did not take long for New Philadelphia's massive flagship to materialize out of the blue haze of distance. *Delphi* was an anachronism, a machine from out of another time and place. It was a dirigible, a giant gasbag half-a-kilometer in length whose whale shape traced its ancestry back to the earliest flying machines. Large stabilizers sprouted from the airship's stern, while the bow was a blunt curve that sliced the wind with minimum resistance. Behind the great dirigible roiled a long streamer of disturbed air that marked the flagship's exhaust. Where cargo hatches had once been, there were now weapons locks, long-range sensors, and sally ports.

Heavier than hydrogen craft like *SparrowHawk* had their uses, but eventually, they had to land. The giant lighter-than-hydrogen dirigibles like *Delphi* provided them with a place to set down. Like the ancient aircraft carriers of Earth, they were the roving bases from which the smaller craft launched their attacks. However, like those earlier behemoths, the flagship was a fragile construct. It depended on its squadrons for protection.

"Attention, All Ships! Enemy craft sighted. Fifteen hundred kilometers at ninety degrees. All craft form up on Avadon. Prepare to attack!"

Lars glanced once at Halley. The voice was that of Commodore Kraken, the Delphi commander. A flurry of orders came over the command circuit from Dane as the battle center of the flagship came alive. Lars looped *SparrowHawk* well behind *Delphi* in order to take his place in the defensive line. There were twenty-one New Philadelphia craft in all. Eighteen of these were assigned to intercept the intruders and to drive them back.

"Everyone tied down?" he asked over his intercom.

SparrowHawk's four crewmen checked in. Ross Crandall was attending the ship's fire control computer. Brent Garvich and Hume Bailey were at weapons stations, while Kelvor Reese monitored the ship's auxiliary systems.

When the squadron defending *Delphi* had formed up, they accelerated to two thousand kilometers per hour. Even at that speed, they had not exceeded sonic velocity in Saturn's hydrogen-helium atmosphere.

The two fleets closed to maximum range and began their first cautious probings of one another's formations. In the thick atmosphere, lasers were limited to short range. Thus, the sky was filled with missiles as ships launched at their distant adversaries. Within seconds, individual sparks of light began to appear as enemy missiles came within laser range and were blotted from the sky.

The two dozen Alliance ships bored in to engage the mixed privateer/Delphi force. The two fleets interpenetrated. Within seconds, the sky was filled with twisting, turning ships that stabbed at one another in a deadly dance.

The Alliance drew first blood as they blasted the wing off one of the Delphi customs craft. Sands watched as the small vessel healed over and began its long dive toward the invisible hydrogen sea two thousand kilometers below. There was no fire because there is no oxygen in Saturn's atmosphere to support combustion. While he watched, a small object separated from the single seat fighter and grew

into a silver balloon with a tiny figure suspended beneath it.

Assured that the pilot had gotten out, Lars went back to the battle. The next two craft to take hits belonged to the Alliance. One of their prowlers was struck amidships by a missile that exploded it. The rain of parts was such that Sands doubted anyone had survived. The second ship, a larger destroyer, took a missile in its reactor spaces. The results were less spectacular, but sufficient to cause it to withdraw.

“We’re winning!” Halley exclaimed after she launched a missile that was destroyed by laser fire scant meters from its target. Even though vaporized, the cloud of molten drops splattered across the wing surfaces of its target, causing it to follow its wounded companion east.

“They’re not as strong as we were led to believe,” Lars said through gritted teeth.

Another Delphi ship died within the next few seconds, along with one of the larger Alliance craft. By now the dogfight was spread across so much sky that *SparrowHawk* appeared alone. The only nearby ship was a single seat Alliance fighter. Sands bore in as his opponent attempted to flee. His concentration was broken by a sudden cry for help.

“Attention All Ships! This is Delphi. We are under attack. The group you have engaged is a diversion. The main fleet is here. All ships to us!”

“Damn!” Sands exclaimed. A high gee turn transformed the curse into an unintelligible grunt. Once lined up to the west, he advanced his throttles to emergency maximum and felt *SparrowHawk* leap forward.

“What’s your situation, Dane?” he asked over his private command circuit.

Dane’s face was wide eyed as he came on the screen. Lars did not know when he had seen his brother so frightened.

“They came out of the cloud wall, Lars! Nearly thirty of them. They are boring in on the flagship. Our combat air patrol has gone out to meet them. We are running west as fast as we can. I don’t think we’re going to make it.”

“We’re on our way.”

“Hurry, damn it!”

“How many others are with us?” Lars asked Halley.

She made a quick sensor survey of the sky. She noted six other craft with the green New Philadelphia icon. There were a dozen enemy vessels behind them. The rest of the Delphi fleet was still engaged and unable to break free.

“We should have known something was wrong. No one sends a two dozen ships to attack a city.”

“Do you think Dane’s in danger?” Halley asked, horror suddenly creeping into her voice.

“I think we’re *all* in danger,” he replied grimly.

As they rocketed through the sky, Halley put up the long-range scanner display. What they saw sent a chill through Sands. A swarm of red icons was being opposed by three green while the flagship symbol attempted to flee. The defending New Philadelphia craft lasted only a few seconds before fluttering into the depths. They left twenty-eight intact Alliance craft free to swarm around *Delphi*.

“That’s it,” he said as the Alliance fleet reached the flagship. “Kraken will have to surrender now.”

Almost as though the commodore had heard Sands’s comment, the call went out. The two privateers listened gloomily as the New Philadelphia commander struck his colors. One part of Sands was saddened by the loss, another part relieved. Dane would be interned for a while, but would eventually be freed. There was no reason for the Alliance to harm captured privateers.

“Let’s get away from here,” he ordered Halley. “We don’t want to be interned, too.”

“Right.”

Ahead of them, the flagship was just coming out of the blue. It was still so distant that they could not see the smaller Alliance ships darting around it. Lars was about to turn away when the first bright flash appeared on the upper surface of the dirigible.

“*What the hell?*”

“They’re attacking!” Halley screamed. “They’re not accepting the surrender.”

“Stand by,” Lars ordered. “We’re going in.”

It was impossible for *SparrowHawk* to move any faster. Despite its headlong speed through the thick atmosphere, it seemed they were barely moving as two more missiles impacted the flagship. Sands watched in horror as the dirigible split open like a ripe grape. With the central gasbag holed and the hot hydrogen spilled to the surrounding atmosphere, the ship was unable to support its own weight. It sagged in the middle, then broke in two as its keel snapped. The stern section, burdened by heavy drive reactors, began immediately to drop toward the distant cloud floor of the flyway. Freed of the weight of the stern, the bow bounced upward as men and machinery tumbled out through the gaping hole in the midsection.

It was then that Sands realized the attack had been no mistake. The bow section was obviously helpless as it rose out of control. Yet, the Alliance ships pressed their attack. More explosions rent the forward gasbags and the bow lost its lift. It, too, foundered and then started on a long downward spiral.

Lars Sands screamed in rage as he watched the calculated cold bloodedness of the attack. Dane was in the forward combat center. Every missile hit was like a knife into his own ribs. No longer was the Alliance shooting at a dangerous enemy craft. Honest battle had been transformed into the murder of helpless men and women.

SparrowHawk reached the Alliance fleet and launched every missile in her depleted magazines. The desperation attack took the Alliance by surprise. Three ships that had been vectored to intercept the surviving New Philadelphia craft were smashed. The resulting gap allowed *SparrowHawk* free passage through their defense line. The arrival of the rest of the New Philadelphia fleet kept the other Alliance ships too busy to pursue.

Sands dove for the falling flagship remnant, heedless of the pain in his ears as cabin pressure increased with each kilometer of altitude lost. It began to grow warm as well. By the time *SparrowHawk* overtook the bow section, *Delphi* had plunged twenty kilometers, yet was still under attack. With no missiles in his magazines, Sands ordered his weapons crews to slash at the marauders with defensive lasers.

The initial attack on *Delphi* had been centered on the dirigible’s upper surface in order to dump the hot hydrogen that buoyed the ship. Since most of *Delphi*’s lifeboats were housed atop the gasbag, these were destroyed in the first seconds. Still, there was the possibility that individual crewmen might yet bail

out. Sands kept *SparrowHawk* in a tight circle around the falling bow as he watched intently for the silver balloons of survivors. As the pressure and temperature continued to mount, the Alliance ships broke off the fight and climbed for the safety of the upper atmosphere. *SparrowHawk* continued its plunge alongside the doomed flagship.

“Come on, Dane! Get out!” Sands muttered to himself through clenched teeth as he kept one eye on the dirigible and another on the pressure readout. Beside him, Halley sobbed quietly. Sands’s universe narrowed to exclude everything but the falling airship until Ross Crandall’s growl came over the intercom.

“For God’s sake, Lars, break off! Cooking us won’t help Dane.”

Lars glanced once more at the outside temperature readout. Then, with his own sob, he pulled back on his controller and sent the ship into a flat circle. They did not gain altitude, but they were not losing any either. For the next minute, he watched as *Delphi*’s remains sank lower and lower. Finally, it disappeared into the cloud floor of the North Temperate Belt. As Sands scanned the sky, nowhere could he see the silver sphere of a rescue balloon.

He looked at Halley, who was staring at him. There was horror behind the glistening tears in her eyes. Suddenly, Sands felt an emptiness greater than any he had ever known.

“I’m sorry, Halley. He’s gone.”

His comment was answered by nothing save the rushing hydrogen wind beyond the hull.

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Chapter 2: Port Gregson

The Alouette Bar was on the outer rim of the Port Gregson support truss, beyond the protective enclosure of the gasbag, with picture windows overlooking the abyss. At one time, the place had boasted a balcony where patrons could step outside -- suitably bundled up against the cold and wearing a nose breather, of course. It had been the custom for drinkers to lean over the waist high railing and spit into the wind. The balcony had been closed when one expectorator had let go with too much enthusiasm, and had nearly followed his saliva into the misty depths.

For the past twenty minutes, Larson Sands had been eyeing the graphite railing through the floor-to-ceiling plastic window and thinking how easy it would be to end his problems forever. All that was required of him was to get up from the table, walk casually to the hydrogen lock, and step through. It would then be three long strides to the city’s outer edge. Once over the railing, Lars would have two thousand kilometers of empty sky in which to soar before plunging into the hydrogen sea that had swallowed Dane. Without a breather, he would pass out from asphyxiation long before the temperature or pressure rose to fatal levels. All things considered, not a bad way to go.

“Ready for another, Lars?”

His drinking partner’s question shook him out of his reverie. Ross Crandall was an old man for a privateer. At 45 standard years, he had been a hired mercenary for more than two decades. He had once had a ship of his own, but had lost it in a brushfire war five years earlier. After bouncing from ship to ship, he had joined *SparrowHawk* as a weapons specialist. It had been Crandall’s marksmanship that had cleared the way for them to go to the aid of the stricken *Delphi*.

“Sure, Ross.”

Crandall signaled for the waitress’s attention. She sauntered over to the table. She was a typical Gregsonite, a fact made obvious by a costume that left little to the imagination. Had Lars been in a better mood, he might have been interested in the wares she was so forthrightly advertising. As it was, Crandall ordered two more scotches while Lars stared off into space.

The bar was on the starboard side of the city, which meant that it faced south. The Arch was a pale rainbow of soft white light barely visible in the royal blue sky. From this latitude, it climbed nearly one-third to the zenith. The sun was low to the right, casting darkening shadows over the cloud canyons. In only a few minutes it would dip below the horizon and First Night would begin.

“Stop torturing yourself,” Crandall said. “Dane’s death wasn’t your fault.”

“It should have been me,” he muttered, his voice breaking with emotion. “Fleet liaison is my job. If I’d done my job, Dane wouldn’t have been aboard *Delphi* when she went down.”

“No, but you would have! You would now be dead and Dane and I would be having this conversation. Dane was a privateer. He knew what he was doing. In our line of work, people get killed.”

“But damn it, they’d surrendered!”

Crandall nodded. “And the Alliance shot them down anyway. Not too difficult to figure their motives, is it? Most of the New Philadelphia brass were aboard that ship. Better for the Alliance that they not be around to cause problems during the assimilation. Dane was just one of the poor bastards unlucky enough to be aboard the ship when the Alliance assassinated it.”

Sands did not answer. One part of him could see the logic of Ross’s words even though most of him burned with rage at the injustice of it all. Then there was the corner of his brain that remembered how he had always laughed at people who mentioned war and justice in the same breath.

Following the disappearance of *Delphi* into the mist, Sands had evaded the Alliance fleet by heading directly for the nearest cloud wall. In so doing, he had adopted the tactic that the Alliance had used to set up their ambush.

Unlike Earth, which is largely heated by the sun, Saturn derives most of its heat from internal processes. The predominant mechanism is the formation of helium droplets under high pressure. Once formed, the droplets fall as helium rain into the vast hydrogen sea that covers Saturn to a depth of several thousand kilometers. As the helium droplets sink, they generate heat. As the lower atmosphere is heated, vast columns of rising hydrogen form and produce convection cells that cover many thousands of kilometers. The cells are then smeared along the lines of latitude by the planet’s high rate of rotation, forming globe girdling linear storms that give the planet its characteristic banded appearance.

The rising legs of the convection cells are called Zones, and are characterized by dense clouds and unstable conditions. As the organic-molecule-laden hydrogen rises, it cools, causing its load of chemicals to condense out to form multihued clouds at various altitudes. Blue clouds of water vapor form a layer 500 kilometers deep in the atmosphere, while a layer of brown ammonia hydrosulfide mist forms a hundred kilometers higher still. A third cloud layer, this one composed of white ammonia ice, forms at a depth of 320 kilometers from the arbitrary line that marks the edge of the planetary atmosphere. Non-condensing particulates are carried above the ammonia cloud layer by the rising convection cells. There they form the high thin haze that softens the planet’s outlines and mutes its colors when viewed from space.

By the time the rising column of hydrogen reaches the top of its arc, it is cold and largely devoid of impurities. As the column falls back toward the depths, it sweeps away the clouds and creates vast canyons of clear, stable air. The astronomers dubbed these canyons “belts” because of their dark color. It is the alternating pattern of the broad light zones and narrow dark belts that form Saturn’s bands. By diving into the cloud wall, Sands had sent his ship across the zone - belt interface and into hiding.

Once he had won free of the battle area, Sands sought safety for his ship and crew in Port Gregson. He would have preferred a sanctuary farther from the Alliance, but the long dive into the thick, hot atmosphere near the bottom of the flyway had caused *SparrowHawk*’s reactor to overheat. By the time they regained the heights, Port Gregson had been one of the few independent cities within range of their stricken craft.

Port Gregson was a trading city that made its living by tacking back and forth across the six thousand kilometer wide North Temperate Belt and trading with the other cities as they sailed past. Because of their need to stay on good terms with everyone, they were neutral in the various rivalries of North Saturnian politics. They had a tradition of offering sanctuary to the vanquished so long as the refugees could pay their way. Sands used the last of his crew’s funds for the city’s mandatory docking and port fees.

In the past two weeks, he had contracted with the port authorities to repair and reprovision *SparrowHawk*. The work was nearly done and payment due. Unfortunately, Sands was broke. If he were lucky, the Port Gregson authorities would only throw him into jail when they realized the truth. Otherwise, they might decide to drop him over the side. On Saturn, the disposal of inconvenient corpses was a matter of the utmost simplicity.

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“You’re Larson Sands, aren’t you?”

Sands looked up bleary eyed at the speaker. His first impression was of an egg. When he focused his eyes, he saw that his interrogator was bald to the point where he lacked even eyebrows. Even though tall, the stranger was obviously not from Port Gregson. His clothes were conservative, but expensive, as was the gold bracelet he wore on one wrist. A diamond stickpin held his cravat in place. The stone dated from the time before Earth’s evacuation. It was priceless for that reason.

“Yes,” Sands answered warily.

“I am interested in hiring your ship. May I buy each of you a drink while we discuss it?”

“Sure,” Crandall replied for Sands. The mention of possible business sobered the old warrior faster than a cold needle shower.

The bald stranger sat down and made a show of taking off his leather gloves. These alone would have cost Lars his previous year’s earnings.

“Might we know your name?”

“Certainly. I am Micah Bolin.”

“Of what city?”

“That is not important at the moment. Let us just say that I am a citizen of Saturn.”

“Very well. You wish to hire our ship?”

“I do if you own that Air Shark Mark III down in the landing bay.”

“We do.”

“She’s beautiful,” Bolin said. “What power plant?”

“Twin Saturn Industries hundred megawatt drive reactors.”

“Range?”

“Enough for ten times around the planet,” Sands lied. When she had been new, *SparrowHawk* could have done it easily. In her present condition, once around would be risky. Still, at 375,000 kilometers in circumference, Saturn was a big world.

“Armament?”

“Up to one hundred air-to-air missiles with mixed seekers, full circumambient fire control, and two heavy turret mounted lasers.”

“I take it that you are between engagements,” Bolin said.

“You would have to be very ill informed not to know that,” Crandall replied.

“Your last employer?”

“New Philadelphia.”

“Ah, yes. The ill fated defense of those poor foolish cities,” Bolin said. “I thought as much. In fact, it was New Philadelphia’s loss that spurred me to come here in search of privateers. I figured at least some of you would put into Port Gregson to reprovision.”

“What’s the job?” Lars asked.

“The job is confidential. If you are free, I would like to discuss it at some length. If not, I don’t want to waste your time ... or mine.”

“We’ll always listen, Citizen Bolin.”

“Excellent.” Bolin fished in an inside pocket, retrieved a card -- of real paper -- and wrote a note on the back. He handed it to Sands. “Please meet me at this address at Second Dusk this evening. We’ll talk more fully then.”

Sands glanced at the address. It was in the warehouse district on the underside of the support truss. It was not the sort of neighborhood he would have expected someone who dressed as well as Bolin to visit.

“We’ll be there.”

“Not ‘we’, Captain. I want you to come alone. What I have to say requires the utmost discretion.”

“My crew will have to agree to whatever deal we make.”

“I understand that. However, I must insist that we keep our business quiet. Once you know the job, you will understand the need. Tonight at dusk?”

“Tonight at dusk,” Sands agreed.

“Excellent. I will be expecting you.” Bolin stood and walked away from the table. The two of them watched him go. Sands wished he had not drunk so much. He could not think with his head spinning and thought was what he needed most just now. Something about Bolin hadn’t rung completely true. Yet, considering the current state of their finances, they were in no position to be choosy.

As he downed one final gulp of scotch, he hoped Bolin did not know that.

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Kelt Dalishaar stood on the balcony of his apartment in Government Tower and surveyed his domain. It was near first midnight, with The Notch almost directly over the city. The Notch was the region of the ring eclipsed by Saturn’s shadow. One look at its position in the night sky told one the time to within a few minutes.

Saturn’s rings never failed to fascinate Dalishaar. Their intricate structure was apparent even to the unaided eye. From one of the cloud cities, The Arch looked to have the texture of an ancient phonograph record. With even a small telescope it was possible to see the twisting strands of the F Ring and the spokes that had so surprised Earthbound astronomers when first they had noticed them. Gazing at the proportion of the sky that The Arch covered, it was easy to forget that the whole imposing display consisted of a band of ice particles only a few hundred meters thick. Dalishaar remembered a trip to the southern hemisphere many years earlier. As their suborbital transport had reached the apex of its trajectory, the sun had slipped into eclipse behind a knife-edged ring. It had been a moment that had disturbed him greatly, for it had been a reminder of just how insignificant human beings are on the scale of the universe.

Dalishaar let his gaze sweep down the darkened horizon to where the base of The Arch dropped behind the cloud walls of the North Temperate Belt. Stretched out as far as he could see were the cities of the Northern Alliance. In two weeks, they would be passing the Dardenelles Cyclone. The cyclone was a giant storm that intruded into the flyway, narrowing it to less than one-quarter its normal six thousand kilometer width. Since even the cyclone’s outermost winds could blow a cloud city off course, the storm was always given a wide berth. They would be literally hugging the northern cloud wall of the flyway during the passage.

The move north took place at approximately the same time every standard year as the Alliance’s swift passage around Saturn brought it into phase with the equally swift moving thousand-year-old storm. As the fifty Alliance cities maneuvered into line astern order, they bunched closer than at any other time. The sight was a reminder that the Alliance was growing steadily year-by-year.

Kelt Dalishaar had often thought that he had been born into the wrong century. Back before the sun had gone awry, the human race had seemed to be evolving toward maturity. The ancient nation-states and their inefficient partitioning of resources had slowly given way to a larger international order. In another few centuries, the human race would have been truly united for the first time in its history.

The discovery that the sun was flaring out of control had actually accelerated the process for a time. For more than a hundred years, humans had put aside their bickering to work together against the traitor star. At first, they had tried to find a way to protect the home planet. When that had failed, they had cooperated in evacuating the race to the upper reaches of Saturn’s atmosphere. Most had expected the cooperation to continue. They had been badly mistaken.

The advent of the cloud city had brought with it a disintegration of human social order. On Earth, people had largely been confined to the nations into which they were born. That was because their cities were tied to a particular geographic location. The free flying cities of Saturn, however, could go where they

would. Thus, it was easy for a dissident city to seek other associations if they were unhappy with their rulers. Though some hailed this as an expansion of freedom, Kelt Dalishaar saw it as the road to anarchy. It was his goal and that of the Northern Alliance to someday bring Saturn under a single political administration.

As he gazed at the line of cities astern, Dalishaar's eyes dropped to the lights of Cloudcroft itself. The habitat barrier was close enough above him that he could feel the heat radiating from the main hydrogen gasbag overhead. Although transparent and relatively non-reflecting, the barrier did reflect those lights out near the edge of the city. The reflections created a phantom line of illumination just beyond the city's rim, a "barrier reef" as Dalishaar was fond of calling the illusion.

His attention was drawn to a line of strobing lights far off in the distance. He recognized the hull beacons of an approaching ship. It was, he decided, one of the big dirigibles transporting prisoners from New Philadelphia. He scowled as he remembered how the Militarists had pushed their plan to conquer the geneticists through the Alliance Council. The council had adopted the scheme against Dalishaar's advice. The Militarists were now stronger because of their success.

Like all members of the council, Dalishaar believed in the Alliance's manifest destiny to one day rule Saturn. Still, he found the Militarists' impatience to be childish. Didn't the fools understand that there were other ways to unification than conquest? Given time, the Delphis could have been made to see the advantages of peaceful assimilation. Moreover, if they had remained reluctant, there were still economic and political pressures that could have been brought to bear. As it was, the Militants had gotten their way and thereby put every independent city on Saturn on their guard. This was an especially bad time to remind them that they had an expansionist power in their midst.

If only the damned admirals had waited until...

Dalishaar clamped down on the thought as quickly as it flowed into his brain. The admirals were ignorant of his special project and he intended to keep them that way. They would learn nothing until he had consolidated his own position and fought back this latest danger to his personal power. So careful was he about keeping the secret that he did not even allow himself to think about it. That way he would be less likely to whisper something in his sleep. Not only did an occasional eavesdropping device turn up in his apartments, at least one of his mistresses was in the pay of the Militarists.

Chapter 3: Kimber

Port Gregson was a typical Saturnian cloud city. Lift was provided by heated hydrogen trapped inside a ten-kilometer diameter gasbag. A light support truss stretched across the gasbag at its equator and was attached to the ultra-strong membrane around its periphery. The support truss was the structural base to which the city's buildings were anchored. A fusion powerplant was suspended ten kilometers below the city proper where it hung like the basket of an ancient terrestrial balloon. The powerplant provided the energy to heat the hydrogen inside the gasbag and produce the buoyancy that kept Port Gregson and its inhabitants aloft in the clouds.

From above, Port Gregson looked like an earthbound city of an earlier century. Imposing (but lightweight) edifices were interspersed between wide thoroughfares and greenswards. Only when one approached the city from below was it obvious that its habitable volume extended throughout the open framework of the truss. Not only were structures built atop the deck that covered the truss, they were buried within its volume and suspended by cables from its lowest levels. Around the truss edges were a

series of portals through which aircraft entered and left the city. Also buried inside the support truss were the giant maneuvering engines that allowed Port Gregson to tack back and forth across the flyway.

A few hundred meters above the upper deck, a transparent membrane covered the city. This was the habitat barrier inside which the city engineer maintained a breathable mixture of oxygen and helium. Since both the habitat barrier and the gasbag were transparent, inhabitants strolling through the city's parks had the illusion of being outdoors beneath Saturn's rich blue sky.

Like the other cloud cities, Port Gregson hovered at the 500-kilometer depth in Saturn's atmosphere. At that level, the temperature remained near the freezing point of water. Atmospheric pressure was ten times what had existed at Earth mean sea level before the sun flared, but Saturn's low-density hydrogen-helium atmosphere robbed the wind of much of its force. This combination of high pressure, low density, and moderate temperature was surprisingly Earth-like for a world that orbited one-and-a-half billion kilometers from the sun.

Nor were those the only aspects of the Saturnian environment that were Earth-like. With an overall density only 60% that of water and a diameter of 120,000 kilometers, Saturn's surface gravity at the poles was only 16% greater than Earth standard. The planet's high rate of spin further reduced the gravitational pull. As one approached the equator, centrifugal force subtracted from gravity until it was slightly less than Earth-normal. Overall, a comfortable environment for the refugees from the inner solar system.

The Saturnian day was an annoyingly short one, however. The planet rotated on its axis every 10 hours and 40 minutes. Humanity had solved the problem by adopting a diurnal rhythm that encompassed two complete revolutions of the planet. Thus, each Saturnian 'day' was 21.3 hours long and included two sunrises and sunsets. The rising and setting of the sun divided the day into four parts that corresponded roughly to morning, afternoon, evening, and night. To keep the years straight, a calendar of 411 of the short Saturnian days had been adopted. The system was not perfect, but it simplified the problem of adapting to an alien world. Keeping accurate time was further complicated by the varying rates at which the winds blew the cloud cities around the planet, and the progression of seasons as the planet circled the sun once every 29.5 standard years.

Larson Sands thought of none of this as he made his way across the park that fronted the hotel where he and his people were staying. Saturn's gravity and length of day were as natural to him as breathing, as was the elevated timbre of human voices and other sounds transmitted through the city's helium-oxygen atmosphere. Indeed, he had heard recordings that had been modified to simulate what human voices would sound like in a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere. The women had all sounded like men and listening to the men had made his throat ache in sympathy.

The hotel was the Saturn Royale, the best in Port Gregson. When one is bankrupt, Sands reasoned, it is important to keep up appearances. Otherwise, the city's authorities might begin to wonder if *SparrowHawk*'s crew could afford all the port charges their ship was accumulating down in the landing bays. The secret to keeping out of debtor's prison was to ensure not only that the question was never asked, but also that it was never even considered.

As he made his way across the spongy surface of the park, past trees anchored in the light foam of their planters, Larson's thoughts were occupied by the coming interview with Micah Bolin. If anything, the uneasy feeling Sands had experienced in the bar was even greater now that he had had a chance to sober up. Whatever Bolin wanted from him, it was obviously not a normal privateer's contract. Those were concluded in lawyers' offices with bonus, penalty, and non-performance clauses spelled out for both sides in dreary detail. This furtive meeting in the bowels of the Port Gregson industrial district reeked of something else entirely.

Larson found a lift and pressed the call button. Moments later he was dropping swiftly toward the lower levels of the support truss. When he stepped out, he found himself in an enclosed corridor deep in the heart of the city. This was a warehouse district where cargo was sorted and stored. Port Gregson's status as a trading city meant that work never truly ceased in the giant warehouses, but since Second Night was when most people slept, Larson Sands found the corridor deserted.

Sands walked briskly toward the address scrawled on the back of the card he had been given. The meeting place was at the end of a side corridor in a part of the city where factory space was available on a short-term lease. He rapped quickly on the closed door. A moment later, it opened and he found himself facing a hard-eyed guard.

"I'm here to see Citizen Bolin."

The guard gestured for him to enter. Sands did so and found himself in a large compartment whose sole furnishings consisted of a table, a few chairs, and a battered autokitchen. An upper level office jutted out over the warehouse facility. The translucent office window glowed with interior light. The guard directed Sands up a set of stairs. He climbed them quickly and was about to knock when Micah Bolin opened the office door.

"Come in, Sands. Welcome." The bald man held out a hand and grasped Larson's in a firm grip. Bolin was still dressed in the expensive suit and jewelry that he had worn in the Alouette Bar. Something about his posture suggested to Sands that he was more at home in a uniform. What had begun as a stray thought quickly grew into a strong conviction as Sands watched his potential client move back to the desk at the far end of the enclosure. Bolin walked in the unconscious gait of a man pacing the bridge of an airship.

The furnishings inside the office were only slightly less spartan than those outside. Whoever Bolin was, he obviously had not been the occupant for long and did not appear to be staying for any great period. Bolin offered him a seat in front of the battered desk on which an electronic tablet was open and operating.

"Coffee?"

"Thank you, yes."

Bolin spoke briefly into the comm unit on his wrist, and moments later, Sands heard a set of footsteps climbing the stairs outside. The door opened and a third man appeared. He had a military air about him, too. The -- orderly? -- poured coffee from a plastic brewer into two insulated cups, then handed one to Sands. The privateer checked the temperature indicator built into the side of the cup to make sure the liquid would not scald him. The action was purely automatic. At the atmospheric pressure under which Saturnians lived, water did not boil until it reached 180°C.

Micah Bolin took the second cup and set it on his desk. He then waited for the orderly to leave. The bald man regarded Sands with a penetrating gaze.

"Where were you born, Sands?" he asked without preamble when they were alone once more.

"Sorrell Three."

"That is in the South Equatorial Belt, is it not?"

Sands nodded. "It is now. We started out in the South Temperate Belt. They moved the city when I was ten. My father is still paying his share of the assessment."

"An agricultural city, isn't it?"

“We grew grapes and made them into wine.”

“Ah, yes. I had a glass of Sorrell champagne once. Quite tasty as I remember. How does the son of vintners get to be a privateer?”

Sands shrugged. “I didn’t want to be a farmer. You have me at a disadvantage, Citizen. You have told me precious little beyond your name. Who do you represent?”

“That is confidential.”

“I won’t work blind.”

“You won’t have to. But you will learn the name only when I’m ready to tell you.”

“I can keep a secret,” Sands replied. “A privateer who can’t keep his mouth shut concerning his clients quickly discovers that he has none.”

“The same goes for people in my profession,” Bolin said.

“Then you aren’t representing your own city?”

“No, of course not. Like you, I am a professional. I was engaged by my sponsors to find someone to do a job for them.”

“What sort of job?”

“A raid. Although it is to look like a simple grab for resources, the primary purpose is to bring political pressure to bear.”

“A raid against what city?”

Bolin smiled. The expression did not help his looks. “That information will come later as well. First I must know whether you are the right man for the job.”

“You seem to have learned a great deal about me already. What more do you need to know?”

“I have garnered mere facts. Now I must know what sort of man you are.” Bolin glanced down at the desk. He reached out to key his electronic tablet. There was a quiet beeping noise after which Bolin began to read aloud as glowing text scrolled up the flat screen. “Larson Clarke Sands. Age 32. As you said, the son of prosperous merchants aboard Sorrell 3. You attended the Aeronautical School at Nueva Rhoelm briefly, but left after getting into a fight with one of the other students. You returned home, tried to work in the family business, then joined a privateer crew under Gentleman Jacques Le Vecque. You took part in the Battle of the Cusp on the winning side. You used your bonus to invest in a ship of your own. You returned home briefly to recruit your younger brother. The two of you served a number of cities over the last five years. Your brother was killed two weeks ago during the battle between New Philadelphia and the Northern Alliance and you have been grieving his loss ever since.”

“You didn’t come to Port Gregson looking for just any privateer,” Sands said, trying to control his rising anger. “Why me?”

“You would seem to be uniquely suited to the task at hand. Tell me, why did you sign up with New Philadelphia? Surely you must have known that the Delphis would be no match for the Alliance.”

Sands shrugged. “We didn’t expect the argument to come to blows. We thought a good show of force would be enough to dissuade the Alliance. Obviously, we were wrong. They were set on annexing

another helpless city and nothing we could have done would have stopped them.”

“You believe the Alliance to be imperialistic then?”

“Anyone who doesn’t is a fool.”

“How would you like the opportunity to avenge your brother’s death?”

Sands sat suddenly upright, a surge of adrenaline boiling through his veins. He had thought of little else these past two weeks. Despite his reaction, he answered cautiously, “How do I go about doing that?”

“The Alliance is pressuring my sponsors to join them. Those I serve would like to divert their attention.”

“By raiding them?”

Bolin nodded.

“What do they want us to do? Waylay one of their freighters?”

Bolin’s eyes flashed with some inner emotion. After a moment, he said, “Nothing so minor. The target is to be Cloudcroft, the Alliance capital!”

#

Kimber Crawford sat in the spacecraft lounge and watched the deep canyon of North Temperate Belt glide by around her. Kimber was dark haired, with a wide face that had inherited the best traits of several of her polyglot ancestors. Like most Titanians, she was well above average in height. Titan had largely been settled by people from Luna to whom Saturn’s gravity had seemed oppressive. Although fifty percent larger than Earth’s moon, Titan’s lower density gave it a nearly identical gravity field. As humanity had learned early in the twenty-first century, people who live under low gees tend to grow tall.

It had been five hours since the Titanian freighter had slipped under the Ring to enter the vast envelope of hydrogen and helium that is Saturn’s atmosphere. Four times the ship dipped among the outermost wisps of gas before rising once again to space. Each entry shed part of the freighter’s 23 kilometer per second orbital speed. After three hours spent porpoising between atmosphere and vacuum, the freighter dove into the rarified atmosphere for the last time. As it dropped toward the distant cloud tops, it was bathed in a sheath of superheated plasma that lit up the Saturnian night.

The full entry into atmosphere was the most dangerous part of any ship’s return from space. If a vessel’s entry angle were too steep, its wings would snap off under the stress and its broken body would plunge out of control toward the unseen liquid hydrogen sea below. Kimber could not imagine a more horrible death than lying strapped into an acceleration couch while waiting to be crushed and broiled to death.

She was breathing easier now that particular danger was past. The freighter had successfully made the transition from spaceship to fusion-powered aircraft an hour earlier, and was even now approaching Cloudcroft. It was Second Night outside and Kimber could make out the bright string of pearls in the distance that were the Alliance cities. She felt rather than heard the change in the ship’s engines as the captain reduced power for the final approach. The change caused a transformation in her mood. She had been sightseeing primarily to take her mind off the difficult task ahead. Now that they were almost there, she reviewed the speech she would give at the welcoming ceremony that waited in Cloudcroft’s landing bay. This was her first diplomatic mission and she was anxious to see it succeed.

Because Saturn’s rocky core was covered by several thousand kilometers of superhot liquid hydrogen under enormous pressure, the planet’s supply of metals was beyond reach. For that reason, humanity

depended on Saturn's moons for its stocks of metals and a number of important inorganics. There were mining colonies on Dione, Rhea, and Titan. The mines on Titan were the largest and most productive, making the Titanian colonists a power to be reckoned with.

Envon Crawford, Kimber's father, was the Factor of Titan. Crawford had held his position for nearly twenty years and hoped that his daughter would one day succeed him in office. To this end, he had begun Kimber's training at an early age. When she was old enough, he had dispatched her to Oxford-in-the-Clouds, the preeminent university on Saturn. Four years of hard work had earned her a Masters Degree in Industrial Economics. She had planned to go for her doctorate, but had been called home when her mother fell ill two years earlier. She acted as her father's hostess at official functions following her mother's death. To her own surprise, she discovered a talent for the give and take of diplomacy. As part of her training, the elder Crawford appointed her to head the annual trade mission to negotiate copper prices with Titan's largest customers. Their first stop was to be the Northern Alliance.

"We're beginning our approach to Cloudcroft, Miss Crawford," a voice said from behind her. "Captain Nyquist says that you can observe from the cockpit if you like."

"I would like that a lot, Miles!" she told the grizzled flight engineer *cum* steward.

The freighter's pilot glanced over his shoulder as she entered the darkened cockpit. Saturn's ring was a broad arch to their left and Cloudcroft was a brilliantly lit pearl directly ahead. Far off through the night, she could see the lightning flashes that punctuated the flyway's nearby wall. The laminar flow that marked the flyway came to an abrupt end at the cloud wall. Any city that crossed the boundary was liable to be torn asunder within a few minutes. Even if they survived, the first rainstorm they encountered would so weigh them down with condensate that they would slip into the depths.

As they approached the lighted balloon that was their destination, they were able to make out a thin dark band circling its waist. This was outer edge of the support truss. Flashing lights marked the openings where ships could slip inside the vast structure. The freighter banked and slowed, suddenly dropping to a speed where the wind whistling across the wings could no longer support its weight. There was another change in the pitch of the engines as the underjets came alive. The freighter slowed even more.

"Cloudcroft Approach Control, this is *Gotham* out of Titania. We are in your outer approach zone, ready to come aboard."

"We have you on our screens *Gotham* . Place your controls into auto."

"Auto engaged."

"Very well *Gotham* . You will be arriving in Landing Bay Number Six. Stand by."

The pilot removed his hands from the controls and sat back in his seat. The freighter hovered for a moment longer, then smoothly slid forward. The city grew until it filled the windscreen. Kimber watched as the landing hatch swelled to displace everything else in view. Then, with a barely perceptible bump, they were down on the landing ledge that jutted out from the cavernous open bay. A few seconds later, mechanical arms reached out to hook a cable into the spacecraft's nose and they were pulled inside the oversize shiplock.

Once through the lock, they found themselves in a giant bay lit by overhead flood lamps. A crowd of dignitaries began to form up on the far side as Kimber slid out of her seat. She took a deep breath and headed for the midships lock. The moment of truth was upon her.

Chapter 4: Plot and Counterplot

“Raid Cloudcroft? *Are you out of your fucking mind?*”

Bolin leaned back in his chair and gazed at Sands through steepled fingers. “I don’t believe so. Are you saying that it can’t be done?”

“I’m saying that only a fool would try! The Alliance fleet is the strongest in the North Temperate Belt. Believe me, I should know! If we were to approach within a hundred kilometers without clearance, they would blast us out of the sky.”

“What if a way can be found through the patrols and sensor nets? What if you could board Cloudcroft undetected?”

“Then we might get away with some loot. But it’s still a lousy idea.”

“Why?”

“Look, Citizen,” Sands said, “a successful privateer needs more than a fast ship and a crew willing to risk their lives. Raiders who want to die in bed learn to choose their targets with the same care they put into the genetic makeup of their children. First, there is the matter of finding the right victim. You need a city that has accumulated enough wealth to justify the risk, but not so much that they can put a lot of resources into retribution. Once raided, most cities would rather strengthen their defenses than fund a punitive expedition. The Northern Alliance looks at things differently. If we are successful, there will be no escape for my crew and me. They will track us to Alpha Centauri if they have to. Once they’ve caught us, they’ll wring the name of your sponsor out of us and then send a fleet to punish them.”

“And if we can keep you and your people safe?”

“They’ll still have their suspicions.”

“That you can count on,” Bolin said. “In fact, *we* are counting on it. Without evidence, however, their suspicions will be unfocused. They will lead the Alliance leaders to become frustrated and more than a little paranoid. They will suspect everyone and launch an investigation. That will monopolize their attention for a very long time, thereby taking the pressure off my clients.”

“You hope,” Lars said sarcastically.

“Believe me, Sands, we have planned this most carefully. The operation is far subtler than it might first appear. By raiding Cloudcroft, we will be exploiting an existing schism in the Alliance leadership. The New Philadelphia crisis was precipitated by the Militarists on the Alliance Council. Kelt Dalishaar, the first councilor, opposed them on the matter. He is an Accretionist; one who believes that the Alliance goal of worldwide hegemony is better served through subversion and the use of political and economic pressure. The Militarists’ apparent success has badly damaged his prestige. That is why he is behind the effort to pressure my clients into joining the Alliance. He is trying to rehabilitate his position with the rest of the council.

“In raiding Cloudcroft, we have the opportunity to embarrass both factions. The ruling council believes their cities to be impregnable. We will prove them wrong. If we are successful, the council is likely to dissolve into an orgy of recriminations. At the very least, we hope to topple the militarist leadership. With luck, we can damage the manifest destiny faction as well.”

“There is still the problem of keeping my identity and that of my people secret,” Sands said.

“You will, of course, be masked from head to toe.”

“What about my ship?”

“We will disguise that as well. The fact that you fly an Air Shark is one of the reasons I chose you. That is the vessel of choice among many civic navies. We will make it appear that your vessel is one of those disguised as a privateer. I have also arranged for one of the southern cities to employ you. As far as the records will show, you were a hundred thousand kilometers distant from Cloudcroft at the time of the raid.”

“Let’s hear your plan for approaching Cloudcroft undetected.”

Bolin nodded and keyed an instruction into his tablet. Using graphics screens, he detailed how the capital of one of Saturn’s most powerful nations could be approached without detection. Despite his wariness, Sands had to admit that the plan might work. It had the advantage of being both simple and clever, although possibly too much so. When the bald man finished, Sands shook his head.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to find someone else. I won’t risk my ship and crew on such a venture.”

“You haven’t asked about your fee.”

“Whatever you’re paying, it isn’t enough.”

Bolin continued with no sign of having heard him. “In addition to your own *SparrowHawk*, there will be three large freighters involved in the raid. Your fee will be half of everything taken.”

Sands blinked. The offer was unprecedented in its generosity. The going rate was ten percent. Still, he was not tempted and told Bolin so.

“It’s not enough?”

“You have to be alive to enjoy your wealth.”

“True, I suppose,” Bolin said. He sighed heavily. “Well, I tried. I must ask that you not speak of this to anyone, not even your crew.”

Sands laughed. “Your secret is safe. Believe me, I wish you well. If you pull it off, it will pay the bastards back for murdering Dane. I just don’t think you have much of a chance.”

Bolin stood and extended his hand. “We’d have more with you than without.”

Sands took the proffered hand. “It doesn’t take much to improve on zero.”

He was halfway to the door when Bolin spoke again. “I was surprised that you could afford the Saturn Royale and Port Gregson’s fees after the Delphi debacle. Losing privateers are not often paid. You must have been extraordinarily fortunate!”

“We’ve enough savings to tide us over,” Sands said. Despite his best effort, a hint of defensiveness had crept into his voice.

“Then you should have no trouble convincing the authorities of your credit balance should they ask.”

“Your point?”

“Only that if you accept my offer, I will advance you whatever funds are necessary to clear up your bills here. Such payment would, of course, be in addition to the fee I have already offered.”

Sands sighed and returned to his seat. “What makes you think that I won’t say yes now, then refuse to go through with it once we’re in the clear?”

Bolin tapped his tablet. “Among other things, those who know you say that you are trustworthy. I’m willing to bet on their good opinion of you.”

#

Kimber Crawford sat in front of her mirror and applied the final touches to her makeup for the evening. She had been aboard Cloudcroft for three days and was beginning to despair ever wrapping up the new trade agreement. So far, all the talks had taken place between her own technical team and the low-level functionaries of the Alliance’s Ministry of Resources. Tonight she would sit with the first councilor at a banquet in her honor, and would try to get some of the sticking points resolved.

She had chosen her weapons for the evening with care. Her gown was in a style that had been popular on Earth just before the evacuation. It was cut from a black translucent material that revealed as much as it concealed. Her hair was piled on top of her head to emphasize her height and held there by an intertwined chain of copper links. Her jewelry was also of hammered copper with turquoise insets, the work of some ancient Navajo craftsman.

She had just finished perfuming herself when her apartment’s annunciator chimed. She rose in a rustle of fabric and crossed the room to answer the door. Outside in the hallway was Ganther Bartlett; her father’s most trusted servant and her own second in command.

“Come in, Ganth,” she said, gesturing him inside.

“You are very beautiful this evening, Kim,” the old man said. He entered the apartment, closing the door behind him.

“Are the others ready?”

“Everyone is in their finery. They will leave for the banquet in another fifteen minutes. Since you are the guest of honor, we can delay a bit longer.”

Bartlett walked awkwardly to an easy chair and plopped down in it with a sigh. He was troubled by a permanent stoop that caused him to hobble slightly as he walked.

“Is your back still giving you trouble?”

He nodded. “It’s the damned gravity. I should have let one of my assistants handle this one.”

“Why didn’t you?”

He smiled. “I guess I’m just an old war-horse who rushed to the sound of the guns once too often.”

“I think you were drafted by my father to keep an eye on me.”

“I could have said no.”

“I wonder,” Kimber replied.

“Talking about it just magnifies the pain. What say we take my mind off it by going over a few things?”

“By all means,” she replied, returning to the small stool that sat in front of the dressing mirror. As she finished her makeup, she could see Ganth over her shoulder in the mirror. “What about this new arrangement they’ve been hinting at? Have you found out anything more?”

He shook his head. “Only more of the same. Apparently, Dalishaar is going to broach the subject tonight at the banquet. Matlin continues to hint that we will be very impressed by their proposal. He refuses to elaborate further.”

“What do you suppose they’re up to?”

“That’s hard to say,” Bartlett said cautiously. As he did so, he gestured toward his ears and then at the surrounding walls, signaling that there might well be listening devices present. It was easily the tenth time he had warned her of eavesdropping since their arrival.

“Well, perhaps we will find out this evening.”

“Perhaps,” he agreed.

They spent the next quarter hour discussing other negotiating points. Their comments were intended for the benefit of any silent listeners and were frequently at odds with Titan’s true positions. When it was time to go, Bartlett announced that fact loudly, then climbed painfully to his feet and offered Kimber his arm.

The two of them strode to the tube station a mere one hundred meters distant from Kimber’s guest quarters. The apartment was in a wealthy section of the city near the rim and close by the main landing bay. Their destination was to be Government Tower, some five kilometers distant at the city’s center. They both climbed into the small tube car, which awaited them -- with Kimber helping Ganth Bartlett, make the awkward step down into the car’s interior. When they were seated, the car canopy slid closed over them and they were pushed gently into the cushions as the vehicle accelerated into its transparent guide tube.

Cloudcroft had been built in three levels. The uppermost of these was the city’s main deck, while two lower levels extended down into the support truss. Like similar structures in other cloud cities, Cloudcroft’s support truss enclosed far more volume -- nearly fifty cubic kilometers -- than the population could ever use. Thus, the city’s architecture tended toward very large community spaces enclosed by lightweight composite panels.

Also typical of Saturnian cloud cities, many of Cloudcroft’s community spaces had been turned into dioramas that duplicated scenes from Earth. The tube car whisked through several cavernous shopping arcades and parks on its way toward the city’s center. One such simulated an Earth forest as seen on a moonlit night, while another housed rolling plains in which large brown animals grazed. Holographic projections hid the far walls of each, making it appear that they extended to a distant horizon. As they whisked from compartment to compartment, Kimber noticed that the tubeway seemed to be following a small stream that was the sole unifying feature through each of the dioramas.

As the car neared its destination, the transparent tubeway broke through the upper deck and arched upward toward Government Tower. It was near Second Dusk and the sun was low on the horizon, turning the western sky into a golden sheet of fire. The sun was a tiny glowing globe of misshapen light as it sank toward the distant clouds.

They were out in the air only a few seconds before entering Government Tower at its tenth level above the main deck. The tower was one of seven structures that supported the city’s habitat barrier. It also enclosed a large duct through which heated hydrogen flowed upward from the powerplant dangling far below. By modulating the flow of heat to the gasbag, the city engineer maintained Cloudcroft’s altitude at

the desired level. Several smaller power plants had been built within the support truss for additional lift capability, but the radiation hazards associated with their operation limited them to use during emergencies.

Kimber and Ganth Bartlett were thrown forward as the car slowed to a stop inside Government Tower. The tube station was noticeably more posh than the one they had left. As the canopy retracted with a quiet hissing noise, an officer of the Alliance Marines strode toward them across the landing platform. He clicked his heels as they handed over their engraved invitations, and then punched a series of codes into a portable computer terminal. Satisfied, he ordered an enlisted Marine forward and directed him to take them to the main banquet hall. They followed their guide through a maze of corridors. When they reached a small anteroom, they found Hallan Matlin, the chief Alliance negotiator waiting for them.

“Ah, there you are!” Matlin said.

“Good evening, Resources Minister!” Bartlett said, bowing to his counterpart. “I hope we aren’t late.”

“Not at all,” Matlin replied. “The other members of your party went in about ten minutes ago.”

“It is kind of you to wait for us,” Kimber said, extending her hand in order that Matlin could kiss it.

“All part of my duties,” he said. “Shall we go in?”

“By all means.”

The minister led them down a long hall to a high set of double doors. He whispered something to a uniformed servant stationed outside, who spoke quietly into a headset. A moment later, the doors swung open and both Kimber and Ganth Bartlett heard their names being announced over the hall’s public address system. A small orchestra that had been playing softly in the background fell silent and heads turned in their direction. After a moment’s hesitation the crowd applauded them.

Hallan Matlin led them toward a heavysset man who rushed forward to meet them.

“Miss Kimber Crawford, Mr. Ganther Bartlett, may I present the First Councilor of the Alliance, Citizen Kelt Dalishaar. Citizen, the leader and chief negotiator of the Titanian trade delegation.”

“Welcome to Cloudcroft, Miss Crawford,” Dalishaar said, bending to kiss her hand. He did it with more flourish than Matlin had.

“Thank you, First Councilor. It’s good to be here.”

“I’m sorry I was unable to meet you when you arrived. My duties have kept me rather busy of late. The recently concluded New Philadelphia crisis has the government working overtime.”

“I understand perfectly,” Kimber purred in her most diplomatic tone. “We’ve been led to believe that your Excellency will have a new proposal for us this evening.”

“If you are willing, after the banquet I would like to give you a preview of a proposal we will be making at tomorrow’s session.”

“Excellent!” Kimber responded.

“That is, if you aren’t too tired.”

“I’m never too tired to talk business.”

“Then you are a person after my own heart, Miss Crawford. Come, let’s find our seats and get the festivities started.”

“By all means, First Councilor. Lead the way.”

#

The banquet was interminable. Each of the courses was punctuated by windy speeches. By the third such, Kimber had consumed enough champagne that she was beginning to feel light headed. For the main course, she switched to the bitter coffee that was the specialty of one of the Alliance agricultivists. She sat to Dalishaar’s right while Ganther Bartlett sat between two beautiful women farther down the table. The rest of the Titanian delegation was spread around various tables throughout the banquet hall.

“An excellent feast, Citizen,” she told Dalishaar as waiters cleared away the remains of chicken Kiev and potatoes au gratin.

“Thank you, Miss Crawford. I only wish your father were here to partake of it.”

“He would have liked to come. His doctor would not allow it. Too much strain on his heart.”

“So my negotiators have told me.”

“About this plan you will be presenting tomorrow...”

Dalishaar held up one hand in a cautioning gesture. “Please, this is hardly the place to speak of business. Ah, here comes the entertainment!”

The orchestra struck up an old Earth song as an acrobatic troupe entered through a side door and dispersed through the hall. Despite her impatience at getting on with business, Kimber had to admit that they were quite good. Midway through their act, she was struck by how medieval a scene they presented. It was almost as though Dalishaar were an ancient king entertaining visiting royalty. All that was missing were the dogs to clean up table scraps and for the guests to wipe their hands on. The image bothered Kimber. It reminded her that the man sitting next to her held more power than any medieval king who had ever lived.

Dessert was served after the acrobats, and as with the rest of the banquet, proved delicious. Kimber resolved to eat lightly for the next several days in order to control her weight. One of the hazards of the diplomatic life her father had never warned her about was the possibility of getting fat.

Dalishaar abruptly ended the banquet fifteen minutes later. He left by a back entrance, taking a large retinue with him and leaving both Kimber and Ganther Bartlett to Hallan Matlin.

“What about the rest of our people?” Kimber asked, gesturing toward where their six negotiators were still engaged in conversation at their respective tables.

“The first councilor asked that only you and Citizen Bartlett attend this informal session,” Matlin replied. “There will be plenty of time tomorrow for the technicians to hammer out the details. Tonight is merely to be a preview.”

They followed Matlin to a lift that whisked them to the topmost floor of Government Tower. There they waited in a sitting room until a liveried servant informed them that the first councilor was ready to receive them. They found Kelt Dalishaar standing on an open-air balcony beyond the main room of his living quarters. He smiled broadly as Kimber joined him, leaving Ganther Bartlett to confer with Hallan Matlin inside.

“Welcome again, Miss Crawford. What do you think of my city?”

Kimber gazed down at the lights of Cloudcroft. “Very impressive, First Councilor.”

“Not nearly so impressive as what lies beyond, eh?”

Kimber gazed out past the lighted rim. It was near second midnight with The Notch high in the southern sky. To the north, Saturn’s aurora borealis covered the sky in a sheet of silent fire. Stretching out in a long line beyond the city were the other cities of the Northern Alliance. The cluster was more compact than it had been the night they had arrived. The nearest city was close enough that she could see individual buildings atop the support truss.

“It’s impressive, all right,” Kimber agreed. “Why have you brought your cities so close together?”

Dalishaar explained the need to give the Dardenelles storm a wide berth. He finished by saying, “That is why I love this time of year. It is the time when those of us in positions of power can see the results of our handiwork. The Alliance grows steadily.”

“I suppose the New Philadelphia cities will be added to the parade by this time next year,” she said.

The first councilor smiled in the darkness. “Of course. Those cities acquired under less than friendly circumstances are much more docile when they are part of the larger group. In time they will come to love the Alliance as those of us who were born into it.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Of course. We have added half our cities in my lifetime. They will come around in time. You sound as though you don’t approve.”

She shrugged. “I can’t afford to approve or disapprove. The politics of Titan’s customers are not my concern, except insofar as they affect me.”

“That is a terribly myopic attitude, young lady.”

“It is a necessary attitude when you deal with as many different groups as we do.”

“I’m sorry, but that just won’t wash,” he said. Dalishaar’s voice changed to that of a professor lecturing a backward student. “Saturn is humanity’s home. What happens here is important to every man and woman alive. Eventually, we will be one people again just as we were during The Evacuation.”

“Under your leadership, of course.”

Dalishaar shrugged. “Under the leadership of anyone who has the power to make it happen. If not us, then someone stronger or wiser. In fact, Miss Crawford, that is one of the reasons why I want to speak to you this evening.”

“Oh?”

“Please, let us step inside.”

Inside they found half-a-dozen of Dalishaar’s advisors waiting. A beautiful young woman served them drinks, and then withdrew.

“Now then,” Dalishaar said, seating himself in a big overstuffed chair, “I’ve asked you here tonight to discuss a more permanent arrangement between Titan and the Alliance than has been possible in the

past.”

“We are listening, First Councilor,” Bartlett said.

“We would like to negotiate an exclusive trade agreement between ourselves and Titan.”

Kimber frowned. “I’m not sure that will be possible.”

“Hear me out,” the first councilor said. “We propose that our two nations enter into a long term agreement. We in the Alliance will agree to annually purchase Titanian metal products equal to your current yearly output. You, in turn, agree not to increase production or to sell to other Saturnian cities. The advantages of such an arrangement to Titan are obvious. You will have a guaranteed customer willing to take a known quantity of product at an attractive price. In effect, you will be freed from the economic cycle and will no longer have to invest your hard earned profits in expansion of facilities.”

“And the benefit to the Alliance?”

“Those are obvious as well. We will add metallics to the impressive list of products we already market to our neighbors. That can’t help but enhance our competitive position.”

“And our current customers? What will become of them?”

“They will become *our* customers. We will honor all existing contracts, even if it means losing money in the short run.”

“And how will you pay us?” Bartlett asked.

“Half in universal credits, half in commodities. Whatever you like. We in the Alliance make just about everything that Titan needs. And since more cities are joining us all the time, we can offer you an ever widening array of commodities.”

“You are, in effect, asking to be our agents on Saturn.”

“That is one way of looking at it,” Dalishaar agreed. “You produce the resources and we distribute them. A natural division of labor.”

“Our fleet distributes our product,” Kimber said.

“Under this agreement, your ships will deliver your metals to the Alliance and we will bear the expense of seeing them transshipped to the ultimate customers.”

“If we go through with such an agreement, it will have the effect of tying Titan to the Alliance.”

“I told you that we believe in the unification of humanity. Is that such a bad thing? In any event, that is the offer we will be making at tomorrow’s session.”

“I will transmit your offer to my father. I must tell you that there is virtually no chance of his accepting it.”

“Oh?”

“We Titanians guard our independence jealously. We will not exchange it for short-term profits. I will forward your proposal along with my own recommendation that it not be accepted.”

Dalishaar glanced at the others. Several significant looks were exchanged. When he turned back to Kimber, his manner was subtly altered.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Miss Crawford. I can see that I have not done a good job of explaining my offer. What say we have a series of coordination meetings where we can lay out our plan in more detail before you make any recommendation to your father?”

“You won’t convince me.”

“Give us a chance to try. In the meantime, there is liable to be an adverse public reaction if it becomes known that you are personally opposed to this plan. To prevent any untoward incidents, I suggest that you and your people move into Government Tower until negotiations are concluded.”

“I am comfortable where I am, First Councilor.”

“For your own safety, I insist. I’m afraid our people won’t understand your reticence.”

Ganth Bartlett stood up, his face livid. “Surely the first councilor isn’t suggesting that we be held hostage pending the outcome of negotiations!”

A slow smile crossed Dalishaar’s face. “Please, Mr. Bartlett. Let’s just say that we will be granting you increased protection for the rest of your stay aboard Cloudcroft ... no matter how long that may be.”

Chapter 5: Night Flight

Larson Sands stretched inside his environment suit and wished the ache in his arms would go away. It had been an hour since he had bailed out of *SparrowHawk*’s hydrogen lock to soar free beneath a jet-black flight wing. His flight had started high above the North Temperate Belt flyway, but the downdraft had cost him ten kilometers of altitude. At the same time, the glowing numbers in his visor navigation display registered a total distance covered of 120 kilometers. At the beginning of his flight, the Northern Alliance cities had been little more than individual specks of radiance glimpsed intermittently against the background lightning of the Dardenelles Cyclone. Now they were a necklace of tiny glass beads strung out against a background of black velvet.

Once each standard year the cities of the North Temperate Belt overtook the Dardenelles Cyclone as both were blown eastward by the globe girdling winds of the flyway. The centuries old storm was so named because it intruded deeply into the flyway, narrowing the safe passage lane to less than five hundred kilometers. To avoid being pulled into it, cloud cities bore much closer to the northern cloud wall than was usual. For the past several weeks, the cities of the Alliance had been arraying themselves preparatory to passing through the dangerous narrows.

After leaving Port Gregson, *SparrowHawk* had rendezvoused with three large air freighters in a deserted section of the flyway. The fusion-powered aircraft had been taken aboard the largest of the airships and given new markings. Its battered dark blue hull had been painted silver, while garish patches of paint had been slopped over where its identification symbols should have been. The overall effect was of a city naval unit that had been hurriedly disguised as a privateer.

At Bolin’s insistence, Sands waited until they were safely away from Port Gregson to tell his crew their target. He had expected them to want no part in the scheme. Instead, they cheered the opportunity to get back at the people who had killed Dane. Only Halley Trevanon remained silent. Her brooding had begun to worry Lars. Of all the members of his crew, he would have expected her to be the most excited.

While the airship crew worked to disguise *SparrowHawk*, the three freighters moved to the far eastern

edge of the Dardenelles Narrows. There they would wait just beyond sensor range for Sands's coded signal. If the signal did not come by the time the first Alliance cities registered on their sensors, the airships would disappear into the blue and white vastness.

Just before *SparrowHawk* departed the airship, Micah Bolin had called Sands to his cabin.

"Drink?" the bald man had asked amiably.

"Soft drink. I'm flying, you know."

"Right."

Sands still felt uneasy around Bolin, but had to admit that he had planned the raid well enough. They would fly to Cloudcroft on unpowered flight wings under the cover of darkness. The high volume of electromagnetic noise coming from the Dardenelles Cyclone would further mask their approach. Bolin had even provided lists of goods to be taken once they were in control, along with their storage locations throughout the city. Whoever the recruiter's employers were, their spies were good.

Bolin handed Sands his drink, slid a small glass rectangle across the desk, and then leaned back in his chair to regard the privateer seriously.

"What's this?"

"Your further instructions should you succeed. It is time locked and security coded. We are scheduled to be safely away by ten hundred hours. You will have one hour after that in which to use the password. Wait any longer and it forgets everything it knows. If you're captured, please destroy it."

"Very well," Sands said, pocketing the record tile. "I presume this tells me the name of my employer."

"It will direct you to the city where we will split up the loot."

"How long for your ships to join us after I make the call?"

"Half an hour."

"I'll wait forty five minutes. If you aren't there by then, I grab whatever loot I can and run for it."

"We'll be there. We haven't gone to all this trouble and expense to fail now."

They had reviewed the mission plan one last time. To minimize the risk of a slip, only *SparrowHawk*'s personnel would show themselves to their victims. Bolin's people would stay aboard their ships and direct the loading of cargo via communicator. *SparrowHawk* would then cover the getaway of the slower airships.

The disguised privateer Air Shark departed the small fleet of airships and flew to a spot directly opposite the Dardenelles Cyclone. For two days, they had orbited inside the turbulent flyway wall, lurching in giant figure eights through the imbedded storms while they waited for their victims to arrive.

As Cloudcroft drew abreast of their hiding place, Larson Sands, Halley Trevanon, Ross Crandall, and Kelvor Reese climbed into the midships hydrogen lock and launched themselves one by one into the night. After a dangerous five minutes when they had steered through cloud, they broke out into the clear and began their long flights toward the largest and brightest pearl in the Northern Alliance.

Cloudcroft was no longer a tiny, lighted bead in the night. It had grown slowly over the long, anxious, lonely minutes -- first to a ball the size of a child's toy, then to a self-contained world that hovered between vacuum and the crushing depths of the lower atmosphere. Sands felt a shudder go through his flight gear as he crossed over the city with a full kilometer of altitude to spare.

The slight shudder was the result of the millions of ergs of heat Cloudcroft's gasbag radiated to the surrounding environment. It was his signal to bank sharply left. The ache in his arms suddenly disappeared as he spoiled his lift and began his long downward spiral.

The super strong membrane of the gasbag was transparent, but since it was filled with hydrogen a full 100°C hotter than the surrounding atmosphere, it glowed a wan yellow in his infrared visor display. Shifting streamers of orange and red marked the regions where vagrant breezes cooled the giant balloon. Deep inside, a point of blue-white radiance marked the main outlet where hot hydrogen wafted upward from the city powerplant.

Cloudcroft, like most Saturnian cities, was laid out in a concentric pattern. Alternating bands of buildings and open spaces were spread across the support truss's upper deck. Just below where the heat pipe discharged into the gasbag was a tall tower. This was the seat of the Northern Alliance government and Sands's primary target.

In addition to providing a conduit for the main city heat pipe, Government Tower was also the central support for the habitat barrier. Six smaller towers were arrayed in a hexagonal pattern midway between the city center and its rim. These provided additional support for the tent-like membrane that separated the city's oxygen-helium atmosphere from the bag's heated hydrogen gas.

Suddenly the faintly luminescent fabric of the gasbag was only a few meters below him. With his heart pounding in his ears, he ignored the protests of his muscles and flared his wing. The wing stalled out just as his boots grounded on the yielding surface. He sprawled forward onto his face, and even while the fabric of his wing was collapsing around him, keyed the switch that would jettison the flight pack. He crawled out from under the folds of black fabric to get unsteadily to his feet. As he did so, he glanced anxiously skyward.

The worst part about the flight had been his inability to communicate with the others. Isolated and flying into danger, his mind had conjured up all manner of disasters. He saw Halley and the others blown off course by the microbursts of wind that punctuate the Saturnian atmosphere. In his mind's eye, he saw them turn back while anxiously calling for him to do the same. Only, his suit radio had been turned off lest its quiescent radiations give him away. He had seen himself flying alone into the jaws of the enemy. It had taken all of his willpower to keep from breaking radio silence to ask if anyone were with him.

He had a long, agonizing moment as he searched the sky. The Notch was behind him, signaling the fact that First Dawn was not far off. The Arch was its usual silver band casting a pale glow over everything. Suddenly, a black delta wing eclipsed The Arch. Moments later, Halley Trevanon swept low over him as she came in for a landing. He felt the ripple as she touched down on the gasbag. Like he had done, Halley lost her balance and went sprawling. A moment later, she crawled free of her wing and came running to where he was standing on the gently glowing plain that was the top of a ten kilometer diameter balloon.

Seconds later, Ross Crandall and Kelvor Reese also swept out of the dark sky. Unlike Lars and Halley, they retained their wings. Sands watched their glowing figures on his infrared display as they moved awkwardly toward where he stood. Draped as they were, they reminded him of two bats he had once seen in the Sorrell Three zoo.

“It looks like we all made it,” Halley said as soon as she reached him. Her voice was barely recognizable in his earphones as his external sound pickup recorded her words. They still dared not use their radios for fear of discovery.

“Ready with your tape?”

“Ready,” Crandall replied, gesturing with his gauntleted hand toward the large reel suspended from his equipment belt.

“Good. You and Kelvor begin paying it out. Halley, get the detonator wired up.”

“Right, Lars,” she said as she unclipped a small electronic device from her belt.

Crandall and Reese stooped to attach the ends of two long adhesive strips to the gasbag at Sands’s feet. They then launched themselves into the air in opposite directions. As they soared low across the membrane, they trailed the tape out behind. Wherever it touched, it stuck. Meanwhile, Halley knelt at the intersection of the two strips and attached her small black box to the wires protruding from the adhesive strips.

By the time Crandall and Reese returned for a second landing, the detonator’s arming light glowed a malevolent red. The detonator contained a hemispheric-field-of-view camera in addition to its firing circuits. Anyone who approached it after they left would sound an alarm.

“That does it,” Crandall exulted upon seeing the ruby red light. “We’ve got them by the balls!”

Sands nodded. “If only we can tell them what we’ve done before they blow us away. Everyone ready for Phase Two?”

“Go,” Halley said. Her words were echoed by the other two.

Sands withdrew a knife from his equipment belt and knelt down. Grasping it overhand, he drove the point savagely into the yielding membrane. The film proved surprisingly tough. It was not until the third try that the point penetrated. After that, he carefully sawed a long slit. He halted when the opening was a meter long. A greenish cast in his visor marked it as hot hydrogen boiled upward through the rip.

He sheathed his knife and sat down gingerly on the bag with his boots inserted through the hole. He placed his arms over his head and slid forward. A moment later, he was falling freely toward the city below. Flattening out, he spread his arms and legs to assume a stable, nose down attitude. He watched the city expand with frightening rapidity. When he was three hundred meters above the habitat barrier, he touched a switch. There was a muffled explosion from his suit backpack and his flight was halted with an abrupt tug on his harness. Breathing a sigh of relief, he glanced upwards toward the strange device floating overhead.

Sands was familiar with rescue balloons. The device above him was similar in function, but different in shape. It was a giant parasol with numerous shrouds attached to the bottom of a wide canopy. Micah Bolin had called the device a “parachute” and had assured him that it was safe. Sands reached up to grasp the directional controls on the harness risers and steer himself well clear of the bright exhaust from the heat pipe. He watched the tall conduit carefully as he descended past its open end. He landed with a loud thump on Cloudcroft’s habitat barrier a hundred meters from the pipe.

The habitat barrier was much spongier than had been the gasbag. Unlike the bag, the barrier was not stretched taut by the weight of the entire city. Sands rolled with the impact, flattened out, and came to a sitting position in the midst of a deep depression. Switching his visor to normal vision, he glanced down.

He was suspended in midair a hundred meters above a park-like expanse of grass and bushes. Nearby was the foreshortened obelisk of Government Tower. Lighted windows testified to the fact that people were at work inside. The upper several floors of the building were dark. A wide balcony jutted from the near side of the tower slightly above his level. It glowed silver with archlight, but was otherwise dark.

The other three raiders touched down in quick order. Sands was bounced around by the force of their landings. While he waited for the oscillations to die away, he continued to search below for signs that their arrival had been noticed. Despite the noise, all was quiet.

For the first time since entering the gasbag, Sands noticed the heat. His suit, which was designed to protect him from the cold of the upper atmosphere, was no help in the sauna-like gasbag. Already he was becoming overheated. He scrambled to his feet and attempted to climb the slope to where the habitat barrier overhung the balcony of Government Tower.

Walking atop the membrane proved impossible. As he attempted to stand, Lars found himself at the bottom of a slope sided hole with no way to climb out. Each time he tried, he would overbalance and fall down. Since Government Tower was the central support of the tent shaped barrier, each time he tumbled, he rolled further downhill from his goal.

Lars cursed at being thwarted by so simple a thing as trying to stand on the yielding surface of the membrane. He thought about the problem for a moment, and then began to crawl toward his goal. It was undignified, but it worked. He slowly made his way up the sloping membrane until he was directly over the corner of Government Tower.

The others had similar problems. They emulated him and were soon crawling on hands and knees toward the point where he lay atop the membrane. Sands had begun to sweat profusely as he pulled out his knife and worked at puncturing the habitat barrier. Once again, it took several tries before the point would penetrate the strong polymer. Then there was a ripping sound as he chinned himself on the hilt of his knife, drawing it down and toward him. A slit nearly two meters long opened up before him. He moved back from the slit to avoid tumbling into the opening he had carved. It was twenty meters down to the balcony that was his goal, and another hundred to the surface of the support truss deck. He signaled the others to be careful as they joined him.

Ross Crandall sidled up to the rip and dug into his suit pouch. He pulled out a long strip of adhesive tape. Sands did the same. They tore away the backing material and smoothed the sticky strips to the membrane. Each strip ended in a loop. Halley Trevanon unclipped a climbing line from her belt and passed it through the loops before threading it through the rip in the membrane. The line hung down from the habitat barrier to the balcony that was their goal.

Sands wriggled forward, grasped the line in one hand, and lowered himself through the rent in the membrane. As he left the overheated environment of the bag, he could not help thinking that he was exchanging the frying pan for the fire.

Chapter 6: Cloudcroft

Kelt Dalishaar had gone to bed late and woke groggily to the feeling of a rough hand shaking his shoulder. Even before he was completely awake, a deep anger boiled up within him. Whoever disturbed his rest would pay dearly for the effrontery. Only the tower guard had the right to enter his bedroom, and then only in the direst of emergencies.

Emergency!

Dalishaar's eyes came open as he sat bolt upright in bed. He ignored the comely woman beside him as he turned to the Marine officer whose cold hand rested on his bare shoulder.

"What is it, Colonel?" All thought of sleep was gone.

"There are people atop the barrier, First Councilor. They appear to be making their way to a point where they can rappel onto Government Tower. We must get you to safety."

"Any idea who they are?" Dalishaar asked, still not unduly alarmed.

The colonel shook his head. "They are wearing environment suits. We picked them up on the topside scanners when they landed on the barrier."

"How long have they been up there?"

The officer checked his chronometer. "The first touched down just over one minute ago. I have security teams deploying in the three rooms that front the balcony. That will undoubtedly be their point of entry."

"What do you suppose their mission is?"

"We must assume they are an assassination team, First Councilor. You are the logical target."

"Hmmm," Dalishaar mused. Suddenly a different thought occurred to him. "Perhaps they are in the employ of the Factor of Titan."

"Come to rescue Miss Crawford?"

"A distinct possibility. Have someone check on her and double her guard." In the ten days since he had taken Kimber Crawford hostage, Dalishaar had been negotiating with her father. The Titanian lord was proving as resistant to reason as his daughter. He would eventually agree to Dalishaar's demands, of course. He had no other choice with Kimber in Alliance hands. Still, when the factor got his daughter back, it would be difficult to hold him to any agreement he had made under duress. In fact, Dalishaar had yet to think of a way to bind him permanently to the Alliance. If this were Titanian team come to rescue Kimber Crawford, perhaps its capture could be turned to Dalishaar's benefit.

"You must leave, sir," the colonel said, intruding on Dalishaar's musings.

"I think you're right." He threw back the covers, stood erect, and slipped into a lounging robe and slippers. He ignored his companion of the evening, who was sitting up in bed, clutching the sheet to her breasts.

Dalishaar took three long strides to the closet and threw open the door. Behind a rack of expensive suits was a meter-square opening. He ignored his flapping robe as he grabbed the overhead bar and swung his legs into the opening. A moment later, he was slipping down a long spiral slide toward safety. Seconds later, he emerged from the slideway to plop down on a pneumatic cushion in one corner of the situation room located two decks below.

"Seal the slideway and put the intruders up on the screen," he ordered the duty officer. He cinched his robe around him as he walked to stand in front of a trio of oversize screens. They flashed momentarily, then cleared to show the drama taking place high above his head.

The cameras were mounted near the top of the heat pipe. They gave a panoramic view of the habitat

barrier from above. They were infrared sensitive and showed four people clad all in black making their way up slope toward Government Tower. Several discarded aeronautical devices marked where they had landed. Dalishaar thought he had seen similar apparatus in history books, but could not remember precisely when or where.

The first councilor grinned. The idea of approaching Government Tower atop the habitat barrier was not a new one for assassins. Such an attempt had been made against his predecessor and had very nearly succeeded. Ever since, cameras mounted high on the sides of the main heat pipe kept a close watch on that particular avenue of approach. Of course, if these intruders were Titanians, they would not know that. Dalishaar glanced at the chronometer on the wall and was astonished to see that it had been only ninety seconds since he had climbed out of bed. Somehow, it seemed a great deal longer.

“What armament can we bring to bear?”

“Nothing very large, First Councilor. We dare not risk a major hole in the barrier. We could asphyxiate hundreds.”

Dalishaar nodded. If they blasted the intruders where they lay, it would mean poking a good size hole in the membrane. Without the barrier, the city atmosphere would mix with the hydrogen in the gasbag. There was no danger of an explosion -- the concentration of oxygen would still be well below that required to support combustion. However, there would be a good chance that the gas would asphyxiate those in the parks surrounding Government Tower. The building itself would not be affected. Like all enclosed buildings in the city, it had its own air supply.

“How many Marines do you have in position?”

“Twenty two, Councilor. In addition to the men we have in your apartments, we have set up defense lines in all stairwells and at each elevator shaft. There is no way to leave the penthouse.”

“Warn your people that I want to take as many alive as possible. I want to know who hired them. We’ll dispose of them after they’ve answered my questions.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dalishaar watched as one of the figures took out a knife and drove it downward into the habitat barrier membrane. He did this twice more before forcing a rent in the transparent film. Then the intruders clustered around the rip and began working furiously at something he could not see. Suddenly, a climbing rope dropped through the hole and dangled to the balcony near the ornate table where the first councilor ate his breakfast.

As Dalishaar watched intently, a single black clad figure slipped through the hole in the barrier and let himself down hand over hand until he stood on the balcony. The three others quickly followed. From their silhouettes, at least one of the intruders was a woman. Soon all four were down and spread out across the balcony in a variety of crouching positions. One of them moved toward the door leading to Dalishaar’s living room.

He picked up a hand communicator and keyed the command circuit. “Take them now! Remember, I want prisoners.”

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Larson Sands ignored his aching muscles as he slid quickly down the climbing rope. His boots barely missed a table carved from solid wood. He crouched behind it and surveyed his surroundings while

listening to outside noises with his sound pickups at maximum gain. He heard and saw no evidence of movement or interior lights.

Staring upward, he gave Crandall the high sign. The old privateer helped Halley position herself to slip through the hole. She swarmed down the rope, and then took up station on the opposite end of the balcony. Malvor Reese was next, followed finally by Ross Crandall.

“Everyone all right?” Sands whispered. When he received three answers in the affirmative, he gestured for them to move toward the large picture windows that separated the living quarters from the balcony. The diagram Micah Bolin had shown them placed Dalishaar’s bedroom on the other side of the tower, far enough distant that he should not have heard the sounds they had made.

At Sands’s signal, Reese moved forward to check whether the door was locked. He had barely touched the frame when a harsh light flooded the balcony, pinning each of them where they crouched.

“Stand up! You are each the target of half a dozen rifles.”

Sands, who was still behind the table, got slowly to his feet and raised both hands. The others followed his example. Within seconds, the doors opened and the balcony was awash with Alliance Marines. An officer in full battle gear strode out to gaze at them. His shoulder tabs identified him as a colonel.

“Which one of you is the leader of this little band?”

“I am,” Sands replied, his voice curiously flat as it issued from his suit’s external speaker. His words were being fed into his suit’s computer, which substituted electronically generated speech. That way it would be impossible for anyone to identify him later via voiceprints.

“Drop your weapons!”

“We have no weapons,” Sands said, mildly. “Only tools.”

The colonel seemed not to know how to respond to the claim. A team of unarmed assassins did not fit his preconceptions. Finally, he asked, “What are you doing here?”

“This is a raid.”

“You must be joking! No one raids the Alliance!”

“Precisely why we chose you,” Sands replied. “Please inform your leaders that we’ve rigged a kilometer of pyrotechnic tape and a radio detonator to Cloudcroft’s gas bag. If we are attacked or any attempt is made to thwart us, we will set it off. If our ship does not hear from us within a specified time, they will detonate the bomb remotely. The detonator will also explode if anyone tampers with it. Do you understand what I am saying to you?”

The colonel suddenly turned ashen. “I’ll have to communicate with my superiors.”

“Naturally,” Sands replied. “While you are doing so, please tell First Councilor Dalishaar that I require him to come here in person. He has five minutes to comply.”

The next few minutes were confused. The four raiders stood in the midst of a milling group of armed enemies, most of who seemed undecided as to what to do. Lars waited patiently; sure that nothing would happen until the Alliance rulers verified his claim. He knew they had done so when the Marines began to filter back into the apartment. They left only the colonel and four of their number behind.

Seconds after that, a man in slippers and an ornate dressing gown appeared. He was overweight, with small eyes set close together in his pudgy face. His hair was thinning, and at the moment, uncombed.

“I am Kelt Dalishaar. How do I know you’ve attached a bomb to Cloudcroft?”

“You have already verified it,” Lars responded, “or else you wouldn’t have come here.”

“We’ve searched the top of the gas bag with cameras. We see four irregularly shaped splotches.”

“Those are our flight wings. The tape is invisible at night. You’ll be able to see it when the sun comes up.”

“In the meantime we’re supposed to take you at your word?”

“Unless you want your city blasted out of the sky. How long do you think you can stay aloft with a one kilometer rip in your gas bag?”

“Not long,” the first councilor admitted. “How do we know you won’t take what you want and then set off your bomb anyway?”

“You don’t. You’ll just have to hope that we’re honest.”

“Right Since I don’t appear to have any choice in the matter...”

“None at all,” Sands replied. He put all the menace he could into the statement, but once again, electronics robbed his voice of its overtones. Still, he hoped the Alliance rulers would play it safe. He was lying. He had no intention of sending a city of 300,000 plummeting into the depths. He hoped fervently that no one would risk calling his bluff.

“What do you want of us?” Dalishaar asked simply. If he were terrified, he hid it well. Sands could see the calculation going on behind those eyes. Bolin had warned him the first councilor was clever.

“I want you to alert all security forces within the city. They are to cooperate fully. That means opening all vaults and assisting in loading our ships when they get here. Please remember that our detonator will be active for several hours after we are gone. If we find we’ve been crossed, I won’t hesitate to split this city wide open.”

“You will have our cooperation.”

“Excellent. Now then, two of my people will go down to your landing bay to prepare to receive our ships. They have lists of commodities we will be taking away with us. Get your people to work gathering them up.”

“Colonel, you heard the man! See to it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Three and Four, go with him! Two, you stay with me.”

Crandall and Reese followed the colonel through the open doorway and out into the hall. They entered a lift and were whisked to the heart of the city. As soon as they were gone, Larson Sands felt a tinge of loneliness. They were four people running a colossal bluff in a sea of enemies. All that was required to ruin everything was one fool whose bravery exceeded his intelligence.

“You will guide us someplace where I can contact our ships. You had best hurry. The deadline for checking in has very nearly expired. Also, I want to be able to oversee operations in the landing bays.”

“Follow me,” the first councilor said. As Sands followed him, he could not help thinking how ridiculous Dalishaar looked in his slippers and robe.

#

They were led to the first councilor’s personal office. Sitting on top of the oversize desk was a phone, a holoscreen, and a computer terminal. Sands strode to the high back chair and used the phone to send the prearranged signal that would alert *SparrowHawk* to their safe arrival. The screen cleared a moment later and he found himself staring at Brent Garvich and Hume Bailey. Like Sands, they were encased in environment suits to hide their identities.

“We’re in control here,” Sands told Garvich. “Notify the others and then come running.”

“We’re on our way. See you in ten minutes.”

The screen went blank and Sands turned to Dalishaar. “All right, now I want to see the landing bays.”

“I’ll have to unlock the surveillance system.”

“Do so.”

Dalishaar reached over his shoulder and quickly typed a series of twenty characters into the computer keyboard. As with most computer security systems, the password was input manually to prevent eavesdropping. The screen lit with a series of questions. These Dalishaar answered verbally. At the end of the series, he turned to Sands.

“You are connected to the city computer with unlimited privileges. Simply state your wishes and it will do its best to comply.”

“Computer. General view of Landing Bay...”

“Six,” Dalishaar prompted. “That is the main bay and the one where I presume you want your ship taken aboard.”

“General view of Landing Bay Six,” Sands repeated.

The screen cleared to show a view from high above a large cavernous compartment. A group of people milled around in the middle of the compartment. Two of them were clothed in environment suits.

“Hello, Three,” Sands said into his suit radio. “I’ve got you on screen.”

“Here, One,” came the reply from Ross Crandall. On the screen, one of the figures waved an arm.

“The ship is on its way. Have you given them your list yet?”

“I have. They’re opening the vaults now.”

“Keep this circuit live. If they even look at you funny, report it to me immediately.”

“Aye aye, One.”

Sands ordered the computer to keep Crandall in sight as he directed his retinue to various storerooms and vaults. He was working from the list of valuables provided by Micah Bolin. By the time Crandall and Reese finished inspecting the third storeroom, it was obvious that Bolin’s information was uncannily accurate. Sands wondered again where Bolin had obtained his data. From the look on Dalishaar’s face,

he was obviously wondering the same thing.

As he finished looking over each vault or storeroom, Crandall detailed several of the locals to begin moving the most valuable items to the landing bay. One storeroom contained pharmaceuticals worth their weight in iridium. Another was filled with electronic modules used in safety-critical city systems, and therefore, highly saleable anywhere on Saturn. Yet, another was filled with long planks grown in one of the cities specializing in wood production. These alone would bring several megacredits on the black market.

The cataloging of goods was halted by the arrival of *SparrowHawk*. Sands watched the entire operation from Dalishaar's office, intent for signs of treachery. There were none. The Alliance technicians handled the ship with the same care they would have given the first councilor's yacht. The landing bay was a vast open space that dwarfed the fusion-powered aircraft. Yet, even this would be too small for Bolin's airships when they arrived. These would be serviced via a loading bridge extending outward from the city support truss.

"Number Two, take over here," Sands ordered Halley once *SparrowHawk* was safely aboard. "If you see anything suspicious, notify me immediately. First Councilor, I would like a personally conducted tour of this facility."

"Why?"

"To see what might be worth taking, of course. Also, I have a list of art objects from your museum I want delivered to the landing bay." He fished the prepared list out of his pouch and handed it to Dalishaar.

The first councilor's scowl deepened as he scanned the list. Even though the artwork would be virtually impossible to fence, its loss would infuriate the Alliance rulers in a way high value industrial goods never would. Hopefully, their fury would heighten the intensity of their recriminations.

"Any problem?"

"None," Dalishaar responded through clenched teeth. He handed the list to one of his subordinates and ordered him to take care of it. He turned to Sands and asked, "Where would you like to begin your tour?"

"The city computer."

Cloudcroft was typical of most Saturnian cities in that the city computer was located within the seat of government. Indeed, as far as much of the citizenry was concerned, the computer *was* the government.

On the way to the computer center, Sands recognized two paintings hanging in corridors as having been done by Old Masters. One was a Smithsonian from the twenty-first century, the other a twentieth century Warhol. Sands ordered them taken down and delivered to the landing bay. He did the same for two vases that might (or might not) have been ancient Chinese.

The computer center was a large, well-lighted place where white-coated acolytes serviced the big machine that ran the city. The chief technician hurried toward them with a cluck of disapproval as Sands, the first councilor, and three Marines pushed past a series of signs forbidding entry to all but authorized personnel.

"You shouldn't be here, First Councilor."

Dalishaar explained the situation in a few well-chosen words that caused the computerist to turn a bright

crimson. After that, Sands asked, “Where do you keep your archival copies?”

“We send them over to Murphiston.”

“What’s that?”

“Another Alliance city. If we were to have a major computer failure, they can get the archives back to us in a matter of an hour or so.”

“You don’t keep copies here?”

The computerist hesitated for a long moment until Dalishaar growled, “Tell him, Alver. It isn’t worth destroying Cloudcroft over.”

“Ah, we have working copies here, of course.”

“Where?”

“Behind that door.”

“Open it.”

The computerist opened the door to reveal a data vault. Thousands of domino-sized memory tiles were arrayed in floor-to-ceiling racks. These were the archival copies of all information contained in the Cloudcroft city computer. Considering the storage capacity of a single memory tile, the magnitude of the recorded information was staggering.

Sands made a show of scooping up an empty wastebasket into which he then began loading tiles. He carefully compared the file numbers of the tiles with a list from his pouch before putting them into the basket. Despite his apparent care, the list was a fake. He was working entirely at random. Like the theft of Cloudcroft’s artworks, his actions were intended to sow suspicion and mistrust in the enemy ranks.

Mixed among the mundane records that clutter any city computer are a great many valuable secrets. The trick is to find them. Had he taken the entire computer archive, it would have been the work of centuries deciphering all the security-coded information. By appearing to take specific tiles, Sands was giving the impression he was after specific pieces of information. The Alliance rulers would naturally review what he had taken, looking for clues to his identity. Since there was no real significance to his acquisitions, he hoped he was giving them a headache from which it would take months to recover.

Sands removed a small net bag from his pouch and poured his ersatz treasure into it. He then clipped the bag of tiles to his equipment belt and ordered the Marines to dump the remaining archives on the floor.

The rest of their exploration of Government Tower proved anticlimactic. It was getting time for the airships to join them when Sands called the charade off. They were returning to Dalishaar’s office when they encountered two guards in a corridor.

“What’s in here?” Sands asked, gesturing toward the nondescript doorway the guards flanked.

“VIP quarters,” the first councilor replied. “They are currently occupied by the head of the Titanian trade delegation.”

“Open up.”

“I assure you that there is nothing of value within.”

“I said open it!”

Dalishaar gestured abruptly to a member of their retinue, who moved forward and keyed a code into the door lock. The door slid open to reveal two more guards inside.

“Get out,” Dalishaar ordered sharply. The two did as they were told. The first councilor stepped back and gestured for Sands to enter.

Sands did so. Seated on the couch, staring at him with a surprised look on her face, was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Chapter 7: To Loot A City

“Who are you, Citizen?” Sands asked as the woman climbed to her feet. She was tall; with a heart shaped face framed by hair as black as space. Her green eyes flicked back and forth between him and the disheveled Kelt Dalishaar.

“My name is Kimber Crawford. My father is Envon Crawford, the Factor of Titan. I’m a prisoner here.”

“Why?”

“The first councilor is trying to force my father into trade concessions. He’s holding me and our entire delegation prisoner until my father agrees to his demands.”

“Will he? Agree, that is?”

She laughed. The sound was musical. “The sun has a better chance of healing itself tomorrow. Who are you?”

“My associates and I are currently raiding Cloudcroft.”

“A raid?” Kimber asked, clasping her hands together like a child on Christmas morning. “So that’s what’s happening! They roused me out of bed, but would not tell me what was going on. No chance that my father hired you to rescue me, is there?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Too bad. Still, that’s no reason we can’t improvise, is it? Let my people go and my father will reward you handsomely.”

“I’m sorry, but I have no way of getting you to Titan.”

“No problem. We have our own ship.”

“How would I collect the reward?”

She thought for a moment, and then pulled an expensive ring from her finger. She held it out to him. “Here. Present this on Titan and demand whatever you think fair. Father will honor the debt.”

He made no move to take the ring. Instead, he considered her proposal. If this beautiful lady were indeed the daughter of the Titanian leader, getting her away from Dalishaar would be reward enough. Not only would it take the Alliance’s mind off Micah Bolin’s clients, it would be one more small revenge for

Dane's murder.

"You don't mind if this lady and her people leave Cloudcroft, do you, First Councilor?" Dalishaar's scowl was all the answer he needed. He turned back to Kimber. "We will be here approximately one more hour. If you can get your ship ready by then, we will see you away from the city. After that, you will be on your own. I think I should warn you that the whole Alliance fleet is probably waiting for us out there."

"You get us out of this city and we'll do the rest."

"Very well. The first councilor will issue the orders."

Dalishaar turned to the same aide who had relayed Sands's earlier demands. He instructed him to see that the Titanian spacers and trade delegation were conducted to the landing bay, and that their ship was removed from storage.

"Is that satisfactory?" Sands asked Kimber when the Alliance leader had finished.

"Very!" She thrust the ring at him once again. "To claim your reward."

"No reward is necessary. I have my own reasons for freeing you."

"Then take it as a token of appreciation. It is not every day a damsel in distress is rescued by a knight in armor of midnight black. Aren't you hot inside that suit?"

"Very!" he replied as he took the ring from her. For one brief moment, she squeezed tightly enough that he could feel her fingers through his gauntlet. He slipped the ring into a pouch, said goodbye, and directed Dalishaar to guide him back to the office where they had left Halley.

Dawn was breaking over the flyway as he rejoined Halley. The first of Bolin's airships had arrived with the sun. They watched as the freighter approached the city on the holoscreen, its flanks golden. As soon as the ship had poked its blunt nose into a docking ring, the cargo handlers ran a loading bridge out to it. The airship's bow hatch opened and a steady stream of booty began to flow inside.

"We're a little ahead of schedule," Halley reported.

"Excellent," Sands replied, glancing at his helmet chronometer. It had been 43 minutes since they had first touched down on Cloudcroft's gasbag and 27 since he had sent the 'come hither' message. "Anything to report?"

"No problems. I have been monitoring the signal from the detonator. No one has gone near it, although I did see an aircraft fly over about ten minutes ago."

Sands turned to Dalishaar. "What aircraft?"

"Probably just a commercial flight that hasn't heard of your presence."

"More likely one of your military craft making sure our bomb is really there."

"No. I assure you that I have given very strict orders."

"You have done well up until now, First Councilor. I would hate to see your city destroyed because someone got sloppy. Perhaps you should reiterate your orders that no aircraft is to approach this city. None. Zero. If we detect any naval units heading out into the flyway, we will act appropriately. Do we understand each other?"

“I will reissue the orders,” Dalishaar replied. Ever since they had left the VIP apartment, the first councilor’s lip had tended to curl up when he talked. Sands wondered if he were aware of the change. He took it as a sign that his victim had been servile for about as long as he intended to.

“I need to discuss something with you,” Halley said. “Alone.”

“Right. First Councilor, please wait outside with your men. And relax. We’ll be gone within the hour and you’ll have your city back.”

When Dalishaar and his people had left, Sands reached for a cable on his belt, extended it, and plugged it into a mating receptacle on Halley’s suit. They could now talk freely without fear of eavesdropping.

“While you were gone, Lars, I did some poking around the councilor’s desk.”

“And?”

“See the drawers on the right? They are fakes. He has a computer in there. A big one.”

“A private machine?” Sands asked, suddenly interested.

Halley nodded, causing her suit visor to reflect the early morning light that was flooding in through the window.

“Apparently he doesn’t trust the city computer,” Halley said.

“Interesting. Any way to access his files?”

“No, I tried. I can get as far as the system menu. After that, I keep running into password blocks. What does that tell you?”

“That the first councilor has a lot of secrets. How do we go about learning them?”

“Threaten to blow up the city if he doesn’t give us the passwords?”

Sands shook his head. “If he has a normal security system, he’ll have an entire batch of fake files for just such an eventuality. Probably more than one, in fact. He will give us the wrong passwords, and we will get bogus data. Besides, you saw how he is acting. I’d say we’ve pushed him about as far as we dare.”

“Truth serum?”

“Fine. Where do we find any?”

“We could order it up from the local hospital.”

“No, they would probably just give us a syringe filled with distilled water. Besides, it would take too much time. We have a schedule to maintain. You were able to gain access to the system utilities?”

“Yes.”

He unclipped the bag of memory tiles from his belt and handed it to her. “Then record over as many of these as you need. I want a total system backup. We will take everything and let our employers crack the security codes. They can then sort out the real data from the bogus. Make sure you leave a record of your backup. Perhaps we can shake Citizen Dalishaar’s confidence if he thinks we have his secrets.”

“How about a note thanking him?”

Sands could hear the grin in her voice. It was the first time she had smiled since Dane's death. "Just make sure you don't leave him a sample of your handwriting."

She set to work while he turned his attention to the holoscreen. A steady stream of robot vehicles was moving across the loading bridge to the first airship. Meanwhile, a second was docking with another bridge on the opposite side of Landing Bay Six. Within a few minutes, it too was receiving a steady stream of booty. The third freighter, Micah Bolin's flagship, was hanging back. The weapons aboard the airship were every bit as capable of destroying the gasbag as the bomb up above. Sands could imagine Bolin glued to his screens, nervously monitoring every aspect of the raid.

Sands ordered the computer to show him the landing bay interior. It was even more crowded than the last time he had checked. *SparrowHawk* was at the center of a large group of stevedores who were passing the smaller booty into the aircraft's cargo hold. Among the spoils were a number of artifacts from Cloudcroft's museum. Undoubtedly, some of the items they were taking aboard would contain homing devices, and possibly a bomb or two. Homing devices did not bother Sands. Any signal emitted inside *SparrowHawk*'s cargo hold would be grounded out by the extensive shielding Bolin's technicians had installed. A bomb was another matter, however. Hume Bailey was passing everything through a detector before allowing it aboard. He would also inspect for externally attached limpet mines and locator beacons when it came time to leave.

Other Alliance personnel were using the bay's automated cargo handling equipment to funnel the larger items out to the two docked airships. Although they were not showing themselves, Bolin's people were being equally cautious.

As he watched, the stream of cargo to the first airship halted and the bow hatch closed. Two minutes later, the freighter broke free of the city. It was immediately replaced at the docking bridge by Bolin's flagship.

Sands noted that they were still slightly ahead of schedule. The ease with which everything was going set off a small alarm bell deep inside his brain. Dalishaar and his people were being far too docile. That they were planning something went without saying. He hoped that when the counterstroke came, it would be one that he had foreseen.

#

"Are you sure this isn't an Alliance trick?" Ganther Bartlett asked Kimber Crawford as the tube car whisked them toward the landing bay. Imprisonment had taken its toll on the old man. He looked as though he had not slept in a week.

"What do they have to gain by letting us escape?"

"Ask me a question I can answer."

As they raced along, they passed through many of the same compartments as on the night they had gone to Government Tower to attend the banquet. Most were deserted, but those few people about seemed to be engaged in normal early morning business. If they were worried that their city might be blasted out of the sky, they hid it well. Obviously, there would be no public announcement of the raid until it was over.

"Why do you suppose this raider refused a reward?" Bartlett asked.

"I don't know. Maybe he'll reconsider and we'll be able to thank him properly."

Their conversation was cut off as the car reached the landing bay. Grim faced Marines carrying riot guns met them. Kimber stepped out of the car and helped Ganth up onto the station platform. They were directed out onto the floor to where Captain Nyquist and the rest of *Gotham*'s passengers and crew were assembled. Except for being dirty and in need of a shave, they seemed unaffected by their imprisonment.

"Where's our ship, Captain Nyquist?"

"Coming out of the storage hangar now, Miss Crawford." He pointed to where a large airtight door swung ponderously open to reveal the sleek prow of *Gotham*. "What the holy hell is going on?"

"We're getting out of here. There is a raid in progress and the raiders are freeing us. We are under their protection through launch. After that, we will be on our own. How long until we can get underway?"

"The reactors need to be temperature stabilized. The manual recommends half an hour, but I can cut that to fifteen minutes."

"As fast as you can, Captain."

"Aye aye, Miss Crawford."

Nyquist and his copilot trotted toward *Gotham*, which was being towed into position on one of the landing bay's three catapults.

The fat prow of one of the raiders' airships was visible through the transparent hydrogen lock. Like a baby whale that had finished suckling its mother, the ship cast off and backed away from the city. It turned ponderously, and then accelerated from view. A minute later, a larger airship took its place.

"Our hosts seem to be preparing for their departure," Kimber said. "I suggest we all get aboard *Gotham* and do likewise."

"Agreed," Bartlett responded.

She helped him to the ship and assisted him into an acceleration couch before moving forward to the cockpit. She arrived in time to hear the end of a string of oaths from the pilot.

"What's the matter?"

"The reactor controls aren't responding," Nyquist replied.

"Then switch to backup."

Nyquist pressed a series of controls without result. Each failure escalated his profanity. Finally, he twisted in his seat to regard Kimber. "I'm afraid we aren't going anywhere, Miss Crawford. Someone has shorted out the control system. The failsafes are locking us out of the circuit."

"Then bypass them!"

"Can't, not without blowing up the ship."

"Can we repair the damage?"

"Sure, given enough time. However, gaining access to the affected system is a four-hour job. I'm afraid Dalishaar's monkeys are one step ahead of us."

Kimber gazed out through the cockpit window. Beyond the loading airship lay blue sky, white cloud, and freedom. It seemed so close, yet was as far beyond her reach as the parched mountains and valleys of poor, dead Earth.

#

Fifteen minutes later, Halley turned to Sands and said, "Our employer reports that he's fully loaded and ready to cast off."

"Tell him to make tracks. We'll hold on here for another twenty minutes or so."

After a brief silence, she said, "Acknowledged. They're unhooking now."

Sands switched the holoscreen to exterior view. The flagship freighter cast loose, backed away from Cloudcroft's support truss, and turned to head north. From the airship's exhaust, it was clear that their drive reactors were at emergency maximum. Even so, it took a long time for its elongated shape to begin to dwindle in size. Beyond it, the second freighter was almost to the limits of visibility, while the lead ship had disappeared. With luck, it had reached the cloud wall and was sowing the rising leg of the convection cell with tons of reflective chaff. Soon the cloud wall would be as opaque to radar as it was to the human eye.

"All right, let's begin cleaning up in here," Sands told Halley. "Where did you put the note?"

"In the upper drawer of the desk."

"Good. I'd like to see his face when he finds it."

Duplicating the contents of the first councilor's private computer had required only a single memory tile. Much of what they had recorded was operating system, canned software, and the computer's extensive security system. Amid this dross, however, were the files Kelt Dalishaar felt too sensitive to maintain in the city computer. There was no telling what secrets might come to light if someone had the patience to crack the various security codes that protected the data.

"Hello, Three," Sands said over his radio. "Are you there?"

"Where else would I be, One?"

"How go things with the ship?"

"We're fully loaded and ready to lift out. The bay commander has us on the catapult, ready to launch."

"Any sign of chicanery?"

"None obvious, One. They're still being good little boys."

"That could change anytime now. I want the rest of you aboard when we arrive in the bay. If they're going to jump us, that will be their last chance."

"I've already reminded the port captain how much damage a fusion powered aircraft can do inside a city. I think he was suitably impressed."

"See you in a few minutes. We'll give the freighters time to reach the cloud wall, then get the hell out ourselves."

"Suits me fine," Crandall's electronically generated voice said. "I'm getting the distinct impression these

people don't like us."

"Can't say I blame them," Lars replied.

He and Halley gathered up their equipment, and then exited the office. They found the first councilor and his staff gathered in the living room. Dalishaar had taken the opportunity to change out of his robe. He was once again the very essence of a man of power. That worried Sands. Getting caught without one's pants tends to sap self-confidence. Now that Dalishaar had been given time to make himself presentable, no telling what ideas might be going through his head.

"This is what we will do, First Councilor," he said as the waiting Alliance dignitaries got to their feet.

"You, I, and Number Two will take a tube car to the landing bay. The rest of your people will wait here in Government Tower. You will stay in the bay until we have completed our launch. Any sign of interference and we blast our way free. No need to tell you what will happen to you personally if we do that, is there?"

"None at all."

"Let's go then."

Dalishaar led them to the lift, and from there, to the tube station. The three of them squeezed into one of the little cars and were whisked toward the rim of the city. Despite his misgivings, they arrived without incident.

There were two ships on the catapults that accelerated heavier-than-hydrogen craft away from the city. *SparrowHawk* was on the portside catapult. It was sealed up and ready for flight save for the starboard hydrogen lock, which was standing open. The black clad form of Ross Crandall stood outside the open port. A larger craft was on the starboard catapult. Sands recognized one of the winged spacecraft used for transit between Saturn and its moons. He ordered Halley to get aboard *SparrowHawk*, then grabbed Dalishaar by the arm and dragged him across the deck toward the spacecraft.

"You people should have been away by now," he shouted at Kimber as he neared the ship. An old man turned around at the sound of his voice.

"You must be our benefactor," he said. "I am Ganther Bartlett, Miss Crawford's chief negotiator."

"Never mind the introductions. What the hell are you doing here?"

"We've been sabotaged." He hurriedly explained about the damaged reactor.

Sands frowned. "You should have said something. We could have gotten you out on the airships. Now, it is too late. How many of you are there?"

"Eleven."

"What about it, First Councilor, can the Alliance provide a ship?"

"Sorry," Dalishaar said. There was no mistaking the note of triumph in his voice. "None available."

"Get one!" Sands ordered.

"You aren't going to set off your bomb over this," Dalishaar replied confidently. "You might if we thwarted you from leaving. These..." he gestured toward the assembled Titanians "... aren't that important to you. Besides, if you destroy Cloudcroft, you will kill them too."

Sands turned to Kimber Crawford. "I'm afraid he's right. I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help."

"Wait a minute!" the old man said. "Surely you have room aboard your ship."

"For eleven people? Hardly."

"How about one person?"

He hesitated, and then said, "That might be possible."

"Take Miss Crawford. Get her away from here."

"I won't leave you, Ganth!"

He turned to Kimber. "You must. Without you, Dalishaar has no leverage at all against your father."

"He's right, Miss Crawford," a man in the uniform of a Titanian spacer said. "Once you are safe, there will be a Titanian fleet on its way to free the rest of us in a matter of hours."

The man Kimber had addressed as Ganth turned back to Sands. "Please take her. You will be amply rewarded."

"I can squeeze her in," Sands replied. Events were moving entirely too fast for his peace of mind. He considered that this might be a ploy by the Alliance to put a spy aboard his ship, and then dismissed the thought out of hand.

"Were I you, Miss Crawford, I would not go with him," Dalishaar said.

"Why not, First Councilor?"

"You know nothing about these people. They may cut your throat as soon as they are out of sight. Besides, traveling with them isn't safe."

"What he means," Sands said, "is that he will try to blow us out of the sky the moment they deactivate our bomb."

Kimber smiled at Dalishaar. "It's true that I don't know what sort of cutthroats I'm throwing in with, but I do know the ones I'm leaving behind." With that, she turned to Sands. "Shall we get away from here?"

Chapter 8: Maelstrom

"What the hell is *she* doing here?" Halley asked as Lars led Kimber to *SparrowHawk*'s cockpit.

"It's a long story. Miss Crawford, you take the observer's station. It's going to be a rough ride so make sure you are strapped down." Sands took his own advice. Only a tiny portion of his brain was engaged in the task, however. The rest of him was consumed by his study of the instrument panel. "What's our status, Halley?"

"Who is she? And is it wise to use names?"

"Miss Crawford is the daughter of the Factor of Titan. We are rescuing her from the Alliance. As for names, she'll see our faces sooner or later, so what does it matter?"

“How do you know she’s the factor’s daughter?” Halley persisted. She had turned in her seat and was staring unabashedly at Kimber. It was not difficult to imagine the scowl beneath the opaque faceplate of her environment suit.

“If she turns out to be an Alliance spy, then we’ll toss her out the hydrogen lock. Now give me that status check, copilot!”

“The ship is ready to launch, *Captain* !”

Sands disabled his speech synthesizer. He had been running on adrenaline ever since bailing out into a hostile sky. For what he had to say now, he wanted his voice to come through with full overtones.

“Look, you’ve delivered your message. You don’t like having a passenger along. I am sorry I didn’t have time to consult you about it. The fact remains that I thought it important to rescue this lady from the Alliance. We can argue about it later... that is, if we evade the trap they have undoubtedly set for us. Okay by you?”

“Yes, sir.” Halley’s tone had lost all trace of insubordination. “The powerplant is ready for maximum thrust. All instrumentation is working and all weapons are armed.”

“Thank you.” Sands turned to his guest. “You’ll have to launch without a suit. As soon as we are clear of the city, I will give you the word. When I do, you go to the locker just aft of the cockpit door. You will find a suit in there. Put it on. You will have ninety seconds maximum, so do not dawdle. The whole Alliance Navy is out there somewhere. If we’re to escape with our lives, I’m going to have to really fly this beast.”

“Maybe they won’t attack with me onboard,” Kimber said.

“After what we did to them, they would attack if we were transporting Jesus Christ!” Halley responded. “Now please be quiet. We’ve a battle to fight.”

“Contact the port captain,” Sands ordered. “Tell him that we’re ready to launch.”

She did so. A moment later she reported, “They’ve passed control to us.”

Sands activated the ‘All Hands’ circuit.

“Look alive back there. If they are going to jump us, this is their last chance. I want a full circumambient sweep as soon as we get clear.”

“You’ll have it,” Crandall’s voice said over the intercom.

“Launch in ten seconds.”

He watched the red numerals count down on the chronometer display. When they reached 00:00, he keyed the control that triggered the catapult. There was a surge of acceleration and the landing bay was suddenly replaced by the blue-white vastness of Saturn’s atmosphere.

Sands rolled *SparrowHawk* upside down and pulled the nose into a vertical dive. As the ship dove past the bulge of the main city gasbag, he advanced the throttles. The reactors came alive with a surge that drove them toward the depths. He stayed close to the gasbag, hoping his proximity would thwart any fire control computer that might be tracking them. Within seconds, a large cylindrical object grew in the windscreen, and then fell behind as the exterior radiation detectors chattered once and went silent. The black-and-yellow cylinder had been the fusion generator suspended ten kilometers below Cloudcroft.

Lars worked furiously to clear his ears as he continued the descent. He held it until he was ten kilometers below the level of the fusion generator. He pulled back on his controller. Their speed was such that even that gentle movement was transformed into a three-gravity turn. As they leveled out, Cloudcroft was falling behind at a rate of 2200 kilometers per hour. The artificial compass showed them heading due south, directly toward the heart of the Dardenelles Cyclone.

"I've got multiple aircraft circling west of the Alliance, Ross Crandall reported. Now that they had dropped well below the cluster's altitude, they could see objects that had been screened by the other cities of the Alliance. The Alliance Navy had spent the time assembling a large force in the blind spot. Only the fact that most of the Navy was engaged in the annexation of New Philadelphia kept the fleet from being larger.

"We just lost the signal from the detonator," Brent Garvich reported.

"Someone check our stern!"

"Cloudcroft's still there," Halley replied. "They haven't set the frumpin' thing off. They must have neutralized it!"

"In only three minutes? I wonder how they managed that."

Crandall's warning echoed over the intercom. "We've got multiple missiles being launched behind us. They're from Cloudcroft." Even without his speech synthesizer, he was remarkably calm about it.

Sands glanced tensely at his tactical display, and then relaxed. They were already 100 kilometers south of the city and fleeing at high speed. They would be out of range before the missiles closed on them.

"Those aircraft to the west have stopped circling," Crandall continued. "They're coming after us. I make them six prowlers and two destroyers."

"Keep me apprised of their progress. We'll see what we can do to get to the cloud wall ahead of them."

In front of *SparrowHawk* lay the several-hundred-kilometer-tall wall that marked the northernmost reaches of the Dardenelles Cyclone. It was streaked in blues, purples and blacks. The lightning that had been so visible across hundreds of kilometers last night was muted, but still active. The cloud wall had a fluffy texture that warned of massive turbulence inside the storm. Already they were being subjected to a series of bumps. It would get a lot worse before it got better.

From space, the Dardenelles was a tiny white spot intruding into the dark band of the North Temperate Belt. Only Saturn's massive size could make such a thing look small. The storm arose from a localized hot spot deep within the atmosphere. Its energy was small compared to the zonal upwellings, but far more concentrated. The cyclone was powerful enough to maintain its shape against the Coriolis forces that tore apart other features of the Saturnian atmosphere.

"All right, Miss Crawford ... Kimber. You have your ninety seconds. Get into that suit!"

"Yes, sir."

He glanced over his shoulder once to see her scrambling aft to the emergency suit locker. She was back in her seat faster than he would have believed possible. She strapped down, and then expertly snapped her helmet in place with a quick thrust and twist.

"You do that like you were born to it."

“I was. Every Titanian learns to put on an environment suit almost before he learns to walk.”

“I’m picking up something ahead.”

“Where?”

“Just exiting the cloud wall,” Halley answered.

“What is it?”

“It looks like four aircraft. I tentatively make them Alliance prowlers.”

“How the hell did they get there without us seeing them?”

She shrugged. “Like that squadron to the west, they used the other cities to mask their departure. They must have gone the long way around and come back inside the cloud wall.”

“This complicates things,” Sands muttered.

He glanced at his screen. Now there were two clusters of red symbols closing on the single green dot at the center. Crimson arrows gave velocity vectors, while blue alphanumerics told ship types and measured time to intercept. He mentally placed his adversaries in three-dimensional space. The craft behind him were still much higher than he was, almost at the altitude of the cities. They were descending in a long slanting dive, hoping to outrun him. The figures said that their efforts would be in vain.

The ships in front were another story. They lay directly across his path, having been vectored there by battle controllers aboard one of the cities. They too were above him, but well within striking distance. He considered his options and decided that his best hope of evasion lay in diving deep.

“Watch your ears again. We’re going down!”

SparrowHawk stooped and dove for the dense atmosphere of the lower flyway. Sands yawned mightily as the pressure mounted. After more than a minute, he leveled off some 50 kilometers below the cities. The pressure was now 20 atmospheres and the outside temperature higher than it had been inside Cloudcroft’s gasbag. Only the ship’s environmental control system kept them from being cooked. The flow noise was deafening.

He glanced at his screen. The blocking force was in a near vertical dive down the face of the cloud wall as they attempted to cut him off. He waited for them to come level, then advanced his throttles to emergency maximum and sent *SparrowHawk* into a zoom climb.

“Smart move!” Halley said from beside him. “The prowler’s never been built that can out climb an air shark.”

“We all hope.”

Their speed bled off continuously as they climbed. When it fell to 1000 kph, Sands nosed his ship over to maintain that velocity. Two kilometers below them and still a hundred kilometers distant, the four prowlers had discovered their error. They began to climb as well.

They would never make it. Sands was gaining altitude at almost twice the rate they were. By the time *SparrowHawk* reached the cloud wall, the prowlers would be too far below to be a threat. Meanwhile, however, the climb had slowed *SparrowHawk*’s arrival at the cloud wall, allowing the ships behind to close the gap.

“It’s going to be a dead heat,” Sands said as he watched the blips on his display.

Sands watched his airspeed indicator as he climbed. Their speed was now less than 800 kph, yet still much too high to enter the cyclone. At that velocity, the first bit of turbulence would rip the wings off. To safely penetrate the Dardenelles, it was necessary to slow almost to a hover.

“Missiles in the air behind us,” Halley reported simultaneous with Ross Crandall.

“Man the lasers,” was Lars’s only response. He had all the trouble he could handle trying to find a relatively calm spot to breach the storm. He found it in a patch of smooth cloud that grew until it seemed ready to envelop them.

“Missiles are entering their terminal dive,” Crandall reported. “They fired too soon.”

Ten kilometers behind them, the missiles -- designed for use a good deal higher in the atmosphere -- ran out of kinetic energy and heeled over.

“It’s the last chance they’ll get,” Sands replied. He cut *SparrowHawk*’s reactors back to minimum as he fought the aircraft’s controls. He pulled the nose higher as the wall of dark black clouds came up to smack him in the face.

Suddenly, they were inside the storm and a giant hand was trying to shake his brain loose inside his skull.

#

“R... r... rough ride,” Halley said, the words burbling in her chest.

“It’s going to get rougher,” Sands responded. “Launch all decoys and chaff!”

He dove the ship as a series of popping noises denoted the launch of their various “spoofers,” devices designed to lead the enemy astray. Like *SparrowHawk*, the Alliance vessels would have to slow down to enter the storm. However, nothing would stop them from racing up to the cloud boundary and launching a full brace of missiles before turning away. If that was their choice, he wanted to give their missiles a target other than himself.

He switched his display from tactical to navigation. A schematic of the Dardenelles Cyclone came up with wind velocities denoted by small arrows of varying lengths. The obvious thing was to make directly for the cyclone’s eye, cross that thousand-kilometer-wide expanse of calm air, and escape out the other side. Sands had no intention of doing the obvious. There was most likely a squadron stationed inside the eye to ambush them the moment they appeared.

Rather than cut straight across the storm, Sands plotted a course around its eastern edge. That, too, was a risk. With peak wind velocities of 1800 kph near the eye, it was impossible to buck the storm winds by taking the western route. At the maximum velocity they dared use, they would find themselves blown backwards.

They spent fifteen tense minutes wallowing through the storm before Halley said, “I think we’ve lost them, Lars. Mind if I take off my helmet? It’s starting to chafe.”

He scanned the instruments that measured his ship’s health. Despite the shaking, all systems were well within safety margins. They were not about to lose a wing or anything else vital.

“Go ahead, but keep it handy.” He then keyed the ‘All Hands’ circuit and instructed the rest of the crew to do the same.

Halley removed her helmet to reveal drawn features and hair plastered down with perspiration.

Sands switched *SparrowHawk* to computer control, and then reached up to remove his own helmet. He needed two attempts to get it off. Finally, he got the neck seal undone and lifted the helmet over his head. The sudden blast of cool air was like being reborn. He glanced at Kimber Crawford as he stowed the helmet in the rack beside his seat. She too had removed her helmet and was looking at him with renewed interest.

“My savior has a face,” she said as he turned. “And quite a handsome one, at that!”

Sands grinned while Halley said something uncomplimentary under her breath.

The next half-hour saw their flight turn slowly from east to north as they fought their way around the storm. Sands put *SparrowHawk* into a climb, until an hour later; they broke free of one layer of storm clouds and began climbing for another far overhead. It was perpetual night between the storm’s cloud layers. A thick fog of ice crystals battered the windscreen, yet the obscuration and lightning of the past hour were gone.

“Is this wise?” Kimber asked as soon as she realized they were in clear air.

“It’s necessary,” Sands said through gritted teeth as he fought to control the ship. The higher they climbed the more sluggish the controls had become.

“What for?”

“We need to get up to the ammonia precipitation level. Our paint job is ammonia soluble. We need to wash off these incriminating markings before we can show ourselves anywhere.”

As they flew, they used all of their passive sensors to listen for Alliance ships. With darkness beyond the windscreen, all they received were a few garbled radar transmissions. Though it was difficult to tell for sure, most seemed to originate at a considerable distance. Sands was just beginning to relax when Halley reminded him of the time.

“Right,” he said, glancing up at the chronometer. “Time to get our next set of instructions.”

He turned control over to Halley, unstrapped, and climbed carefully out of his seat. Now that they were no longer bucking the storm’s winds, but rather allowing them to carry the ship along, the turbulence had quieted considerably. He squeezed past Kimber and made his way to his cabin just aft of the cockpit. He buzzed for Crandall to join him.

“What’s up, Lars?”

Sands flashed the memory tile Micah Bolin had given him. “Are you curious to find out the identity of our employers?”

“Damned right!”

“Come in and lock the door.”

The cabin barely allowed Crandall room to stand while Sands seated himself in front of his workscreen. A bunk and a recessed closet for his clothes completed the cabin’s furnishings. Despite its flattened lifting body fuselage and overall size -- as large as a small airliner of a previous century -- *SparrowHawk* was cramped.

Sands popped the memory tile into the proper slot and brought up a picture on his workscreen. He keyed in the first password Bolin had given him. An old-fashioned clock appeared and began to count down the seconds remaining before the information was erased. Sands keyed in the second password. At the moment he did so, the ship bucked and caused him to hit a wrong key. He willed himself to be calm as he cleared the input and tried again.

His second attempt was successful. The clock disappeared and Micah Bolin's further instructions appeared. They were only three lines long. When he had finished reading, he turned to Crandall, whose position did not allow him to see the screen.

"It looks like we're going to visit Glasgow-in-the-Clouds."

"Are they our employers?"

Sands shrugged. "He doesn't say. I guess we'll find that out when we get there."

Chapter 9: Ammonia Storm

SparrowHawk reentered the North Temperate Belt some 20,000 kilometers east of the Dardenelles Cyclone. As quickly as they returned to clear air, Sands sent his ship toward one of the high traffic lanes used by heavier-than-hydrogen passenger craft. The cargo carrying airships generally flew at a much lower altitude where the higher atmospheric density provided greater lift. Thus, *SparrowHawk* had the sky to herself save for a few distant transponder blips. As far as Sands could tell, they had left their pursuers far behind.

Sands and his crew had spent a Saturnian standard day-and-a-half making good their escape. Three times the world had cycled between pitch black and dark gray as they flew through the turbulent clouds at the northernmost boundary of Saturn's North Tropical Zone. Their flight had kept them well away from clear air to avoid being tracked from an orbiting sensor satellite.

They had flown blind for more than six hours after departing the Dardenelles Cyclone. It was only when Sands was sure they were well out of detector range that he ordered the ship's active sensors turned on.

As soon as they could "see" again, Sands sent his craft into a gradual climb in search of ammonia. Except for specially equipped tankers, most vessels avoided any form of liquid precipitation. Sands would normally have steered clear as well. Liquid entering a ship's engines could damage them by thermal shock. However, his need of the moment overpowered his fear of abusing his drive reactors. Bolin's people had used ammonia soluble paint to apply their ersatz markings. Liquid ammonia would wash away the traitor's coat the ship wore and return *SparrowHawk* to her former shabby appearance.

The chemistry of the Saturnian atmosphere was complex, especially inside a major upwelling like the North Tropic Zone. Generally, however, liquid ammonia was found much higher in the sky than where the cloud cities flew. Indeed, *SparrowHawk* lacked the ability to climb all the way to the white clouds of ammonia ice that give Saturn its characteristic look from space. The best they could do was climb into the layer of brown ammonia hydrosulfide clouds a hundred kilometers above the cities. After that, the hydrogen-helium atmosphere became too rarified for the ship to support its own weight, despite a pressure of five standard atmospheres.

They flew for an hour before their questing radar found a region of sky where ammonia droplets were forming. Slowly, over several minutes, the radar painted a picture of an anvil-topped storm buried among

the dark clouds of the zone. Sands altered course to send his ship into the heart of the storm. It was not long before the first droplets were splattering against the windscreen. The sprinkle turned quickly to a downpour and the sound of liquid drumming against the hull rose to a dull roar.

They spent twenty minutes flying through the storm to make sure the incriminating markings were completely washed away. Then Sands sent *SparrowHawk* sliding back down to a more comfortable altitude, confident that there was now no way the Northern Alliance would be able to tie his ship to the raid on Cloudcroft. However, as Halley took perverse delight in pointing out, it was no longer necessary for the Alliance to recognize *SparrowHawk* to connect them to the raid. Thanks to Sands, they merely had to discover what ship it was that had Kimber Crawford aboard.

As soon as they left the storm Sands ushered his guest into Dane's empty cabin and locked the door. Once back in the cockpit, he keyed for an "all hands" circuit.

"All right," he announced, "let's hear your comments about our passenger."

Ross Crandall was the first to speak. "How the hell did she talk you into bringing her aboard, Lars?"

Sands explained the circumstances he'd found in the Cloudcroft landing bay after agreeing to help the Titanians escape the Alliance. He dwelled especially on Kelt Dalishaar's reaction to the idea, and finished by saying, "There was no time to consult any of you. I had to make a decision. I chose to take one more revenge on the people who murdered Dane."

"Are you sure that was your only reason?" Halley asked, facing him from across the narrow console of flight controls.

"Speak your mind!"

"She's uncommonly beautiful. Are you sure that didn't sway your judgment?"

His ears burned at her implication. "I brought her aboard because it irritated Dalishaar and aided the task our employers set for us, which, if any of you have forgotten, was to sow confusion among our enemies."

Hume Bailey was the next to comment. "We went along with this raid, Captain, because we had a good chance to hide out afterwards. That chance is now gone. She has seen our faces. She knows who we are, for God's sake!"

"She hates the Alliance more than we do. She certainly isn't going to give us away."

"We don't know that, sir. Even if she does not intend to, she may not be able to help it. She is a public person. As soon as we let her go, the Alliance will know where to lay their hands on her again. What if they abduct her and use drugs to make her talk?"

"That would start a war with Titan."

"That prospect didn't exactly stop them this time, did it, Captain?"

"I hate to say it, Lars, but Bailey's right," Ross Crandall said. "Even if she agrees to keep our secret, it will only take them a few minutes with the right drugs to wring her dry of everything she knows."

"Look, if she's kidnapped again, the news will be all over the planet within a matter of hours! We'll have time to cover our tracks."

"I don't want to cover my tracks," Reese said from the reactor control room. The deep muted thrum of

SparrowHawk's dual powerplants was audible in the background. "I want to spend my ill gotten gains in peace."

"Aren't you all forgetting something?" Halley asked.

"What?"

"What happens when we get to Glasgow-Prime? The arrival of the Titanian factor's daughter will be big news. The Northern Alliance won't have to question her under drugs. They merely have to subscribe to one of the fax services."

"Do we know she is the factor's daughter?" Brent Garvich asked.

To Sands's surprise, Halley spoke up. "I've been doing some checking on just that, Brent. There are half a dozen pictures of Kimber Crawford in computer storage, mostly at diplomatic receptions. She's genuine, all right."

"I say we don't take chances. I vote that we toss her out the hydrogen lock."

"That we will not do!" Sands warned. "Not as long as I am captain of this ship."

"We're missing a bet here," Crandall said, moving in to defuse the tension that had suddenly crackled across the intercom circuits. "What about ransom?"

"She's already offered a reward," Sands replied, glad for the way out of the impending crisis.

"How much?" came the response from several voices.

"She said her father would give us anything we ask."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"I turned it down."

There was a long silence on the intercom, followed by an explosion of oaths.

"All right, I made a mistake. We will demand the reward for delivering her to her father. As for the problem of keeping her concealed when we get to Glasgow, we will think of something. Now, I want a vote of confidence on this. Does she stay aboard, or do you all find yourselves a new captain?"

"No need to put it that way, sir," Garvich said. "I'll go along."

"Reese?"

"Aye, now that I know about the reward."

"Same here," Bailey replied.

"You're the boss, Lars," Crandall added. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

Sands turned to Halley. "What say you, copilot?"

"I still say that you're thinking with your glands. Still, if she'll agree to remain incommunicado, I'll support you."

"Very well," he said, unstrapping from his seat. "Halley, let's see if we can't find open air. Ross, keep the

sensor gain up and notify me if you see anything, even a ghost. I'm going aft to talk to our guest."

He moved down the central passageway and unlocked the second cabin on the port side. He found Kimber lying on the doublewide bunk, which, until a few weeks ago, Dane had shared with Halley. Ever since Dane's death, Halley had refused to enter the cabin.

"What did they decide?" she asked as she propped herself up on one elbow. Her green eyes were cool as she stared at him. She knew that they had been deciding her fate.

"The crew is willing to support my decision if you will agree to certain conditions."

"Such as?"

"They want the reward."

"I offered it to you."

"We'll have to agree on an amount. I warn you, they won't be easily satisfied."

"As I told you, my father will be generous. What else?"

"There's the problem of your celebrity. Word is bound to get back to Cloudcroft if anyone recognizes you."

She nodded. "And it won't take long to track down the ship I arrived on. I'll have to disguise my appearance, at least until a Titanian spacecraft can pick me up."

He nodded. "Some place other than Glasgow. I doubt the laird will want to draw attention to himself by hosting one of your father's ships."

"Then it's agreed? I will masquerade as a member of your crew until you can arrange to send me home. I would not worry too much about the Alliance tracking you down. As soon as my father learns that I'm safe, they will have far bigger things to worry about."

Sands held out a hand and helped her to her feet. "That was the general idea in bringing you along."

#

Kelt Dalishaar stalked into the main briefing center of Alliance Naval Headquarters and moved to take his seat in front of the assembled members of the high command. Grand Admiral Jerzy Samorset's resplendent blue-and-white uniform appeared slept in. The rest of the admirals and captains did not look much better.

Serves them right, Dalishaar thought as he sat down at the antique table.

"Well?" he demanded. "How did it happen?"

"Captain Berghoff!" Samorset growled.

The designated officer stood up and strode to the lectern. Behind it was an oversize holocube.

"First Councilor. The raiders came in on flight wings and landed atop the gas bag."

"Why didn't we detect them en route?"

"Conditions for detection are particularly bad this near the cyclone, sir. The wings and harnesses were

treated with radar absorbent coating and the lack of motive power minimized their infrared emissions. Their ship hid in the northern cloud wall, effectively shielding it from our sensors.”

“Are you telling me, Captain, that they *glided here from the cloud wall?* ”

“It would appear that they did, First Councilor.”

“Impossible. No one would dare cross so much open sky on flight wings. Have you checked the ships in the vicinity?”

“Yes, Councilor,” the grand admiral said from his seat. “We have arrested the crews of every ship that passed within glide range of Cloudcroft last night and are interrogating them vigorously.”

Dalishaar stood and began to pace. “What you are telling me, gentlemen, is that we have a blind spot.”

“No longer,” Captain Berghoff replied. “We installed several long range instruments atop the gas bag and took steps to increase our perimeter patrols yesterday.”

“In other words, you are doing what you should have done *before* the raid!”

“Uh, yes, sir.”

“What efforts are you making to identify the culprits? You people certainly had enough time to get a close look at their ship.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be of much help,” the captain behind the lectern responded.

“Oh? Why not?”

“The air samples we took show a high degree of outgassing from an ammonia soluble coating. The ship’s outer markings were no more than a few days old. Obviously, they intend to eliminate the fake paint scheme before they put into their next port of call.”

“And the airships?”

“We might have better luck with them. They are too big to completely paint over. We have high-resolution holoscans of each and may be able to match them with records of known vessels. If not, we can at least come up with a series of characteristics for our agents to be on the lookout for.”

“That, at least, shows some promise.”

“There is also the matter of the Titanian woman,” Grand Admiral Samorset said. “They may have made a mistake in taking her. Our agents need only watch for her and notify us when she reappears.”

“You are being remarkably profligate with *my* agents, Admiral. Do you have any idea how overworked our espionage service is already? Now you’ll have them checking every port and hotel on Saturn.”

“It would have been better if we’d stopped them, First Councilor, but I fail to see how else we can proceed.”

“Since you bring it up, Admiral,” Dalishaar said in a deceptively soft voice, “let us move on to that particularly shameful part of this episode. How, in the name of all that is holy, did three lumbering airships and a pirate air shark escape your squadrons?”

Samorset squirmed visibly in his chair. “I may have erred when I ordered our forces to concentrate on

the main privateer vessel, First Councilor. I figured that we could always overtake the freighters once we'd dealt with their leader."

"How is it that your people bungled the intercept then?"

"I have no excuse, sir. The commander of our blocking force made a tactical misjudgment when he allowed himself to be drawn down to the same altitude. He has been disciplined."

"I wish I could be as philosophical as you are about this. These raiders have made fools of us, gentlemen, and I will not rest until I have made object lessons of them!"

Dalishaar glared at the military men, careful not to let his hands begin trembling again. He did not tell them that the stakes were far higher than they realized. It had taken several hours to find the note the pirates had left in his desk drawer. It would not do to reveal that his personal data files had been compromised. That would lead to questions about what secrets he kept in those files, questions Dalishaar could not afford to answer. He was not about to admit that he might well have lost the most important secret on Saturn.

Chapter 10: Glasgow-in-the-Clouds

"*Captain to Halley Trevanon's cabin,*" the voice announced over the intercom.

Larson Sands glanced up at the sound. He was in his own cabin going over the list of plunder. It was an impressive list. Just considering the items in *SparrowHawk*'s holds, he calculated the proceeds from the raid would allow every crewmember to live comfortably for life. When their share of everything aboard Micah Bolin's airships was counted, they were all rich beyond imagining, even figuring in the fraction of true value their plunder would bring on the black market. Indeed, they would all be so wealthy that they would have to be careful not to attract unwanted attention. When the call came over the intercom, Sands keyed to have the list of booty printed as he answered, "On my way!"

He shut down his workscreen and slid his cabin door into its recess. Around him were the deep-throated thrum of *SparrowHawk*'s engines and the constant sound of hydrogen-helium sweeping past the fuselage. Halley's cabin was two doors aft on the port side. He knocked and waited for the muffled command to enter.

As he opened the door, he found his copilot putting the final touches on Kimber Crawford's new hairstyle. Halley stepped back and said, "Well, what do you think?"

Kimber pirouetted before him with elbows held close to her sides lest she brush Halley's bookshelf. She was a transformed woman. Where before her hair had been long and black, now it was short and red. Her green eyes had been turned blue and her cheekbones seemed higher.

Sands had seen pictures of redheads on Earth. They had been covered with uneven splotches where the sun had tanned their skins. People on Saturn lived too far from Sol and too deep in the atmosphere to develop freckles. Kimber now possessed the peaches-and-cream complexion that went with being a "carrot top."

There were other, less obvious changes. Halley had somehow made her seem harder. She was no longer the daughter of the most powerful man on Titan. She could easily have been from the laborer class. Her costume accentuated her coarseness. She wore a garish shipsuit with a copper belt wide enough to be

considered vulgar. Finally, her regal bearing had been subtly altered. She slouched. Here was a woman who could not possibly have been a student at the expensive finishing schools Kimber Crawford had attended.

Sands whistled. "I don't believe it."

"Captain Sands, may I introduce Miss Karen Colin, your newest crew member?"

"Miss Colin," Sands said as he bowed to kiss Kimber's hand.

"How do, Captain." Even her voice had changed. It now had a reedier, more nasal quality. "Do I pass inspection?"

"With full honors!"

"Do you really think she'll fool them, Lars?" Halley asked. Despite her misgivings about Kimber, she was proud of her handiwork.

"Even people who know her would have trouble recognizing her in that outfit."

"Thank you, kind sir," Kimber/Karen replied, curtsying as she did so. The movement was choppy, as though she had copied it from a holovid. "I just hope my father recognizes me when I call him to tell him I'm safe."

Sands chewed his lower lip for a moment. "I've been thinking about that. I'm afraid we'll have to delay that call."

"Why?"

"I've got to find out where I stand with the Laird of Glasgow. If he's my employer, he may have something to say about when and where we arrange a pickup."

"Is there any doubt that we're working for Glasgow?" Halley asked.

Sands shrugged. "Bolin merely told us to meet him there. He didn't say a word about the Scots being our clients. If they *are not* our clients, then we have to be especially careful about arranging a pickup. It is certain a Titanian freighter cannot call openly. A simple information search would alert Cloudcroft to its presence the moment it arrived."

"Why can't we call my father right now, before we get to Glasgow?"

Sands shook his head. "Any message we send through the planetary comm net will have *SparrowHawk*'s identification code imbedded in it. If the Alliance were to intercept it, they'd know who we are as soon as they called up the transmission header."

Kimber sighed. "Then I'll wait until we get to Glasgow and you arrange things with the laird. Maybe I could drop father a simple unsigned note telling him that I'm safe."

"We'll see."

#

The three cloud cities of the Glasgow Cluster hovered in the eye of a small cyclone at the southern edge of the North Equatorial Belt. The Scots-descended inhabitants preferred the isolation of their cyclone to the crowded cloud canyons of the main planetary flyways. Like their forebears, they had a reputation for

being both fiercely proud and possessing an independence that bordered on the fanatic.

The Glasgow cyclone was imbedded in a region where the interface between belt and zone turned turbulent. Upstream of the transition point, the cloud wall had the appearance of having been smoothed by a giant trowel. Downstream, the wall was a jumble of clouds, clear air canyons, and giant cumulus formations adrift like icebergs in the flyway.

It was a beautiful day as *SparrowHawk* followed the north equatorial belt to where a canyon branched away to the south and disappeared around a gentle curve. Sands sent his ship into the canyon, whose apparent narrowness proved an illusion. As he flew, he let his eyes drink in the grandeur of the cloudscape around him. The fact that Saturn's beauty was largely the product of a psycho-physiological quirk of the human eye did nothing to diminish his enjoyment.

At Saturn's distance from Sol, sunlight is only about one percent as intense as on Earth. Even so, human beings are far from blind on the planet. The human eye adapts readily over a very wide range of light levels. In fact, the brightest moonlight on Earth was only about one-millionth as strong as the illumination at high noon. If one believes the old books, people could see reasonably well under a full moon, although only in black-and-white.

There are two different receptors in the eye that react to light. The more sensitive of these are the rods, which provide a monochromatic view of the world at very low light levels. When subjected to bright light, the eye switches from the rods to the less sensitive cones. Since cones react to the red, green, and blue wavelengths, people see in color during the daylight hours.

The two sets of receptors perform different jobs. It is therefore not surprising that they are most sensitive to light at two slightly different wavelengths. There is a level of illumination, known as the Mesozoic range, where both rods and cones are active simultaneously. When this happens, the eye undergoes an apparent color shift. Reds become dark or black, and blues become much more intense.

The low light level at Saturn's distance from the sun, plus the filtering effect of the high atmospheric haze, conspired to create this effect. The level of illumination in the deep clear air canyons was almost precisely in the middle of the Mesozoic range. The result was a world of muted reds and vivid blues, a color combination that most human beings found soothing.

A river of clear hydrogen-helium spewing into the Glasgow cyclone had carved the canyon *SparrowHawk* followed. It was the path the three Glasgow cities had taken to establish themselves in the eye of the thousand-year-old storm. It was also the only authorized entryway for ships having business there. Anyone who attempted to approach through the cloud wall would quickly find himself under attack by the Glasgow guard force.

Sands had heard stories about the efficiency of the Scots' detector systems. He was not surprised, therefore, when they were hailed a full two hundred kilometers short of their destination.

"Who are you?" came the curt question broadcast over a tight beam from the cloud cover somewhere ahead.

"*SparrowHawk*. We are a privateer out of Port Gregson, bound for the southern hemisphere. Our portside reactor ingested something solid around Second Midnight yesterday and we need to put in for repairs."

"Armament?" the voice snapped.

"We have the usual antiship missiles and close in lasers."

“Stand by, *SparrowHawk* . I’ll check with my superiors and get back with you.”

There was a five-minute delay while the controller consulted higher authority. While they waited, Halley said, “They’re making it look good, aren’t they? He sounds like he isn’t expecting us.”

Sands shrugged. “He probably isn’t. They would be stupid to tell their low level functionaries about the raid.”

The controller came back on the air. “The landing fee will be a hundred credits per ton and you’ll have to pay for any repairs in advance.”

“That is acceptable.”

“Very well. Standard approach under city control with full verification of weapons lock engaged.”

“Will do.”

“Report the outer marker, *SparrowHawk* . Welcome to Glasgow.”

“What did he mean, ‘weapons lock engaged?’” Kimber asked. Once again, she was seated in the jumpseat between the two pilots.

“It’s a standard precaution,” Halley replied, pointing to a large red lever on the instrument console. “That is our master arm switch. Once we throw it to the disarm position, there is no way for our computer to fire the weapons. The city computer will verify the disarm when we turn control over to it. If anything is amiss, or if we make even the slightest untoward move, they will vaporize us with a city laser.”

“Is it safe to put ourselves so completely in their hands? If I had contracted to raid the Alliance, I might want to make sure the raiders couldn’t talk about it later.”

“They’ll have plenty of opportunities to kill us once we’re aboard Glasgow-Prime,” Sands replied. “Why destroy all that valuable cargo in our holds?”

“All the more reason you shouldn’t trust them.”

He shrugged. “What choice have we? They have had our fate in their hands since the moment we boarded Cloudcroft. How difficult would it be for the Laird of Glasgow to pick up a phone and tell Kelt Dalishaar where to find us?”

“He’d be implicating himself.”

“How? What proof have we that he is our employer? Maybe Micah Bolin merely intends this as a rendezvous or transfer point, and some other city hired us.”

“Or maybe he doesn’t intend to share the loot he carried away,” Halley said. “He could have sent us here while his airships are racing as fast as they can in the opposite direction.”

“You’re saying that you can’t trust anyone!”

Halley laughed. “Now you’re thinking like a privateer!”

Ten minutes later, the clouds around them opened up into a blue-white swirl one hundred seventy kilometers across. The cyclone was not as large or as strong as the Dardenelles, but at its center was the same clear air and relative calm that they had avoided in the larger storm.

The enemy of all the cloud cities of Saturn was weather. If a city found itself in a region of precipitation, it would quickly be weighed down to where the temperature would cook everyone onboard. If it blundered too near a storm, it might be pelted by hail. Sometimes, even in clear air, it could encounter a microburst strong enough to twist a support truss into the shape of a pretzel. For that reason, cloud cities flew only in the eyes of cyclones or in the broad, clear flyways of the planetary belts. The cities, which were their destination, were on the opposite side of the storm's eye. The flashing red point of a laser beacon marked their positions.

They contacted Glasgow Approach Control and began a routine that was as stylized as a classic ballet. Halley threw the switch that would disarm them, and then surrendered control to the city computer. Cybernetic impulses coursed through their ship to confirm that missiles were indeed useless and lasers inoperative. Finally satisfied that they were helpless, the Glasgow city computer took control of their ship. Henceforth, any deviation from flight plan would bring instant retaliation.

Their approach to Glasgow-Prime, the capital city of the cluster, took them near where a new cloud city was being constructed. A disembodied support truss hovered midway between two large cloud cities, supported in the sky by hundreds of small balloons. Each balloon was silvered to minimize heat loss and attached to a small fusion generator that provided energy to heat the hydrogen inside. Men and machines crawled across what would one day be the upper deck of the city.

Kimber pointed to the city under construction. "I've always wondered why the cloud cities don't do something like that."

"Like what?" Sands asked.

"Use multiple balloons for buoyancy. Isn't it dangerous to rely on a single gas bag?"

"Redundant bags were tried in the early days. They lack lifting power. Remember, even though a square meter of gasbag membrane does not weigh much, there are a hell of a lot of square meters! If you double or triple up on membranes, you have to lift more. That translates into a weight penalty."

"But the city couldn't be destroyed by a single gas bag failure."

"Not true," Halley said. "Having two or three gas bags means that should one fail, the city would be seriously out of balance. Lose lift in one bag and you could capsize the support truss. Can you imagine 300,000 people whose world has suddenly turned edge?"

Kimber shuddered. "It still seems a dangerous way to live."

"What other choice have we?"

The construction site in the clouds slipped behind them and Glasgow-Prime grew until the gasbag filled the windscreen. Sands scanned the mooring points around the outer edge of the city. There were several airships there. None belonged to Micah Bolin's group. That was hardly surprising. Even at top speed, it would be several days before the big freighters could reach Glasgow.

As they approached the city, *SparrowHawk* slowed of her own accord. They circled around Glasgow-Prime at a range of one kilometer until an open docking bay came into view. As their ship headed in, Sands could see the maws of several large lasers tracking their progress.

#

As soon as *SparrowHawk* was secure inside the landing bay, Sands made his way to the midships hydrogen lock. The rest of the crew remained at their stations. By law, only the captain could set foot

aboard Glasgow-Prime until he settled with the port authorities.

Sands opened the lock and stepped down onto the landing bay deck. He stood next to his aircraft and surveyed his surroundings. There were four other aircraft in the landing bay. Two of these were passenger vessels making ready to get underway. Sands noted several curious faces staring at him from behind a long row of circular windows. Two smaller winged darts were parked next to the walls of the bay. These were city patrol craft situated on individual catapults with their noses pointed outward. In the event of unwanted visitors, they could be launched in less than two minutes.

Having glanced casually at his surroundings, Sands turned and took in as much of *SparrowHawk* as he could see from where he was standing. Once again, he made it seem a casual thing. In fact, what he was doing was checking to see that their flight through the ammonia storm had washed away all of their ersatz markings. *SparrowHawk* appeared to have been returned to the dilapidated condition she had had before being repainted by Micah Bolin's people. Of course, he would have to check her over carefully to be sure.

A welcoming party of four rounded the tip of *SparrowHawk*'s wing and moved toward him. Sands suppressed a smile. The most common mode of dress aboard his home city of Sorrell Three was a pair of drab gray coveralls. The newcomers wore kilts and sporrans, with bonnets set rakishly atop their heads. Their costumes were also uniforms, as evidenced by the badges of rank on their shoulders. That they were military was made even more evident by their sidearms and the riot guns carried by the two enlisted men in the party.

"Good day, Captain," the officer with the insignia of a subcommander said in the same thick brogue the approach controller had used. "Who are you and what brings you here?"

"The name is Larson Sands. I command Privateer *SparrowHawk*, last out of Port Gregson. We were en route to the south where we have an employment contract. We've put in for repairs."

"So I understand," the officer replied, glancing toward the ship. "What happened?"

Sands repeated his story about ingesting something solid the previous day. It sometimes happened that conditions in Saturn's atmosphere resulted in the formation of hailstones of ammonia, water, or phosphine ice. When a ship encountered such a 'hail storm,' its engines were sometimes damaged when the solid material was pulled in through the intakes. In truth, *SparrowHawk*'s reactors were still suffering from overheating during the battle in which Dane had been killed. The portside reactor had suffered the worst. Its laser focusing rings were warped out of alignment, something that could also result from ice impinging on them.

"How long do you expect to be here?"

Sands shrugged. "That depends on your people. How long will it take to repair my reactor?"

"We'll have the mechanics look at it and give you an estimate."

"Good. I am anxious to be on my way. It won't do to show up late for a new job, you know."

"I suppose not. Any cargo?"

"We're carrying a load of general goods to defray the cost of the flight."

"We'll want to see that."

"I'm sorry, but our holds were sealed at Port Gregson. We cannot open them without being subjected to

a heavy penalty. You may check our manifest if you like. And, of course, you'll want to verify that the seals are properly in place to ensure that we aren't trying to smuggle anything aboard Glasgow-Prime."

"That we will want to do," the officer agreed. He turned to the noncom in his party and said, "See to it, sergeant! Make sure to put our own seals in place to see that those hatches stay closed."

"Aye, sir."

The subcommander turned back to Sands. "You realize that all fees have to be paid in advance, Captain?"

"Understood."

"Very well. We make you out to be a vessel of 100 tons. That will be CR 10,000, right now!"

Sands handed over his credit card. The sergeant took it and inserted into a handheld computer terminal. The terminal beeped once to indicate acceptance. The sergeant handed the card back to Sands.

"Welcome to Glasgow! I hope you enjoy your stay here," the officer said.

"Thank you. Could you recommend a good hotel?"

"Most travelers enjoy the Highland Hilton up on the deck. They treat you right and you've got a good view of the laird's palace."

"The Hilton, you say?"

"That's my recommendation. Tell them Subcommander MacDonald sent you and the proprietor will see that you're well treated."

"Thank you. Are we cleared for entry?"

"You will be cleared as soon as Sergeant Balfallon inspects your ship, Captain Sands. Good day to you!" MacDonald saluted, turned briskly on his heel, and marched back the way he had come. The two guards took their places on either side of the hydrogen lock.

"This way, Sergeant," Sands said, gesturing toward the ship.

"After you, sir."

Chapter 11: Castle and Throne Room

As Subcommander MacDonald had said, the Highlander Hotel was situated atop the main city deck and across a wide square from the seat of government. As aboard Cloudcroft, government headquarters functioned as the central support for the city's habitat barrier and the primary conduit for delivering heated hydrogen to the gasbag. That was where all similarity between the two ended. The Glasgow capital had been built to resemble a Scottish castle of the Middle Ages. Its turrets and walls were constructed of rough-hewn building blocks that gave the appearance (if not the reality) of massive solidity. The architecture was authentic down to the cobblestones in the courtyard and the crenellations on the battlements. The illusion was further reinforced by the presence of kilted guards on either side of a main gate equipped with drawbridge and portcullis.

Sands had seen many cases where Saturnian cities reproduced scenes from Earth, but never one that went as far as the Scots of Glasgow-Prime. He mentioned that fact to the hotel porter who escorted them to their rooms.

“Aye, sir, ‘tis the ugliest pile of fake rock on Saturn. I am afraid our ancestors got a wee bit carried away when they built it. Still, the Laird enjoys living there and the tourists all pose in front of the castle for their vacation holos.”

“Do you really think castles looked that way?”

“Aye! You can punch up the original on a data screen if you like. ‘Tis quite genuine, save that our castle has city offices inside what were once solid walls. If you’ve an interest, I can arrange a tour.”

“Thanks, maybe later.” Sands keyed a tip into the porter’s personal account, and then dismissed him. After the man left, he stared at the ugly anachronism for long minutes. As he did so, he wondered whether Macdonald’s choice of hotel had been anything more than a coincidence. A suspicious person might suspect that Laird Fitzroy had arranged to have them quartered where he could keep an eye on them.

Their suite contained four bedrooms clustered around a common area and kitchen. Sands had one of the bedrooms to himself, with Halley and Kimber sharing another. That left two crewmen in each of the remaining private rooms. He doubted they would use them for anything more than changing their clothes. Someone would always be on guard at the ship, of course, but those off duty could be expected to head straight for the fleshpots.

Having learned all he could from staring at the pile of fake masonry across the square, Sands sought out the room’s computer terminal. He keyed for a listing of airships currently in port. Bolin’s airships would still be days in transit, but if the loot were to be divvied up aboard Glasgow, the recruiter would need other ships to haul it away. It was *forthose* ships that Sands searched.

After reviewing two years of shipping data, he reluctantly concluded that he could find no discernable pattern. Disappointed, but not surprised, he entered an instruction asking that he be notified whenever an airship was granted docking clearance. When Bolin finally arrived, Sands planned to be waiting for him in the landing bay.

After shutting off the data terminal, he crossed through the common room and knocked on the women’s door. Kimber answered the knock.

“Anyone for sightseeing?”

“Not me,” Halley replied. She was busy unpacking her kit bag and had clothes spread all over the bed. “As soon as I straighten out this mess, I’m going to stretch out and catch up on my beauty rest. Take Karen with you.”

“How about it, Karen?” Sands asked. The question was for the benefit of any unseen listeners they might have. He and Halley had agreed that until things became more settled one of them would accompany their guest at all times. For her part, Kimber accepted the chaperonage with good grace, figuring it to be a condition of her parole.

“Sure,” Kimber/Karen replied in her slightly irritating accent. “Do you think we can find some shops? I could certainly expand my wardrobe.”

“Why not? We can afford it.”

He waited while Kimber combed her recently shortened hair, and then offered her his arm. They strolled out of the suite, looking as though they did not have a care under Saturn's rings.

#

Three hours later, they sat in a sidewalk cafe across from the castle. Several brightly colored packages were heaped on the empty seats beside them. They had found a shopping arcade one level below the city deck where Kimber had outfitted herself with a wardrobe appropriate to her new identity.

"Thank you, Lars," she said gesturing toward her purchases. "I don't know when I've had more fun shopping for clothes."

"You're welcome," he replied. "I imagine you don't often buy fluorescent greens and purples."

"Of course I do!" she said with a chuckle in her best Karen Colin voice. "Those are my favorite colors."

"Of course. I forgot."

The smile disappeared and she looked at him with serious blue eyes. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Ask and I'll tell you whether I mind or not."

"Why did you become a privateer?"

He stared into his drink and shrugged. "Boredom more than anything else. My father wanted me to take over the family winery. I thought there was more to life than worrying about commodity prices. When I was eighteen, a friend and I went down to the landing bay to watch the ships load. We stopped in one of the port bars where a first mate off a privateer was buying drinks for anyone who would sit with him. He was spinning yarns about his adventures. After a few hours, the mate told Harry and me that he could use a couple of strapping lads to round out his crew. We weren't feeling any pain, so we both signed on right in the bar."

"It sounds like you were shanghaied!"

He smiled. "Close to it, I suppose. We were certainly in a state of diminished capacity. Unfortunately, not so diminished that we could get out of it afterward. The mate proved to be a lot less friendly after we sobered up. Those first few months were some of the worst of my life. Yet, by the time my contract lapsed, I had found that I enjoyed the life. It's far more exciting than growing hydroponic grapes."

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"Sometimes. Mostly the people who hire us find ways to avoid fighting. They have a strong enough incentive. No one wants to risk another accident like Nuevo Chicago. Still, diplomacy occasionally fails and we have to fight."

Kimber nodded. "Halley told me about New Philadelphia. I'm sorry your brother was killed."

He shrugged. "It happens. A person's luck has to run out sometime."

"Is that why you hate the Alliance?"

"One of the reasons," he agreed. "Certainly the biggest one."

"And the other reasons?"

“I don’t like what they’re trying to do.”

“What’s that?”

“They want to bring back the bad old days. I think that’s a mistake.”

“I don’t follow you.”

He gestured at the castle across the square. “Look at that monstrosity! Hell, the original was obsolete seven or eight centuries before the sun flared. Yet, the Scots went to all the trouble to building that replica as a monument to the dead past. In their own way, the Northern Alliance is doing precisely the same thing, except their monument is even more monstrous. They’re attempting to transplant the traditional terrestrial nation-state to Saturn!”

He took a sip of wine that his father would have considered a candidate for disposal. At best, it would never have worn the label of one of Sorrell Three’s major wine houses. He continued: “The nation-states of Earth were built around the concept of territory. That was only natural. Being rooted to a single spot, the people of the time tried to control as much territory as possible. They drew boundaries to keep unfriendly strangers at arm’s length. As a result, virtually every war ever fought on Earth was a boundary dispute.”

Kimber nodded. “We have similar problems on Titan, although on a much smaller scale.”

“See, that sort of thinking comes naturally on a world with geography. However, this is Saturn and geography is something we lack in abundance. We have no borders, no real boundaries of any kind. If a man does not like the way things are going, he can move to another city. If enough people in a city are unhappy, they can move to another flyway or cluster. Sorrell III did just that when I was ten. The city elders did not like some of the demands being made on them by other cities in their cluster. Rather than give in, they moved to a different belt. It cost a fortune, but everyone still thinks it was worth it. That is the freedom Kelt Dalishaar wants to take away from us.”

“Why, Captain,” Kimber said, “you’re a born anarchist!”

“Maybe I am,” he agreed. “I like things the way they are and don’t have much patience with people who think they can run my life better than I do.”

She smiled. “My father says much the same thing, only he calls it ‘rugged individualism.’”

“He sounds like a wise man.”

“He is.”

“Speaking of your father, how would you like to send him a message?”

“Do you mean it?” she asked, letting her masquerade drop momentarily. “Can we do it without compromising your safety?”

“I think so.”

“How?”

“Your people maintain an embassy on Montana Station in the Southern Hemisphere, don’t they?”

She nodded. “There’s a trading office there. Not quite an embassy, but close enough.”

“Good. I have friends aboard Montana. I could send them a letter with an imbedded message for them to pass along to your people. The message will have to be short, innocuous and it cannot tell where you are. I still do not want to get Glasgow involved in this until I know better where we stand. Can you live with those restrictions and still make sure he gets it?”

She frowned, and then took a notepad from her pocket. She began to write on the tiny screen. After a minute, she handed the small black box to Sands. The note read:

#

For Immediate Delivery to Titania, CR0157, Code Alpha Prime

Father,

Am safe with friends. Will contact you for transportation when I can. See you soon.

Love

Bunny

#

“Bunny?” he asked.

She smiled. “Father gave me a rabbit for my sixth birthday. His name was Mr. Long Ears. He’s called me his little bunny ever since.”

“And this code at the top?”

“His personal computer address. The Alpha Prime priority will ensure the station sends it on.”

“That should do it. I’m sorry you can’t let him know where you are, but the Alliance probably has computers listening to every communications channel they can tap into.” He downed his drink, stood, and began gathering packages. “Let’s go find a public screen and we’ll get this on its way with instructions for my friends.”

#

Five days later, Sands was beginning to worry. Bolin’s airships were overdue and there had been no word from the recruiter. Another reason for distress was the apparent lack of interest by the Glasgow authorities for *SparrowHawk* or her crew.

“What do you think, Lars?” Halley Trevanon asked one evening after dinner.

“Maybe Bolin never bothered to report that he’d hired us.”

“That’s a possibility, isn’t it?”

“Not a very likely one, I wouldn’t think. If I’d employed him to handle such a delicate matter, I’d want to know who he’d gotten to handle the dirty work.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she asked.

“That we’ve been tricked?”

She nodded. “It seems more likely with each passing day.”

“Agreed,” Sands replied. He, too, had been thinking that Bolin had sent them to Glasgow while he headed in the opposite direction. Still, the idea did not ring true. There was the matter *SparrowHawk*’s cargo to consider. Bolin’s airships had made off with the bulk of the prize, but Sands was in possession of the most valuable booty. Just the artwork from the Cloudcroft museum alone was worth millions on the black market. Sands had no problem visualizing Bolin double-crossing them, but only after he had laid his hands on the cream of the enterprise. That was what worried him. When none of the scenarios fit, it is usually because you don’t have all the facts. He had a knot in the pit of his stomach that told him there was more going on than he had been told about.

“So what are we going to do?” Halley asked

“We’d best find out where we stand with the laird.”

“How do we do that?”

“Why not ask him in person?”

Arranging to see the Laird of Glasgow took two days. In the arranging it, Sands found it necessary to work his way up through several layers of bureaucracy. Finally, after much waiting in anterooms and the dispensation of ever-increasing “honoraria,” he was informed that he and his party were on the laird’s audience schedule for the following day.

Sands, Halley, and Kimber entered the government complex on the third sublevel an hour before their appointment. They were ushered to the anteroom of the laird’s official greeter, Angus MacPherson. MacPherson was a tall man with hard eyes and the air of a harried, busy man.

“Hello, Captain,” MacPherson said after a twenty minute wait in a windowless room with twenty other petitioners. “May I be of assistance?”

“We are here to see the laird.”

“But, of course, you are. Everyone who comes to me wishes an audience. May I inquire as to your business? You were a bit vague on your application.”

“We want to discuss employment with him”

“My dear sir, Glasgow has no need of mercenaries at the moment. Surely, that must be obvious to you. If you think a personal appeal will change that fact, then you are wasting your time. However, if you will leave your résumé, we will give you fair consideration the next time we are in the market for your services.”

“I’m not talking about future employment.”

“Surely you aren’t referring to *topast* services. We have checked. So far as we know, you have never been associated with this city.”

“Perhaps your knowledge doesn’t extend far enough.”

“What are you implying?”

“It is a matter we can only discuss with the laird.”

“Very well. You have paid for the privilege of an audience, so you shall have one. You will be given two minutes. That time begins when you enter the audience chamber. State your case succinctly and do not argue. When the laird indicates the audience is at an end, go quickly and quietly.”

Sands and the two women were guided down a long, ornate corridor. Like the exterior of the building, the decor had been designed to simulate some ancient structure. There were high “stone” walls around them, with flying buttresses and narrow windows through which poured a strong yellow-white light. Functionaries in archaic costumes hurried past them on unknown errands. When they reached the audience hall, a servant took Sands’s credit voucher and transferred the last installment of the audience fee.

A subdued electronic tone announced that it was time for them to go in. The page turned to them and said, “Remember to bow and don’t speak until the laird signals that he is ready. Good luck.”

The big double door swung ponderously open in front of them and Sands found himself standing at the back of a long aisle. On either side of it were various people in kilts and sporrans. A chamberlain announced their presence in a loud voice and they started their walk down the aisle. As they did so, Sands studied the Laird of Glasgow.

Hugh Fitzroy was a big man with a round face and a long, flowing silver beard and bushy eyebrows. He wore the traditional Glasgow costume, including feathered bonnet set at a rakish angle. From the surroundings, Sands would have expected to find him seated on an ornate throne. Instead, the laird sat behind a perfectly ordinary desk on a raised dais. On either side of him were two other desks at which functionaries of the Glasgow court worked. A large holocube dominated the right wall of the audience chamber while an ancient suit of armor stood to their left.

Sands walked to the first balk line with Halley and Kimber flanking him. He stopped and bowed, while the women curtsied. The subdued tone echoed through the chamber, and they proceeded to the place where they had been instructed to stand.

The laird was busy entering something into the notepad that lay open on the desk. Finally, he glanced up.

“You are Captain Larson Sands of the Privateer Ship *SparrowHawk* .”

“I am, Your Lordship.”

“And you wish to see me about employment?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Didn’t Citizen MacPherson tell you that we are not in the market for privateers at the moment?”

“He did, Your Lordship.”

“Then why are you here, Captain Sands?”

“The matter is somewhat delicate, sir. Perhaps we could discuss it in private?”

“If you wished a private audience, you should have said so at the scheduling office. The fees are a great deal higher for those.”

“I will speak in public if that is your wish, sir.”

“Speak or not as you see fit, Captain.”

“Very well. I would like to know if you employ an agent by the name of Micah Bolin.”

“Bolin? I don’t believe so.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sir, my administration employs a good many people. I can hardly be expected to remember them all.”

“You would remember this one.”

“Captain, your time is running out. Enough of these word games. What is it that you want?”

Sands opened his mouth to respond, and closed it just as promptly. He was caught off guard by a sudden alarm. The laird glanced off to one side toward a court recorder. “What is it, Swann?”

“An alert, Your Lordship! A number of warcraft have been detected converging on us from several different directions.”

“Whose warships?”

“Unknown, sir.”

“Get the city guard out. Stand by to repel attackers.”

The clerk looked suddenly distant as he listened to a message feeding into an earphone. “The fleet commander is calling you, sir. He demands our surrender.”

“Put him on the big screen,” Fitzroy ordered.

Everyone in the audience chamber turned to face the suspended holoscreen as it flickered alight. The screen cleared to reveal a full admiral of the Northern Alliance Navy. It was then that Sands knew that the laird had been telling the truth.

The admiral was Micah Bolin.

Chapter 12: Escape and Consequence

Sands felt his universe suddenly go slack as he stared at the visage filling the holoscreen. The risk of treachery was one every privateer took each time he signed a contract. Still, the rewards from the Cloudcroft raid had seemed to make the game worth any risk. It came as a shock to realize that the game he had been playing was not even remotely the one he had thought. Whatever the stakes, they were worth far more than he had imagined, more than even the lives of a privateer named Larson Sands and his crew.

“Laird Fitzroy!” the figure in the holoscreen boomed out. The haughty face stared in the direction of the Glasgow leader. It took a moment for Sands to realize that the screen pickup was focused on the dais, and that he was standing outside Bolin’s field of view.

“I am Admiral Mikal Blount of the Alliance Navy. You are harboring dangerous fugitives. I demand that you surrender them at once.”

“What fugitives?” the laird demanded.

“The captain and crew of the privateer vessel *SparrowHawk* . They are wanted for high crimes against the Alliance. You will also lay down your own weapons until we can determine Glasgow’s complicity in this matter. You have ten minutes to comply. After that, we will open fire on your city.”

Almost no one heard Bolin’s threat. At the word “SparrowHawk,” the laird and his court turned to stare at Sands. Hugh Fitzroy jumped to his feet and stabbed an accusing finger at the three privateers. “Seize them!”

The guard on duty moved to comply. Unfortunately, it took him a moment to recover from his surprise. Sands, on the other hand, had launched himself the moment Bolin had spoken his ship’s name. He hit the guard just as that protector was moving to unsling his riot gun. The two of them sprawled backward onto the fake flagstone. Sands wrestled the weapon away, tucked it close to his body, and somersaulted. He came out of the roll on his feet while swinging the gun barrel to point in the direction of the laird.

The world seemed to be in slow motion. Hugh Fitzroy’s features were frozen into an angry snarl as his right hand reached into one of his desk drawers. Out of the corner of his eye, Sands saw several of the courtiers rushing toward Halley and Kimber.

“Tell your people to stop!” Sands screamed as he brought the gun up. He saw his victim’s face blanch. The laird froze in place, setting an example for his followers. For a span of a dozen heartbeats, the two of them stared at one another with flaring nostrils and pulses pounding visibly in their temples.

“What’s going on there?” Bolin demanded. From his vantage point, all he could see was the laird slowly straightening up from his crouch to raise his hands into the air.

“Turn that damned thing off!”

After an interminable few seconds, the screen went dark.

“What happens now, Captain?” Fitzroy asked.

“We’re going to return to our ship.”

“You’ll never make it. The city watch is monitoring this chamber. The alarm has already gone out.”

“Then we’ll need you to escort us, Your Lordship! I’m sure you can keep your people from molesting us.”

“Think, man! Even if you can make it to the landing bay, you will never get past the Alliance fleet. They’ll destroy you as you launch.”

“That’s a chance we’ll have to take. There will be no mercy for us if we are captured. Halley, you and Karen get those doors open.” Sands strode up onto the dais, wrapped his arm around the laird’s neck, and put the riot gun to his temple. “Your dagger, sir!”

Fitzroy gingerly removed the ceremonial knife at his belt and let it clatter to the deck. Sands marched him off the dais and down the aisle after the two women. In a few seconds, they were through the oversize double doors. Halley and Kimber quickly swung the doors closed behind them.

“What do we do now?” Kimber asked.

“We get back to the ship,” Sands grunted. He fished in his tunic pocket for his comm unit, thumbed the emergency call button, and held it down for five long seconds. “Ross, prepare for launch! The rest of you, back to the ship. You’ve got five minutes.”

He did not wait for an acknowledgement. Ross Crandall had the watch aboard *SparrowHawk*. That, at least, was a lucky break. He would lose no time getting the ship ready to launch. As for the rest of the crew, if they weren't drunk, or in the arms of whores, they would make for the landing bay. Sands hoped they would arrive in time. Whether they did or not, he would not be able to wait. The Alliance ships were coming in too fast. Hugh Fitzroy was right about one thing. If *SparrowHawk* were to have any chance of escape, they would have to get away before the Alliance fleet surrounded the city.

"What's the best way back to the bay?" Halley asked. "Tube car?"

"It's about the only option," Sands said. "Where's the nearest tube station, Your Lordship?"

"Down a level," the Glasgow leader said. "I can lead you there."

"No tricks." Sands kept the riot gun trained on the laird's midsection as he released him. "Lead the way."

Fitzroy led them down a long hallway and out into the castle courtyard. The two gate guards had come inside and were watching them warily. The laird led them through a door of what appeared to be solid oak and down a set of stairs to a tube station.

"Two cars?" Halley asked, eyeing the small vehicles lined up in the station. The cars were nominally two-person affairs, with seating for three if the three did not mind being cramped. Getting four full size adults into one was not possible.

"What do you think, Your Lordship? If we split up, will both cars get where we're going?"

Fitzroy shrugged. "The public cars can be remotely diverted."

"That's what I suspected. Get us a larger car, one with autonomous controls. A police car should do it."

"May I?" Fitzroy asked, gesturing toward the public comm screen that was standard for every tube station.

"Be careful what you say. I'll have this gun on you every second."

The laird strode to the comm screen, punched in a number, and then gave a terse order to a man in the uniform of the city watch. The policeman nodded and signed off. Thirty seconds later, a four-person tube vehicle silently entered the station. It was emblazoned with the city emblem.

Sands had Halley and Kimber climb in first, then held his gun on Fitzroy as the laird stepped down into the open car. Finally, Sands followed. When all were seated, Halley punched for the landing bay on the destination pad. The car took off with a sudden surge of acceleration, nearly causing the gun in Sands's hands to discharge. He exhaled long and slowly at the thought of what might have happened.

The car entered the travel tube in seconds. Sands relaxed minutely. It would be difficult for the city watch to get at them while they were in the tube.

"Would you mind telling me what this is all about?" Hugh Fitzroy asked.

Sands grinned without humor. He told Fitzroy about the raid on Cloudcroft in a few pungent phrases.

The laird gave out with a low whistle. "No wonder they're after you."

"You've got that wrong, Your Lordship. They're after Glasgow."

"I don't understand."

“Admiral Mikal Blount is our employer. He is the one who arranged the whole thing. Obviously, he sent us here to give himself an excuse to take control of your cities.”

“But why raid his own capital?”

Sands shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe he wanted to embarrass Dalishaar’s faction in the ruling council. Whatever the reason, he obviously cannot let us live. If we are taken back to stand trial, we can expose him. That also means that he will kill you if he suspects you know his secret.”

Hugh Fitzroy was silent for long seconds, and then nodded. “If what you say is true, then you’re probably right.”

Kimber looked at the Glasgow ruler and said, “It would seem to me, Your Lordship, that the best thing for your people is if we make good our escape. Once we are gone, you can proclaim your innocence loudly. That will not stop them from occupying your city, but it will give you time to get word to the Accretionist faction. Once Blount is dealt with, perhaps you can win freedom for your cities.”

The laird thought for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll help you escape. After that, you’re on your own!”

#

The tube car decelerated as it arrived at the landing bay. The scene reminded Sands of Cloudcroft during the raid. Scattered throughout the vast volume were numerous members of the Glasgow constabulary, all heavily armed and obviously irritated. The bay was clear of ships save for *SparrowHawk*, which was being hauled from the storage hangar to the launch catapult. It had only been a few minutes since he had sent his warning and somehow Ross Crandall had gotten the landing bay crew moving in record time.

The milling police officers watched intently as Kimber and Halley rushed across the bay to the moving ship. The two women clambered over the wing and disappeared through the midships hydrogen lock. Once they were out of sight, the full guard force turned its attention to Sands and Hugh Fitzroy.

“Let’s go,” Sands ordered. Despite the laird’s agreement to help them escape, Sands kept the riot gun planted firmly in his back.

The two men trudged slowly across the floodlit, cable-covered expanse of decking. They were the focus of at least a dozen hard sets of eyes, and doubtless countless others that were not apparent. It took nearly thirty seconds to reach the ship. A quick glance at his chronometer told Sands that it had been six minutes since they had left the audience chamber.

“I imagine there are snipers up in the rigging,” Sands said, gesturing toward the maze of overhead plumbing and cables.

“Probably,” the laird agreed. “The watch commander knows his business.”

“Tell them to clear out. Make sure they understand that if I’m shot, my shipmates will light off our propulsion reactors while they’re still in the bay.”

“That would destroy your ship,” Fitzroy said.

“It wouldn’t do your city much good either. So let’s be sensible, shall we?”

Hugh Fitzroy shouted a series of orders to the senior officer in the bay. That functionary ordered his people to back off. Every armed adversary in view quickly departed, leaving Sands to wonder how many hidden adversaries remained.

He took a deep breath and released the laird. After five long seconds, he decided that he was not going to be shot down where he stood. Kimber appeared in the hydrogen lock. "Ross says the ship is ready for launch."

"Any word from the rest of the crew?"

"None."

Sands turned to the laird. "Have your people got them?"

"I'll need a communicator to find out."

Sands handed over his communicator. Fitzroy spoke a few terse words, and then listened to the soft response. He lowered the comm unit and shook his head. "They haven't been seen. The watch has just begun a sweep of the pleasure facilities."

"Where's the Alliance fleet?"

There was another hurried conversation. Fitzroy reported that it would arrive in another two minutes.

Sands made a quick decision. "We can't wait. When you find them, you may want to hide them from Blount. They're the only proof you have that I am telling the truth."

"Very well, Captain. I will keep them hidden until I find that it no longer benefits me or my people."

"Fair enough," Sands said as he stuck out his hand. "Sorry to get you involved."

The Laird of Glasgow took it. "If you are correct about the Alliance wanting my cities, perhaps I should be saying the same to you."

"If we get free, we'll do what we can to help you."

Sands turned, climbed up onto the wing, and moved to the midships lock. Kimber met him in the ship's longitudinal passageway.

"Where's Halley?"

"In the cockpit."

"And Ross?"

"In combat control."

"What are you going to do?"

Kimber frowned. "I don't understand, Lars."

"If you're smart, you'll get off now. Fitzroy can hide you, and even if he doesn't, you'll be no worse off than you were before we came along."

"I'm staying."

"This may turn into a very short flight," he warned.

"I'm not going to give the Alliance power over my father again. Besides, Blount has no idea what you have told me. He'll probably kill me out of hand rather than take a chance that I'll expose him."

“A good point. Close the port and then come forward. Make it quick. This vessel is about to depart.”

Sands poked his head into the compartment where Ross Crandall was preparing to fight the ship. “Give them a spread as soon as we get clear. I don’t care if you hit anything, but let’s remind them to be cautious.”

“Right, Lars.”

Halley Trevanon was in her normal seat as he swarmed into the cockpit. “We’re hooked onto the catapult, Lars. One minute until Bolin gets here.”

“Are we ready?”

“Ready!”

“All right, sound the alarm!”

The launch klaxon rang through the ship. To Sands’s ears, it echoed hollowly without a full crew onboard. He was flicking switches with abandon when he heard Kimber arrive behind him and begin strapping herself in.

“What about environment suits?” Halley asked.

“No time. Ross, you there?”

“Here, Lars.”

“Give me a reading on the opposition as soon as you can.”

“Will do.”

“Kimber?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Strapped down, Captain.”

He gave a quick countdown, and then keyed the control that signaled the city computer. A moment later, they were all crushed into their seats by a giant invisible hand. The windscreen was instantly transformed from the floodlit expanse of the Glasgow landing bay into the infinite vista of blue-white that was the eye of the Glasgow Cyclone.

As *SparrowHawk* was flung clear of the city, Sands brought both drive reactors to power and headed directly away from their former refuge. They passed the site where the new city was being built a few seconds later. This would be no long stern chase. It would be a short, all out sprint for the cloud wall. If they could get there before their pursuers, they would have a chance at evasion. If they were caught short of the clouds, there would be no hope.

“Damn, there are a dozen of them out there.” Ross reported from the combat compartment.

“Where?”

“They’re all around the compass. We are damned lucky Glasgow’s warning system is so good. If they hadn’t been detected fifteen minutes out, we wouldn’t have a chance.”

Which assumes, Sands thought, *that we have one now.* “Find me a hole in their formation.”

“I’ve got something,” Ross reported after an interminable three seconds. “Come right to 080 degrees. They’ve got two prowlers off in that direction, but they’re spread pretty wide.”

“Right.” Sands rolled *SparrowHawk* into a vicious turn. As he did so, Ross launched a full spread of missiles at the ships around them, with special attention to the two directly ahead. Seconds later, antimissile lasers lashed out and vaporized the small dart shapes.

Sands responded by sending *SparrowHawk* into a full power climb. As he had in the Dardenelles, he was trying to out climb the prowlers. The tactic proved unsuccessful as the two ships climbed to keep above him. Of course, he suddenly realized, it had not worked the previous time either. Their escape from Cloudcroft had been preordained. It was all part of the plot to seize the Glasgow Cluster.

They rocketed forward for two long minutes as they closed the gap with the prowlers. Suddenly their windscreen was ablaze with blue-green light.

“We’re in laser range,” Halley reported unnecessarily.

Sands did not respond. Down below, Ross Crandall was playing their own lasers across the prowlers’ distant forms. At this range, the antimissile weapons could do little physical damage, but the blue-green beams played havoc with sensors.

“We’ve got vampires coming in,” Sands reported, using the ancient code word for a missile attack. “Six of them!”

Sands rolled his ship and dove. His only hope lay in the dense lower atmosphere where the missiles would be slow to maneuver. A dozen seconds into the dive, *SparrowHawk* shuddered under the impact of a giant fist.

“How bad are we hit?” Sands asked as he saw half his instruments go dead.

“Bad,” Halley muttered, her voice coming to him over the intercom. The explosion had been accompanied by a vast increase in wind noise. That and the way *SparrowHawk* shuddered told Sands that they had been holed.

“Are you all right, Kimber?”

“I’m fine, Lars.”

“What about you, Ross?”

There was no response.

“Kimber, put on a breather and go see if you can help Ross!”

Once again, he sensed the movement behind him as Kimber moved to the cockpit door. Sands and Halley both donned breathers of their own. If the ship was holed, they were losing precious oxygen to the atmosphere.

The shriek got louder as Kimber opened the cockpit door. He took the time to glance over his shoulder. Aft of the cockpit, the fuselage had been peeled back and loose wires were whipping in the breeze. The compartments immediately aft of the cockpit were in ruin.

“Close the door!” he yelled.

Kimber hesitated. Her white-rimmed eyes gazed at him from over her breather mask. “But I’ve got to

find Ross!”

“Don’t bother,” he said. “Ross isn’t back there anymore.”

Kimber struggled to close the door while Sands turned all of his attention to his flying. In the thirty seconds or so since they had been hit, *SparrowHawk* had nearly made it to the cloud wall. Miraculously, the prowlers had not fired again. The ship shook violently as a universe of dark clouds closed around them. Despite Sands best efforts to keep it steady, *SparrowHawk* began a slow roll to the right.

“One of our elevons just carried away,” he said to no one in particular. As he watched the few working instruments, he noticed the power levels of both reactors dropping. Whatever chunk had just left the ship had been sufficient to trigger the automatic shutdown circuits. His crippled fusion powered aircraft was about to become a crippled glider.

“That’s it!” Halley said from beside him.

He nodded, and then reached for the console between them. A quick flick of the console cover revealed a large red handle. Sands reached inside, gave it a twist, and pulled. There was a quick machine gun sound as explosive bolts fired all over the ship. Suddenly, they were smashed down into their acceleration couches by a hammer blow that made the city catapult seem weak.

Then they were falling free!

Chapter 13: Marooned in Mid Air

“We’re falling!” Kimber screamed.

Even as she said it, the sensation of weightlessness vanished, to be replaced by the normal pull of gravity. The sudden solidity was an illusion. The cockpit was still falling free -- a fact confirmed by the continuous popping of their eardrums -- but had reached terminal velocity in the thick Saturnian atmosphere.

Unlike the ejection seats used in smaller aircraft, *SparrowHawk* had been designed to save its crew by ejecting sections of fuselage. Five escape pods encompassed all of the inhabited compartments in the ship. These were detached by explosive bolts and lifted free by powerful rocket motors. Simultaneously, the doomed aircraft’s wings were blown away and its uninhabited portions -- cargo bays, fuel tanks, and inert drive reactors -- had begun the long fall to the hydrogen sea. The escape pods stabilized and followed more slowly.

Each pod was designed to automatically deploy a large rescue balloon and begin emitting radio distress calls sixty seconds after ejection. As quickly as gravity returned, Sands tore the maintenance cover from the center console and began pulling electronic cards from their slots. Under existing circumstances, nothing would be more disastrous than to have the pod’s rescue aids activated. They would merely serve to draw the pursuing Alliance warcraft directly to them.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Halley’s frightened voice demanded over the intercom. The wind noise had subsided considerably, but still made speech difficult.

“I hope I’m interrupting the balloon deploy sequence!”

Halley moved to protest, then shut up as she thought through the consequences. She began taking cards from Sands and stacking them haphazardly around her feet. They finished a full dozen seconds before the

sequencer was due to explode the balloon out of its overhead storage container.

“We’ll know soon enough,” Sands muttered as he eyed the instrument panel chronometer. The long seconds ticked by with no explosion.

Finally, Halley nodded and said, “Okay, genius! How are we going to deploy now that we’ve wiped out the sequencer?”

Sands reached into the center console, fished around, then pulled two wires free. Their frayed, bare metal ends glinted coppery in the soft gray light filtering through the windscreen.

The breather slurred Halley’s words as she asked, “Is that the firing circuit?”

“I’m betting our lives on it,” Sands replied with more confidence than he felt.

In truth, his every action since pulling the ejection handle had been one of desperation. Somewhere above them, four rescue pods were drifting through clouds, suspended beneath their 200-meter metalized balloons and screaming loudly for help. On the screens of Micah Bolin’s fleet, four blinking red target markers would be glowing like so many fireflies as weapons operators vied to see who would be the first to down the helpless pods. With luck, they would be so intent on their task that no one would notice a fifth pod had dropped completely off their screens.

Kimber demanded to know what was going on. Halley quickly explained what they were doing. Kimber gulped and commented on the heat that was already soaking through the cockpit walls.

“It will get worse,” Sands warned. He watched the altimeter, one of the few instruments still working. As he did so, he kept wondering if Dane had felt this way while he waited for the pressure to crush him. The thought preyed on Sands’s mind. It was all he could do not to touch the wires together to end their fall.

Seconds turned into tens of seconds, and then into minutes that lasted an eternity. The struggle to keep the stabbing pains from his ears required almost continuous clenching of his jaw muscles. Sweat ran in irritating rivulets down his brow and puddled between his shoulder blades.

“We can’t take much more of this, Lars,” Halley warned.

“A little longer,” he said, watching the outside temperature rise. Finally, he touched the wires together. There was a brief spark and no response for the space of half a heartbeat. An explosion shattered the silence somewhere inside the cockpit overhead. A moment later, three “Oofs!” signaled the fact that the pod had reached the end of its descent.

The cockpit swung in a sickening motion at the end of a long pendulum, then stabilized with its nose up and the deck canted down at a thirty-degree angle. Beyond the windscreen was hot gloom that nearly blanked out the light from the sun. Somewhere close by, a lightning bolt lit the interior of the cloud and the high-pitched thunder of Saturn reverberated through the compartment.

“Are we safe?” Kimber asked, the terror of the past few minutes still evident in her voice.

“If they spot us, we’ll have no warning,” Sands replied. “In the meantime, we’ll adopt the working hypothesis that we’ve spoofed them.”

“How long can we survive in this hot box?” Halley asked.

“Not long. We’ve got to get back up to altitude and quickly.” Sands unstrapped and clambered out of his seat. The cockpit shifted in response to his movement. “We’ve stopped our descent, but that won’t

last long. As soon as the hydrogen in the balloon cools off, we will start down again. Time to get the emergency reactor cranked up.”

“What’s that?” Kimber asked.

“Heat source for the balloon. It contains enough plutonium to keep us aloft for a month. We’ve got to deploy it manually.”

He climbed over the back of his own seat and squeezed past Kimber. He stood in the short aisle that ended at the aft cockpit hatch. His breathing tube was just long enough to reach. He braced his back against the locker that contained their sole environment suit and removed a large access panel on the opposite side of the ship. He passed the panel cover to Halley, who stowed it in his seat. Behind the cover was a maze of closely packed equipment.

Sands traced out a large silver pipe that ran vertically the length of the enclosure. It disappeared into a large box inset into the deck. It took Sands a couple of minutes to pry the box loose and work it out of its resting-place. A moment later, he handed it to Kimber. The box trailed a length of flat tubing that had been carefully folded lengthwise.

“What’s this?”

“Emergency reactor and about a kilometer of folded heat pipe. We’ve got to suspend the reactor below the ship before it can produce any power.”

“Why?”

He opened the box and removed a cylinder that bore a faint resemblance to an ancient flashlight. “The engineers who built this thing didn’t put any shielding around it. If it starts up, it will pour enough neutrons through this cabin to kill us in seconds. In addition, this tubing is heat sensitive memory plastic. It expands to thirty centimeters once the reactor begins supplying heat. If we kink it during the deploy, we’ll be taking a one way trip to the hydrogen sea.”

Kimber gulped but said nothing.

“I’m moving the timer to its maximum setting,” Sands said, matching actions to words. “I figure we’ve got about sixty seconds before it goes critical after I punch this stud. Here, hold this!”

Sands gave Kimber the cylinder and turned back to the open equipment rack. A moment later, he inserted his boot and kicked at the thin metal of the lower fuselage. The frangible plate set in the lower skin crumbled into a dozen pieces. Through the hole, Sands could see dark clouds illuminated by intermittent lightning flashes.

“All right, hand the reactor to me and stand by to feed the heat pipe out of the container.”

He pressed the stud, causing a red light to begin blinking on top of the cylinder. He then lowered it through the hole, being careful to keep the delicate folded plastic tubing from touching the edges of the hole.

“One minute,” Halley announced from the front of the pod while they were still paying out the silver heat pipe. “The reactor just came alive!”

“We’re in good shape,” Sands said without looking up. His back was beginning to ache from working stooped over. Nevertheless, he continued the steady paying out of the flat silver plastic tubing. “We’ve got half a kilometer between us and the reactor.”

Two minutes later, the last of the flat silver tube had disappeared through the hole. Already the plastic was beginning to expand to form a hollow tube through which heated hydrogen would rise into the unseen balloon above. Sands retrieved the maintenance cover from Halley and replaced it.

“How long since the balloon inflated?” he asked when he finally returned to his seat. He was feeling dizzy from the heat and his exertions.

“Going on fifteen minutes,” Halley replied.

He let out a deep sigh. “If the Alliance were going to blow us out of the sky, they would have done so by now. Ladies, I think we have fooled them. If we can just get back up to a comfortable altitude, we may live to fight another day!”

#

Admiral Mikal Blount of the Northern Alliance Navy sat at his control station and quietly fumed at the mistakes that had been made during the approach to Glasgow. His crews had carelessly given away their positions prematurely, and in so doing, had placed the whole operation in jeopardy. It irked Blount that his people had stumbled at such a critical moment. The plan had gone along so well for so long.

It had all started at a secret meeting of high-ranking Alliance naval officers two years earlier. The officers had gathered to discuss the ever-increasing restrictions being imposed on the Navy by the Accretionists on the ruling council. Those original, unfocused complaints had evolved into a plan of action for strengthening the Militarist position.

The first phase had been aimed at embarrassing the Accretionists by proving them wrong on a major policy decision. After some debate, the Militarist conspirators had decided to precipitate the crisis with the geneticists of New Philadelphia. The Accretionists and their leader, Kelt Dalishaar, were opposed to annexation by force, and adding such an important city to the Alliance against their wishes could not help but discredit them.

Blount had had nothing to do with the New Philadelphia phase of the operation. He had been too busy planning the raid on Cloudcroft and the subsequent annexation of Glasgow, his own portions of the great subterfuge.

It had taken months to juggle the duty rosters in Cloudcroft’s defense center so that a few key people could provide the strategic blind spot needed for a successful raid. He’d also launched a Saturn-wide search for just the right privateer crew. He required a ship whose captain was desperate enough that he would take the dangerous job, yet sufficiently competent to pull it off. It had seemed fate when Blount located Larson Sands and his people as they licked their wounds aboard Port Gregon.

Sands had proven to be everything Blount could have hoped for. He had made the dangerous flight from the North Temperate Belt cloud wall seem easy. He had paralyzed the Alliance military response and had allowed Blount’s own bogus raiders to escape to the north without pursuit. In the Dardenelles, Sands had nearly won free by his own efforts. It had required only a single misdirection from Blount’s agents in the Cloudcroft command center to clear a hole for the pirate ship. Afterward, Sands had made straight for the Glasgow Cluster and had thereby unwittingly set up the third and most important phase of the Militarist plan.

Reports from Cloudcroft following the raid spoke of a council mired in recriminations. Even the normally unflappable Kelt Dalishaar had screamed for the raiders’ blood. There were those who attributed the First Councilor’s mood to the pirates’ impromptu abduction of the Titanian trade negotiator. Blount knew Dalishaar well enough to wonder if there was not another reason. In any event, Phase II had been a

remarkable success.

When he had taken command of his fleet, Blount had had no reason to believe that Phase III would not go as well. After his forces took Glasgow, he planned to interrogate the captured pirates vigorously, and then dispose of their bodies. It was imperative that he find out whom they had told about their mysterious employer. Anyone implicated would have to be killed. To let them live would seriously jeopardize Blount's own life. If one of those was the Titanian factor's whore of a daughter, too bad for her. Indeed, it might be best if she disappeared in any event. Trouble with Titan would make Kelt Dalishaar's policies even more untenable.

The fleet had approached Glasgow through cloud all around the cities' western littoral. They had planned their approach to keep hidden until they were within striking range. Unfortunately, one of the advancing ships had broken into clear air in sight of a Glasgow patrol craft. After that, everything had gone wrong. Blount's ultimatum to the Glasgow laird had been cut off practically in mid-sentence and the cursed pirate ship had bolted before the fleet could envelop the city. There had been a running fight in cloud. The pirates had been brazen, but that had not saved them. A prowler missile had ripped them asunder and a few seconds later, escape pods began to sprout throughout the cloud-shrouded region where the battle had taken place. That was when the worst of the mistakes had been made.

Upon seeing the escape pods blossom, Blount had leaned forward to order all vessels to cease fire. Before he could get the order out, he had watched his prowlers launch a dozen missiles. He had watched in horror as shrapnel shred three rescue balloons and the pods beneath them dropped into the depths. By the time his cease-fire order went out, only a single pod remained aloft.

It had taken nearly a quarter hour to get a ship alongside the surviving pod and another ten minutes to board the fragment. It contained three staterooms and no survivors. The beds showed no sign of having been recently slept in, nor had there been a clue to how many pirates were aboard at the time of the vessel's destruction.

Damn the trigger-happy fools, anyway! Why couldn't they have held their fire? Plenty of time to send the rescue pods into the hydrogen sea once they learned who was aboard them. As it was, he would now have to reconstruct the pirates' stay aboard Glasgow and infer the identities of those with whom they might have shared their secret. He would have to put things right, but the cost would be terrible.

He leaned forward and keyed his intercom. "Commander Wrightson! Tell the pilot to make for the Glasgow landing bay. Make sure they understand we will destroy them if they offer any resistance."

Time to collect the butcher's bill!

#

It was a dehydrated group that sprawled about the ship fragment that had once been *SparrowHawk*'s cockpit. Around them, cool hydrogen-helium carried away the last vestiges of steam bath heat from skin scorched almost beyond endurance. Hours earlier, Sands and the two women had stripped down to a minimum of clothing to combat the heat. Sands was clad in shorts and breather, Halley and Kimber wore even less. Despite the bare female flesh, Sands had lost all interest in the opposite sex. All he really wanted was to sip tepid water and then sleep for a week.

He did neither. He sat up, waited for the inevitable spell of dizziness to pass, then climbed unsteadily to his feet.

"What are you doing?" Kimber's voice croaked from the jumpseat where she lay like one awaiting death.

“Time for nourishment.”

Before moving to the locker where the emergency food was stored, he glanced at the altimeter. They were nearly back to the altitude where they had been shot down. The emergency balloon had climbed steadily for the past three hours and they were still rising. He commented on that fact to Kimber and Halley.

“How high will we go?” Kimber asked.

He shrugged weakly. “We’re in the updraft from the zone. So long as the reactor continues working, we should be able to clear the water clouds and reach the haze below the ammonia hydrosulfide clouds.”

A very bedraggled Halley Trevanon raised her head and asked, “Any chance we’ll be swept into the southern circulation pattern?”

“Could be,” he said. “There’s a lot of local atmospheric instability around the Glasgow Cyclone.”

“What are you two talking about?” Kimber asked.

Sands turned to face her, then smiled wanly. No, he decided, he was not dead yet. He could almost bring himself to appreciate the uncovered beauty sprawled out close beside him, veiled fetchingly by the breather mask.

“The equatorial zone where we are now is composed of two separate convection cells -- the southern and northern. It is possible we will be swept across the boundary as we rise toward the cloud tops. If we reach the southern circulation pattern, we’ll be blown toward the South Equatorial Belt where we should be able to find rescue.”

“I don’t care where we end up,” Kimber replied, “so long as we can keep as far from Kelt Dalishaar as possible.”

“How long before we break out of cloud?” Halley asked.

“No way to tell,” Sands replied. “Possibly by First Dawn tomorrow.”

He moved toward the rear of the cockpit. The motion he used was less a walk than a series of dragging steps. He opened the storage locker in which their environment suit was housed. Below it was a smaller locker full of emergency rations. The size of the locker was an indication of the problem they faced.

The rescue balloon and its reactor would keep them aloft for a month, while the air regenerators in the breathers would last at least as long. Their immediate problem was food and water. The emergency food stored in the pod would last a week with rationing, but the water would be gone in only three days. They had already consumed more than half their water ration fighting the heat of the lower atmosphere. They would be able to hold out several days without water, but probably not long enough for the winds to carry them across the vast Equatorial Zone. Should they not reach the southern circulation pattern, the wind would blow them back north when they reached the apex of the convection cell. In that event, it might be impossible to attract rescuers without also attracting the Alliance.

“Dinner,” Sands said finally as he handed out bars of emergency rations. The three of them ate listlessly, and then washed the dry bars down with two sips of water each. Afterwards, Sands explained their situation with regard to rations.

Halley frowned. “What are we to do, Lars?”

“I suppose we’ll have to put the beacon back together and hope someone other than an Alliance warcraft responds.”

Halley shook her head. Her perspiration matted hair slipped over her eyes and she pushed it out of the way. “They’re sure to hear us this close to Glasgow. Maybe we should wait a few days and let the winds work.”

Sands nodded. Since Saturn was not solid, different parts rotated at different speeds. Wind speeds in the Equatorial Zone approached 1800 kilometers per hour, compared to a mere 600 kph in the North Temperate Belt. Every day they rode the winds, they put 36,000 additional kilometers between themselves and the Alliance. The only question was whether they could afford to wait.

“Why not call Titan and have my father send a ship?” Kimber asked. “We don’t have to give away our identity any longer.”

Sands was about to explain that the comm sender had gone down with the ship when he stopped and thought a moment. “I suppose we could jury rig the emergency beacon to send on the comm frequencies.”

“What about our location, Lars? Saturn is a big place. How are we going to know our position close enough for a ship to find us in these clouds?”

“As soon as we break into the intercloud layer, we ought to be able to see the sky through gaps in the ammonia clouds overhead. We can give Kimber’s people rough bearings to the moons as they appear. That will allow them to calculate roughly where we are. When they get close, we will set the beacon to broadcasting on low power. The rescue ship can use that to home on.”

“Then it will work?” Kimber asked, her mood improving noticeably.

“I won’t know until I can get a comm unit rigged. Still, I can’t see any show stoppers. It looks like you’ll be going home soon.”

“And you with me, of course.”

Sands had been pulling open panels to get at the remains of the ship’s intercom. He had not really thought about what he would do with his ship gone. Upon a moment’s consideration, he realized that he had no other choice. With the whole of the Alliance Navy after him, Saturn was no longer safe.

“I guess you’re right,” he said. “We’re going to Titan.”

Chapter 14: Rescue

It took Sands the better part of a day to tie the surviving communicator set into the rescue beacon, then tune the jury rigged apparatus to a useable frequency. The latter task proved to be the hard part. He had to guess at the clock speeds and sampling rates required to synchronize his makeshift radio with the general communications bands. The only way to test the transmitter was to send a test message, then wait for an answer. Several times, he tore his collection of mismatched hardware apart and started over.

Eventually he attracted the attention of one of the automated communications stations that orbited Saturn just inside the rings. The attention came in the form of a warning to cease all unauthorized transmissions under penalty of fine. Sands informed the robot guardian what it could do with its regulations, and less

than a minute later, found himself speaking with a live human being. He explained his difficulty and the comm technician patched him directly through to Titan.

The factor and his daughter had a tearful reunion, after which Sands gave Crawford their position as best he could estimate it. As they had hoped, convection cell cross currents had swept them south toward the equator. When they'd finally broken out into the intercloud layer, they had been surprised to see hazy blue sky all around the edges of their rescue balloon. The Arch, so prominent in the temperate latitudes, had shrunk to a bright pencil line in the sky. The sight was absolute proof, if any were needed, of the two dimensional nature of Saturn's rings. Magnificent though they were, the vast circling mass of ice crystals was less than a kilometer wide at its thickest.

They had spent the better part of a day floating beneath the break in the upper cloud layers. From space, the hole would appear as an insignificant blue oval, one of thousands dotting the Equatorial Zone. To the three in the escape pod, it was as though they had fallen down a deep well filled with mist.

Sands spent all of First Dark peering around the bulk of the rescue balloon, recording the times and angles at which various moons and stars appeared. He used that data to estimate their position to within a few thousand kilometers.

Crawford had taken Sands's information and told them that he would have a ship on its way within the hour. The ship would come direct from Titan. Not only would it arrive as fast as would one of the Titanian freighters already on Saturn, it would raise fewer suspicions. If the Northern Alliance suspected anyone had survived *SparrowHawk*'s destruction, they would be watching for a Titanian ship to interrupt its schedule. They might even follow it to the rescue pod.

After that first conversation, the castaways made periodic contact with Titan over the next three days. Late on the third day, Sands disassembled his makeshift communicator and returned the rescue beacon to operation. He then transmitted short distress calls every fifteen minutes or so. A minute after his sixth such transmission, Halley reported a winged spacecraft coming toward them from out of the haze. Her news was met with whoops of joy that set the pod to rocking at the end of its long pendulum.

The rescue ship slowed and balanced on its underjets as it approached the pod from below. The ship's captain proved a virtuoso at ship handling. He slid his craft smoothly beneath the pod, and then slowly raised it until the gap between the two was only three meters. He then balanced the freighter on her underjets while two spacers clambered out onto the upper fuselage to assist in the transfer.

Sands braced himself in the short corridor at the back of the cockpit fragment, grabbed Kimber's wrists, and lowered her into the spacers' waiting arms. He then repeated the operation with Halley. As soon as both women had disappeared through the ship's dorsal airlock, he inhaled deeply and removed his own breather. Bending down, he took firm hold of the hatch coaming, and then jackknifed forward. A moment later, his outstretched toes swung free thirty centimeters above the freighter's hull. He hung on until strong arms wrapped themselves around his thighs. He then let go and allowed himself to be lowered to the rescue ship's fuselage, where other hands forced a breather over his nose.

The spacers led him to the airlock and helped him inside. The lock was a small one. He crouched alone in the dark, inhaling deeply through the breather while an oxy-helium breathing mixture displaced the hydrogen-helium around him. With each breath, his exhilaration at being rescued ebbed, to be replaced by remorse. It was as though safety had freed his conscience to think about all that had gone wrong.

The tally of disaster was a long one. Ross Crandall, dead; *SparrowHawk*, destroyed; the rest of his crew, probable prisoners of the Alliance, or worse! Nor had his intimates been the only ones to suffer. Because of him, three innocent cities were now subjugated to the tyranny of the Alliance. Even the

treasure they had won had been lost, dropped into the depths when *SparrowHawk* had been sundered by explosive charges. All Sands owned he now wore on his back or had stuffed into the pockets of his shipsuit.

The lower airlock hatch opened and Sands let other hands help him down a short ladder into the interior of the space freighter. He barely noticed when Kimber introduced him to Captain Brock Thalman, commanding *Earthhome*. He let them lead him to a spare cabin where they strapped him into an acceleration couch. Minutes later, he watched listlessly as Captain Thalman played his ship's underjets across the surface of the rescue balloon, rupturing it and sending the pod into the depths. Then *Earthhome* accelerated to begin its long climb back to orbit.

An hour later, they were in microgravity and Sands no longer had time to feel sorry for himself. It was all he could do to concentrate on being spacesick.

#

Saturn was a vast swirl of color in the ebon sky with a necklace of translucent diamonds encircling its waist. Directly opposite the sun, the planet's shadow fell across the ring to form the region of darkness that Saturnians knew as The Notch. Sands hung in midair at the viewport and gazed at the world he had left behind. The view was spectacular. Sands only wished that his stomach would cease its slow heaving long enough to let him enjoy it.

"Look!" Kimber said from beside him. "They're turning the ship. We'll be able to see Titan now."

Sure enough, the universe had begun a slow dance in response to Captain Thalman's commands. A crescent moon swam slowly into view. It was nearly as large as Saturn. Like a miniature Venus or Earth, Titan was a world shrouded perpetually in cloud. Unlike the white worlds of the inner system, however, the clouds that covered Titan were frigid. The average surface temperature on the moon was -180°C -- cold enough that the moon's solid mantle of water ice was dotted with lakes and seas of liquid methane.

"Can you see Saturn at all from the surface?" Sands asked, trying to take his mind off his discomfort.

Kimber shook her head. "Only as a generalized glow."

As she spoke, Sands marveled at the change in her appearance. When they had been rescued, all of them had sported perspiration-matted hair and stained clothing. Sands had had the beginnings of a full beard. The breathers had kept them from smelling one another in the escape pod, but once aboard *Earthhome*, it had become obvious that all of them could use a bath.

Captain Thalman had loaned them the use of his cabin and its private shower stall. Sands had been the last to shower. The feeling of warm water running down his flanks had gone far to relieve his depression and had nearly taken his mind off his stomach. He still had an emptiness inside him, but it was no longer the gaping hole it had been in the dark confines of the airlock.

Their sightseeing was interrupted by an announcement that *Earthhome* would be entering Titanian atmosphere within another half-hour.

"That's our cue to return to our cabins," Kimber said. "Do you need any medication?"

Sands shook his head. It embarrassed him that he had been sick for most of his first space journey. After three days, he was beginning to recover. It did not help that Halley, who had also never been outside Saturn's atmosphere, handled microgravity like a professional spacer. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I can order up something from the shipdoc."

“It’s not needed. A few hundred more hours of this and I might be able to look at food again. How long before we arrive at Titania?”

“The reentry is tricky. The captain will have to go twice around to shed his orbital velocity. Touchdown will come ninety minutes after the sound of atmosphere outside the hull.”

“Will there be anything to see?”

“Not much. We will be in cloud most of the time. You’ll get a good look at the Frost Sea during our landing approach.”

“Does anyone ever undershoot and go into the sea?”

Kimber laughed. “If we do, we’ll be well preserved for posterity. It doesn’t take a human being long to freeze solid at minus 180!”

“Thanks. Something else to worry about while staring at the overhead.”

#

The clouds of Titan were tinged with orange, the result of a complex photochemical reaction in the upper atmosphere. Sands watched that orange haze on the viewscreen for more than an hour as the ship grew warm from the heat of its entry into atmosphere. Eventually, the haze cleared and the many-domed city of Titania appeared in the distance. The domes grew precipitously as the spacecraft homed on its landing field. For some reason Sands had expected the ship to land like an ancient aircraft, touching down on a runway amid the screech of tires. If he’d thought about it, he would have realized that any ship able to hover in Saturn’s gravity would have no trouble doing the same in Titan’s one-sixth gee.

After landing, the ship was towed through an oversize opening into the large nearby dome. The workers Sands saw were clad in environmental suits similar to those he was used to. They provided a familiar backdrop against which to judge the scale of the new world. The illumination level was dimmer than that found in the flyways, but brighter than when beneath the multiple layers of clouds on Saturn. The sight of solid ground as far as the distant horizon was strangely unnerving, even when softened by mist. For one used to the vast vistas of the ringed planet, so much solidity was alien indeed. He wondered if this was what Earth had looked like before the change in the sun.

The distant horizon was cut off as the ship moved inside the city dome. As the hangar door closed behind them, Captain Thalman announced that passengers were free to disembark. Sands removed the straps that restrained him and moved into the space freighter’s passageway. There he met Halley. She, too, seemed to have been slightly unnerved by the scale of the landscape outside.

“Funny,” she said. “I always thought of Titan as being tiny.”

He laughed for the first time in days. “Even a small planet is a big place.”

At that moment, Kimber strolled toward them. She moved with the unconscious grace of someone who grew up in low gravity. She did not so much walk as glide down the central passageway of the ship.

“Ready to disembark?”

“Ready,” Halley replied. She held a small bag aloft. “I’ve even got my possessions with me.”

Sands, too, had been given clothing from *Earthhome*’s stocks, as well as a toiletry kit. That which he had taken away from the escape pod had been packed in a bag like Halley’s. It was not much to show

for a lifetime of dangerous work.

“Come on, I want you to meet my father!”

Kimber led them to the starboard airlock, which was substantially larger than the one through which they had entered the ship. Both doors were open, allowing them to step out into a large cavern lit by overhead flood lamps. Large heaters glowed cherry red around the cavern’s perimeter as they fought the cold.

The cavernous space was empty save for a single elderly man who stood at the foot of the disembarkation stairs. The workers who normally swarmed around newly arrived ships had been excluded for reasons of security.

Kimber flew down the embarkation ladder and into the waiting man’s arms. The two embraced with a fervor that was more than a simple homecoming gesture. It was the hug of a father who had thought he might never see his child again. Sands and Halley descended the ladder and waited for the embrace to end. Finally, Kimber unwrapped herself and turned to gesture them forward.

“Father, may I present Captain Larson Sands and Halley Trevanon? It was they who rescued me from Cloudcroft.”

Envon Crawford was a gaunt man with hollow cheeks and a fringe of white hair. He turned to the two privateers and bowed deeply.

“Captain Sands, Miss Trevanon, I will be forever in your debt. I understand that you lost a great deal bringing my daughter to safety. Rest assured that Titan will show its gratitude.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sands replied. “Is there any news from Glasgow?”

Envon Crawford shook his head. “Only Alliance propaganda. I understand you left crewmembers aboard Glasgow Prime.”

“The laird said he would try to protect them.”

“Whether he was able to do so is anyone’s guess at the moment.”

“What of Ganth Bartlett and our other people aboard Cloudcroft?” Kimber asked.

This time Crawford smiled. “Ganth reports that he received a full apology, and that they’ve told him he can leave any time. Dalishaar said that it was a mistake for you to go with these pirates, and that he would rescue you from their clutches if he could.”

“We encountered some of those ‘rescuers,’” Halley muttered. “That’s why we spent five days in a rescue pod.”

“The First Councilor has offered to pay a substantial indemnity for the ‘misunderstanding’ that caused all of the trouble, and asked Ganth to stay and negotiate a new trade agreement.”

“Ganth refused, of course.”

“No, he accepted.”

“*What?*”

Crawford seemed unmoved by his daughter’s shriek. When she regained her composure, he said quietly, “It isn’t in Titan’s interest break with the Alliance just now. Their fleets are swarming all over the

Northern Hemisphere. What do you think will happen to our trade if they start attacking our ships?"

"But they held me hostage!"

Crawford nodded. "For which they will pay. I've instructed Bartlett that he is to settle for nothing less than a fifty percent surcharge on all services."

"You can't deal with a man like that!" Kimber insisted.

"In the short run, we have no other choice. Now, enough of this. We do not want our guests to get the wrong opinion of us, do we? Also, we have to get you out of here. We've got crews standing by to service this ship."

"Why such tight security?" Sands asked as his eyes swept the empty cavern.

"To keep Dalishaar from learning that my daughter has come home. So long as she is presumed missing, our negotiators will have an easier time of it. You intimated on the radio that the Alliance would stop at nothing to silence you. Was that an overstatement?"

"No, sir. With what we know, we're a serious risk to someone."

Crawford nodded. "You have nothing to fear here. We will make sure that you have round-the-clock security. Also, with your permission, our people would like to discuss what it is that makes you such a threat to the Alliance."

"Certainly."

"Good," Crawford said. His smile had a wicked component to it. "Once we've got the trade agreement signed, we'll make Dalishaar wish he'd never laid a hand on my daughter!"

Chapter 15: Interlude on Titan

The lift dropped with a speed that reminded Sands of the long fall into the depths following *SparrowHawk*'s destruction. It was a comparison he did not particular care for, but one his brain insisted on making.

"How far down are we?"

"Just passed twenty kilometers," his guide responded. "Won't be long now."

"Why so deep?"

The mine foreman shook his head. "Hell, this ain't deep! The ice is two thousand kilometers thick hereabouts. This little hole of ours bottoms out a mere thirty clicks down. We're quarrying an ore body suspended near the surface, the remnant of a big meteor that landed here three billion years ago."

"I wouldn't think a meteor would be large enough to make mining worthwhile."

"You'd be wrong. We have been quarrying this one rock for more than thirty years. Current estimates are that we'll still be at it a century from now."

"This must be strange for someone used to Saturn," Kimber said as she gave Lars's hand a reassuring

squeeze. She smiled at him in the polished inner surface of the lift door, aware of his unease at being underground.

He nodded jerkily. “Funny, I’ve lived my life suspended over a bottomless abyss, never giving it a second thought. Yet, here I am headed down a hole and I can barely breath. Do you suppose I’m claustrophobic?”

“No more than the average Saturnian. A true claustrophobe would be climbing the walls.”

Sands had been on Titan for nearly two weeks and this was the first time he had been outside Titania’s main dome. He had spent most of his waking moments talking to the factor’s security people. Kimber had also been grilled. She had finally rebelled and interceded with her father to give them some time off. Since none of them could be seen in public yet, she had suggested an excursion to one of Titan’s mines. Halley, when offered the opportunity, had flatly refused to venture underground. That left Sands and Kimber to make the tour accompanied only by a few security people.

The lift reached the bottom of the shaft and decelerated smoothly to a halt. The door opened and the mine foreman, a taciturn individual named Dard Eisley, gestured for the two of them to lead the way. They walked down a short corridor and out into a cavern lit by flood lamps. Rather than the milky sheen of ice, the walls reflected the black of nickel-iron. At the center of the cavern a large machine was gnawing away at the ore, taking giant bites of metal and crushing them into powder before sending the residue down a side tunnel on a conveyer belt. Only the work helmets they wore kept the noise from deafening them.

“The ore is being sent to the next chamber over,” Eisley said, “where we have a smelter in operation. There we refine it, then hoist the ingots the thirty kilometers to the surface. The slag we dump back into chambers that we are through quarrying. Saves a lot of energy that way.”

The tour took two hours. In that time, they saw the refinery with its electric furnaces and white-hot ingots, a slag pile that nearly filled a huge underground chamber, and the lift station where ingots were loaded into hoppers. By the time they returned to the personnel lift, Sands felt like the legendary Earth tourist who traveled through twelve countries in seven days.

“Is there anything else you would like to see, Captain Sands? Miss Crawford?”

“No thank you, Dard,” Kimber replied. “I appreciate your taking the time to show us around.”

“You’re welcome. I will leave you two here. The lift will be down shortly. Give my best to your father. Captain Sands, it was good to meet you.” With that, Eisley shook their hands, and then strode out of sight down the tunnel.

“Well, what did you think?” Kimber asked.

“Impressive. I had no idea Titan produced this much metal.”

“It’s only a small percentage of what Earth produced before the sun flared. The cloud cities are so mass conscious that they use metal sparingly.”

“I can see why the Alliance wanted to get control of Titan’s production.”

“It would have given them a strangle hold on the other cities, all right!” She peered closely at him. “You still look a little green.”

“I’ll be fine as soon as I get back to the surface. It is the waiting. My mind keeps thinking about how

much ice we've got over our heads."

She smiled, stepped forward, and kissed him lightly. It was little more than a quick brush of lips against lips, but it left a burning sensation everywhere she touched.

He blinked as she pulled back. "What was that for?"

"For saving my life, among other things. I never did get to thank you properly."

"You're welcome."

"Also," she said with an impish look on her face, "I thought it would take your mind off your fears."

"It helped, but it's wearing off fast. Perhaps another treatment is in order." He reached up and tilted her face toward his own. They stood that way for half a dozen heartbeats. Finally, he leaned forward and kissed her. They were still locked in the embrace when a musical tone announced the arrival of the lift.

#

Lars sat with his arm around Kimber as the surface crawler ground its ponderous way across the frozen moonscape. Overhead, the orange tinged clouds of Titan were an opaque roof, while around them, methane snowflakes swirled just outside the cab blister. Their one-man/one-woman security team was in an aft compartment drinking tea. That left Kimber and Sands the sole occupants of the observation compartment.

"Do you know the first moment I loved you?" Kimber asked as she cradled her head against his shoulder.

"When?" His nose was nestled in her hair, taking in the fragrance.

"When you let me aboard your ship after Dalishaar had sabotaged mine."

"But you hadn't seen my face. I might have been a big, ugly brute."

"It didn't matter. You were the answer to my prayers ... literally!"

He smiled. "Do you know when I first knew I loved you?"

"In the rescue pod after we peeled down to keep from dying of heat prostration?"

He snorted. "What makes you think that?"

"I saw the way you looked at me."

"And here I thought I was being subtle. No, it was while you were modeling those ugly clothes that first afternoon aboard Glasgow."

"I take it that Karin Colin is more your type?"

He made a face. "Hardly! No, it was the seriousness with which you threw yourself into the masquerade. It told me that here was a woman worth knowing."

They sat nestled together for several more minutes. The snow had given way to an oily mist that was the product of very complex photochemical reactions in Titan's atmosphere. The mist scintillated in the crawler's headlamps to form a rainbow. After a few minutes spent watching the phenomenon, Sands

asked, “What is your father going to say about us? Maybe he won’t like you falling in love with an ex-privateer.”

“It’s none of his business.”

“He could make things hard for Halley and me if he doesn’t like the idea.”

“He wouldn’t do that!”

“He might. If you were my daughter and someone took advantage of you, I’d break both his legs.”

She looked at him with an odd expression. “But you haven’t taken advantage of me ... not yet!”

“What are you implying?”

She laughed. “That invitation was far more explicit than implied, my love. To put it bluntly, your place or mine?”

“Which is closest?”

“Mine. We’ll go there!”

#

Kimber’s apartment was in a wealthy section of Titania, close to the factor’s residence, but sufficiently removed that she could lead her own life. All four walls of her bedroom were view walls. At the moment, they were displaying a beach scene from Earth before the evacuation.

Lars watched as the setting sun sank below the waves of a long vanished ocean. The sun’s distorted, shimmering orange sphere turned the sky red-orange above a vast expanse of fire-tinged water. On the wall opposite the setting sun, glass and steel towers reflected the dying light in sheets of flame. People long dead strolled a walkway, while on the two adjacent walls; bathers lay on towels and watched the sunset.

“This is my favorite viewscene,” Kimber said. She was lying on her back, propped up on her elbows with one leg bent skyward. She was a goddess with red-orange skin and fiery hair. Her green eyes peered out from under droopy lids as she gazed at the sun. Her bare breasts rose and fell in time with her breathing. She seemed oblivious to Lars’s fingers, which were resting lightly on the dark triangle of her pubic mound.

“Oh?” he asked. Like Kimber, he was lying on his back, peering at the setting sun over crumpled sheets and through the vee formed where his feet rose up from the bed. “Why this particular one?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it reminds me that the sun was once humanity’s friend. In ancient times, people worshipped it. Now we hide here in the outer system, praying it won’t kill us all in a further fit of pique.”

“I would hardly call it pique. The sun flared because it suffered a minor energy imbalance. Maybe in a few hundred years, it will subside once more.”

She shrugged, sending a series of oscillations down her body that threatened to rouse Lars’s desire once again. “When something tries to kill you, it only seems right to think of it as a living thing. To die because of a minor shift in a few nuclear processes seems so pointless.”

“Surely you don’t agree with those who think God was punishing humanity for its sins.”

She smiled. “No, I wouldn’t go that far.”

As they spoke, the sun disappeared. Within seconds, the sky glow was gone as well and streetlights began coming on all over the ancient city behind them.

Sands frowned. “Surely night didn’t fall that fast on Earth!”

Kimber shook her head. “The playback has been time shifted for dramatic effect. We are about at the end of the recording. Want to see it again?”

“I’d rather spend the time watching you.”

His comment brought an arched eyebrow and a surreptitious glance downward. “Is that an invitation, sir? If so, I fail to see the will to carry it through.”

“Give me a moment to recuperate.”

“While we’re waiting, perhaps we should order up something to eat.”

“Is that a polite way of saying you don’t think I can rise to the occasion?”

“It’s a polite way of saying that I’m famished. We missed lunch, you know.”

He rolled over in bed and noticed the chronometer on the nightstand. It was getting on toward dinnertime. As on Saturn, Titan adhered to a 21-hour day. Unlike the larger world, the Titanians had never adopted the dual day/night cycle. Beneath their layer of orange clouds, they had never had the need.

Kimber sat bolt upright in bed. “What say we go out for dinner?”

“What about your father’s orders that we not be seen in public?”

She shrugged. “I think we can arrange it so no one will recognize us. I will go out as Karen Colin. You can fix yourself up, too.”

“Security won’t like that.”

“I’m tired of being cooped up. We can’t live our lives in fear of the Alliance forever. Besides, we will take all the precautions we need to. Come on, it will be fun!”

#

The restaurant was a small one in a section of main dome that was as far from the factor’s complex as it was possible to get. The restaurant catered to miners and their families. Kimber had chosen it to avoid long-term acquaintances that might see through her disguise.

They talked about little things over dinner and wine. Lars told her more of his life aboard Sorrell Three and she in turn talked to him about her days in college. Two hours passed quickly. It seemed like no time at all before they had each polished off a dessert and had drained a last cup of coffee. Sands remarked in a whisper that there was nothing like an afternoon of lovemaking to work up a person’s appetite.

“And to keep up their strength for nighttime!” she replied with a grin.

After they left the restaurant, Sands asked, “Where to now?”

“I’d like to take a walk through the park. It has been years since I was there last. Do you think it will be all right?”

He let his gaze traverse her figure as though he were seeing her for the first time. He had to admit that the disguise was a good one. The woman before him *resembled* Kimber Crawford, but was obviously not her. The differences were subtle, and therefore, convincing.

“I’d say we’ll be safe. I don’t even think your father would recognize you in that getup.”

“Then let’s smell the flowers. Afterward, we’ll go back to my place.”

“Let’s stop at my apartment on the way. I need to pick up some gear for morning.”

The park was a large, circular open area at the center of the dome. It was an expanse of green similar to dioramas Sands had seen aboard several of Saturn’s cloud cities. Yet, where the cloud cities simulated open spaces on Earth, the Titanian park was a reproduction of one of the hanging gardens on Luna. Kimber explained that was only natural since most of their ancestors had come from Earth’s moon.

The park was an intricate living sculpture. Everywhere one looked, a wild profusion of plants grew from planters suspended from an open geodesic framework. A raised walkway moved in a serpentine pattern through the foliage, spiraling upward toward the apex and then back down the outside of the frame. The walkway was two meters wide and rose as much as twenty meters off the ground.

The gardeners who took care of the park had performed several impressive feats of low gravity engineering. Here a giant rosebush arched an impossible distance across the raised footpath; there a giant tree towered upwards, reaching to the peak of the supporting framework; another place, a score of giant yellow flowers moved to follow an artificial light source that moved on a track. The whole place was a riot of color as the various plants were backlit by colored lights.

As they made their way up the walkway, Sands was struck by the heady aroma of the place. The mixture of scents was overpowering. Some odors were pungent, others sweet, but all caused an awareness to stir deep within him. It was as though the floral odors triggered a response in the genes and chromosomes that made him human, a reminder that his species had evolved on a world where such organisms had grown without the need for this complex artificial ecosystem.

Lars noted a preponderance of couples as they strolled arm in arm amid the greenery. He commented on it to Kimber.

“This is where young unmarried people come to get away from parents and roommates. Did you notice the dark alcoves all around the periphery? At this time of night, you will find them filled with lovers.

“Perhaps I should be steering you toward one of them,” he said.

She smiled and took his arm. “We’ve no need, as you well know from this afternoon, my love!”

They walked on for another ten minutes, glorying in each other’s company and the feeling of freedom they shared. For the first time since the Battle of New Philadelphia, Sands felt truly safe and content.

“Ready to go back?”

Kimber nodded.

“All right. My place first, then to bed.”

It took ten minutes to stroll to the residential area where Sands was housed. They were

surprised to find the corridor in front of his apartment section blocked by Titanian police. The police had attracted a crowd of curious onlookers. Sands's heart immediately began to thump in his chest as they pushed their way through the crowd. Kimber identified herself to one of the policemen. They were immediately passed through the police cordon.

Once inside, they were met by Arvin Taggart, the chief of the factor's security services.

"Where the hell have you been?" Taggart demanded when he saw Sands.

"He's been with me, Mr. Taggart," Kimber said with a tinge of frost in her voice.

"Oh, sorry Miss Crawford. I didn't recognize you."

"What's happening?" Sands asked.

"Someone broke into your apartment. Miss Trevanon heard a noise and went to investigate. Whoever it was hit her over the head and escaped."

"Hit Halley? Is she all right?"

"She has a big lump on her skull, but the doctors say she'll heal. They've taken her to the hospital for observation."

"Any idea what they were after?"

Taggart stared at him with a piercing look. "I was hoping that you could tell me."

Chapter 16: Intruder

Arvin Taggart led the way through groups of policemen wielding unfamiliar instruments and questioning neighbors Sands had never seen. As they reached the corridor where he lived, Sands noticed that the door to Halley's apartment was standing open. Three investigators were clustered around a partially eaten meal atop the small table in front of the entertainment screen. The scene caused Sands's stomach to react the same way it had the day Dane died.

"You're sure Halley's all right?"

"She's fine, Captain," the Titanian security chief said. "I talked to her myself before we sent her off to the hospital."

They crossed the hall to Sands's apartment. A uniformed officer opened the door for them and snapped to attention at Taggart's approach. Inside, drawers had been pulled out and dumped on the floor, furniture slashed open, and table lamps smashed.

"What happened here? It looks as though my apartment's been through the Dardenelles Cyclone!"

Kimber let out with a low whistle. "More like one of the bars down by the spaceport after a Saturday night brawl."

"Did Halley put up this much of a fight?"

"Not according to her. She said it was like this when she arrived."

“But why ransack the place?”

“They were obviously searching for something.”

“Searching for what?”

“You tell me.”

“Couldn’t it have been a thief?” Kimber asked.

Taggart frowned. “A thief, yes. An ordinary robbery, no!”

“Why not?”

“I’m the one who chose this section to house Captain Sands and Miss Trevanon. I personally arranged with the owner, who happens to be on Saturn now, for the lease of his home to the government. I have made the location of these apartments one of our most closely guarded secrets. You are asking me to accept that a common burglar -- the first in this section in five years -- just happened to stumble onto these quarters? I would as soon believe my wife loves me because I’ve gotten more handsome over the years.”

“But then someone has penetrated security!” Kimber exclaimed.

“Damned right they have, Taggart growled. “They knew he lived here and that he would be out today. They could have learned that only through my own department. When I find the culprit, he is going to wish he’d never been born.”

“Then this was an Alliance agent sent here to kill me,” Sands said.

The security man shook his head. “This was no assassination attempt. An assassin would not have ravaged your quarters like this. He would have hidden himself and waited for your return, or more likely, rigged a bomb. If Miss Trevanon surprised an assassin, why isn’t she dead? She knows what you know, does she not?”

Sands nodded. “So where does that leave us?”

“As I said before. He was looking for something.”

“Maybe we’ve got the wrong slant on this,” Kimber said. “Could we be dealing with a thief who has somehow learned about the treasures you took from Cloudcroft?”

“But all of our booty went down with the ship.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know that.”

Taggart sighed. “We are speculating to no purpose here. We need more facts. Captain Sands, it is obvious you cannot stay here any longer. Pack your gear and we’ll see about moving you some place more secure.”

“He can stay with me.”

Arvin Taggart stared at the factor’s daughter for a moment, but said nothing. He had already had a report from the security agents who had accompanied the two lovers to the mine. What Kimber’s father would say when he found out the privateer captain had moved in with her, the security chief could not predict. He was merely glad that particular problem did not fall under his jurisdiction.

#

Kelt Dalishaar sat behind his desk and glared at Grand Admiral Samorset. They were in his office on the top floor of Government Tower, the one the privateers had ransacked. That fact did nothing to help Dalishaar's mood.

"And your people *still* think they all perished with their ship?"

"All known facts indicate that to be the case, First Councilor."

Dalishaar let some of the exasperation he was feeling seep into his voice. "How, by the Great Arch, can you say that? Damn it, your trigger happy maniacs shot down three of the four pods without checking to see if they were occupied!"

"The officer responsible for that lapse has been severely disciplined," Samorset replied blandly. Both men knew that disciplined in this case meant that the man had been forced to "walk the plank." Specifically, he had been hoisted over the Glasgow outer railing and dropped into the abyss.

"And the fifth pod?"

"Admiral Blount believes the fifth pod malfunctioned. That would not be unusual for a ship of that age and condition. The pirates could hardly have had the resources to maintain it properly."

"Your people found no one aboard the one pod they inspected?"

"No, sir."

"Was there any sign of its having been recently occupied?"

"We inspected the Number Three pod, First Councilor. It jettisons the mid fuselage crew area of an air shark. Since the ship was in battle at the time, it is not surprising to find it unoccupied. After all, the crew would have been at their battle stations from the time they left the Glasgow landing bay."

"And what of the Crawford woman? Wouldn't she have been in one of the staterooms?"

"She must have been in one of the other compartments."

"She also might not have been aboard."

"She *was* onboard," Samorset replied calmly. "We rounded up everyone in the landing bay at the time the pirate launched. They were subjected to the usual interrogation techniques -- chemical, physical pain, direct brain stimulus."

"And?"

"We have several witnesses who say that she entered the ship with two other crewmembers. She herself was seen to close the hatch. My interrogation officers estimate the reliability of the information to be higher than 90 percent."

"What do these witnesses say about how many crew were aboard?"

"The information is not as reliable on that matter, sir. The crew boarded at different times. Some joined while the ship was in the storage bay. At least three, including Miss Crawford, arrived after the ship had been transferred to the landing bay. However, we estimate a 65 percent probability that all of them were aboard when they launched."

“All right, Admiral. I will accept your analysis for the moment. Now then, what of the pacification?”

“It goes swiftly, sir. There have been fewer acts of disobedience than expected.”

“That usually means they are planning something,” Dalishaar replied. In his younger days, he had taken part in the pacification of two cities that were now some of the most loyal in the Alliance. The experience had not been a pleasant one. It had been largely due to that background that he’d become an Accretionist.

“My people have been instructed to be especially vigilant until we can move the Glasgow Cluster here to the North Temperate Belt.”

“See that they are! Any additional examples of incompetence will be punished severely.”

“Understood, sir. Is there anything else?”

“I want you to report status to me daily.”

“Will a report at First Dusk be acceptable?”

“It will have to do. That is all, Admiral Samorset. You may return to your duties.”

The admiral rose, snapped to attention, saluted, and spun on his heel. He had reached the door before the First Councilor called after him, “One more thing!”

“Sir?”

“If Kimberly Crawford perished with these pirates, why is her father still negotiating with us?”

“I don’t understand,” Samorset replied. For the first time, Dalishaar thought he saw hesitation on that craggy face.

“We kidnapped his daughter, lost her to pirates, and then shot her out of the sky. Yet, her father, who I am told loves her dearly, has reopened negotiations. He has agreed to supply us with metal and we are now negotiating a price. Curious wouldn’t you say?”

“Most curious, First Councilor.”

“Good afternoon to you, Admiral. Please make sure your people do not over process those reports. Sometimes they seem to be boiled down to nothing.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll see to it.”

#

No sooner had the door closed than another opened. This door led to a short hallway off which the First Councilor’s private conference room and lavatory were located. It was also the back way into Dalishaar’s office. The man who entered was short, balding, and possessed a political shrewdness unmatched anywhere in the Northern Alliance.

“You heard?” Dalishaar asked Pierre Lamarque, his administrative assistant.

Lamarque nodded as he took the still warm visitor’s chair.

“What do you think?”

“He’s lying,” Lamarque replied. “He knows that ship was practically empty when it bolted for the blue. The Navy interrogation teams got that out of the Scots within a few hours of setting up shop. My spies tell me Admiral Blount has been tearing Glasgow apart looking for the fugitives ever since.”

“He thinks the Scots are hiding them?”

“Apparently so.”

“Why would they do such a thing?”

“On the surface, it doesn’t make sense. That is why I find the situation so intriguing. The Glasgow hierarchy seems intent on protecting people it has no need to protect and our Navy is lying about it. This is a Gordian knot I will relish cutting through.”

“Don’t take too long,” Dalishaar warned. “The Militarists are growing stronger with each council meeting. If we don’t figure out what they are up to, we may both find ourselves out of a job.”

“I have my people working on it,” Lamarque assured him. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“What news from Titan?”

“Our agent there has confirmed the sighting report through a third party informant.”

“Is this informant reliable?”

Lamarque shrugged. “Who can ever tell? The informant is one of the factor’s personal cooks. He claims to have seen Kimber Crawford at a private dinner. She was in the company of two strangers and there was a lot of toasting going on.”

“Strangers?”

“One is described as a man about thirty. Another is a woman.”

“One of the privateers was a woman!”

“Correct, sir. If the woman on Titan is the same one, she is Halley Federova Trevanon, *SparrowHawk*’s copilot. That would make the man Larson Clarke Sands.”

“Both cockpit crew?”

“Yes, sir. The cockpit was probably the escape module that wasn’t seen.”

“So they *did* survive!”

“That explains Crawford’s willingness to deal. He will make us pay a price for holding his daughter, but the payment will be in credits, not blood. If he thought we were responsible for her death, we would probably be looking at a Titanian strike against our home cities.”

“Would he really destroy a city to avenge his daughter?”

“Do you know a father who would not?”

Dalishaar sighed. “We will concede this year’s contest to the Titanians with as much grace as we can muster. Matters will be different come next year. By then we should be well on our way to our ultimate goal.” The First Councilor glanced at the security readout on his desk. It declared all anti-eavesdropping

devices to be functional and operating. “What of that other matter?”

“My agent reported that she has discovered where the Titanians are keeping the two special guests. She is ready to retrieve our lost property.”

“Does she know the significance of the prize?”

“All she has been told is that the privateers made off with sensitive Alliance data.”

“What if Titanian security has the record tile?”

Lamarque shrugged. “Then there is little we can do. It will be very expensive to break the codes. They may not be willing to spend the money. Even if they do manage to crack the tile, there is a good chance they won’t understand the significance of what they have.”

“We can’t take the risk. We are in a very critical phase. If we speed up our preparations, we may tip the Militarists to our plans. *It is absolutely vital that we retrieve that tile!*”

“If the privateers still have it, our agent will get it away from them.”

“Keep me informed,” Dalishaar said in a note of dismissal.

Lamarque rose and left by the same door through which he had arrived. On the other end of the short hallway was a sealed exit leading to a side passageway. It allowed him to avoid the crush of people in the first councilor’s public anteroom.

As he walked back to his own office, he chewed his lower lip. What he had not told Dalishaar was that a high priority message had arrived from their agent just before he had been summoned to eavesdrop on the meeting with the Fleet Admiral. The agent had failed in her first attempt to retrieve the record tile.

The first councilor’s mood was such that Lamarque did not intend to deliver such news until he had something with which to offset it. Dalishaar had a reputation for shooting the messenger who brought bad news. Besides, he thought, their agent might be more successful next time.

#

Almy Breck stared at the computer printout in disbelief. The message that had gone into the machine had been an innocuous note from her mother who had written to say that she was extending her tour and would not be home until the seventeenth. The letter had gone on to recount several items of gossip about traveling companions Almy had never met. Naturally, the sheet that came out of the decoder said something quite different.

#

BEGIN MESSAGE:

WE ARE MOST UNHAPPY WITH THE FAILURE OF YOUR FIRST ATTEMPT. IMPERATIVE THAT YOU OBTAIN RECORD TILE FROM LARSON SANDS BEFORE THE SEVENTEENTH. TRY AGAIN AS SOON AS YOU ARE ABLE. REPEAT, IMPERATIVE!

SIGNED P.L. LARMARQUE

FOR THE FIRST COUNCILOR

END MESSAGE.

#

“Who the hell does he think I am? James Bond?” she muttered as she destroyed the message.

Mostly, Almy Breck enjoyed her life. Her work as a communications technician in the Office of Trade allowed her to practice her real profession, that of intelligence agent for the Northern Alliance. She saw all but the most highly classified messages flowing between Titania and her far-flung trade offices.

Almy was also engaged to the youngest son of one of Titan’s oldest families. Benito Mayerling was a spoiled young man and someone Almy would not normally have looked twice at. However, his family’s social standing provided a never-ending supply of party invitations. It was surprising how many government secrets could be overheard at cocktail parties. She had often pondered whether it had always been so.

In the four years since she had established her cover identity, Almy had never been asked to do anything more than report the occasional tidbit she picked up. That had changed with a flash priority message from Kelt Dalishaar himself. Dalishaar had ordered her to locate Larson Sands and relieve him of a record tile. When she had asked for more details, she’d received a tartly worded reply stating that she had no “need to know.” She had composed a scathing response to the effect that one record tile looks pretty much like any other, but had not transmitted it. She had been in the business long enough to know when a field agent was handed the dirty end of a stick.

Finding Larson Sands had proved easier than expected. Her cook friend had reported seeing him at a private dinner at the factor’s official residence. In going over her department files, she had discovered a message from Blaumgarten in the southern hemisphere. It was from the trade representative there, giving Arvin Taggart permission to use his apartment.

Since the apartment was only three corridors over from her own, Almy had acted on a hunch and taken to watching the public areas for some sign of the elusive privateer. She had spotted him with Kimber Crawford on the third day of her vigil. After that, she had taken to strolling down Sands’s corridor on her way to and from work. She had gotten off duty the previous day and had taken her customary stroll. The lack of activity in the corridor had emboldened her to stop and knock on Sands’s door. There had been no answer. She’d used some specialized equipment she had never expected to need to gain entry. Not knowing how long Sands would be gone, she had searched quickly and with no concern for destruction, and looking everywhere he could conceivably have hidden a record tile.

She had been getting very frustrated when a sound from the door alerted her that someone was attempting entry. She had picked up a vase and flattened herself against the wall. There had not been time to think. She’d smashed the vase over the head of a woman she’d never seen, then slipped out into the corridor and made her way to her own apartment.

It had been hours before she calmed down enough to write her report. She was furious about the risk she had been forced to take. She was still furious when the second message arrived and demanded that she try again.

Who the hell did they think she was...?

Chapter 17: Record Tile

Kimber Crawford smiled as she gazed upon Lars's sleeping form. He was sprawled face down across her bed, snoring softly, with a sheet tangled around his hips and one leg. She let her eyes trace the pattern of muscles in his back and thought of how lucky she had been to meet this vital, vibrant man.

Kimber had always been leery of anyone who tried to get close to her, especially men. She had learned early that no matter how much they professed their love; it was influence with her father they coveted. Larson Sands was different. She had realized how different when the privateers had debated putting her over the side to protect their identities. Lars had been her champion, opposing his own crew to save her life. Kimber had studied enough psychology to know that her feelings were partially rooted in that incident, a natural reaction toward a protector. Knowing their cause did not make her feelings any less real.

She climbed out of bed carefully so as not to wake Lars and slipped into a dressing gown. After brushing her hair a few strokes in front of the bedroom mirror, she padded barefoot to the kitchen. There she selected two breakfast packets, popped them into the oven, then dialed for coffee and orange juice. With the morning meal begun, she walked into the living room.

After leaving Lars's ransacked apartment, they had visited Halley Trevanon in the hospital. Lars had been even more quiet than usual during the ten-minute stroll. It was then that Kimber had realized the attack on Halley had disturbed him more than he was letting on.

Once at the hospital, they'd found her lying in bed in a hospital gown, engaged in animated conversation with a handsome young doctor. Except for a bruise on the right side of her face, Halley had seemed none the worse for wear. The two Saturnians talked for nearly fifteen minutes. As Arvin Taggart had told them, she had had no warning of the attack. All she could remember was using the combination that opened the door and catching a glimpse of the general destruction before someone had hit her from behind.

When Lars was sure that Halley was all right, he and Kimber had returned to her quarters. There they had dropped his meager possessions on the living room floor and raced one another to the bedroom. They had made love with abandon until the early morning hours when they had finally fallen asleep in one each other's arms.

Lars's kit bag was where they had left it. Kimber picked it up and carried it into the bedroom to put the clothes away. When she opened the closure, she found that he had merely wadded up the outfits he had been given on his arrival and stuffed them inside the bag.

Kimber clucked quietly to herself as she extricated the wrinkled ball of clothing from the kit bag and separated it into individual items. She sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed as she worked. She stretched each piece of clothing to its full length, and then folded it neatly before laying it on its own pile. She quickly had shipsuits on one pile, underwear on another, shirts on a third. When she finished with the clothes from the kit bag, she noticed the shipsuit Lars had worn the previous day flung carelessly over a chair.

By leaning forward, she managed to get one leg between two fingers without getting up. She pulled the suit toward her until she had enough of the tough cloth that she could gain a more substantial grip. She then pulled the shipsuit off the chair and toward her.

On impulse, she buried her nose in the fabric, breathing deeply of the odor of her man. Mildly

embarrassed by the atavistic action, she hurriedly glanced around at Lars. He was still sleeping, although he had rolled over from his stomach to his back, tangling himself even more deeply in the sheets in the process. A detached part of her mind noted the sudden warmth she had felt upon inhaling his fragrance. Not for the first time she wondered if humanity's exile hadn't divorced people too far from the pleasurable stimuli with which Earth must have abounded.

Usually clothing could be worn for several days in the sterile environment of the Titania main dome. The shipsuit she held, however, had been soiled during their visit to the mine. Rather than folding it, Kimber decided that it should be cleaned. Humming quietly to herself, she opened the various closures and began extracting the things that a man carried with him.

In addition to several magnetic keys and some pocket change, she found his wallet. She opened it on impulse and discovered the universal credit card he had used on Saturn, along with several photographs. One showed Lars and his brother. They were standing in what must have been a city diorama, arm in arm, smiling at the camera. Dane Sands had been a handsome man, she noted. No wonder Halley was so broken up by his death. Other pictures showed two people who must be Lars's parents. There were two photographs of women as well. Kimber felt a sudden tinge of jealousy, and ruthlessly pushed it back down. She resolved never to mention the matter to him. If he wanted to tell her about the photos, he would; if not, not.

She was about to close the wallet when a polychromatic flash caught her eye. She found that a fabric liner had worn through to show the corner of a glass rectangle. She reached in, extracted the record tile between thumb and forefinger, and held it up to the light. It flashed with the sparkle of a rainbow, indicating that the tile had something recorded in it. The label was unmarked and the tile was no different from millions of others. She wondered why Lars was carrying it around in his wallet.

She was about to put it back when Lars stirred behind her. She turned to watch him as he arched his back in a giant stretching motion and groaned his way awake.

"Hello, sleepyhead!"

It took him a moment to figure out where she was. Finally, he propped himself up on his elbows and gazed smilingly at her.

"Hello, yourself. What are you doing down there?"

"I'm unpacking your clothes."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to. Besides, from the evidence, you must be the Saturnian system's worst packer."

"I was in a hurry."

"It would seem so." She held the record tile up where he could see it sparkle in the overhead light.

"What's this?"

He focused his eyes on it. "Oh, that. Just a souvenir I picked up in Kelt Dalishaar's office. Halley and I decided to give him something to worry about. We dumped his private computer and then left him a note telling him about it."

"And you've been carrying this around ever since?"

"Sure. It's a reminder of how I met you."

Kimber blinked. Alarms were going off in her brain, yet, she could not quite figure out what they were telling her. Then everything clicked into place. “Could *this* be what our intruder was looking for?”

Sands sat bolt upright in bed, all thought of sleep forgotten. “It’s a long shot, but you may be right.”

“I think we should tell Arvin Taggart about this right away.”

“Before breakfast?”

She smiled. “It can wait until after we’ve eaten.”

#

Taggart held the record tile where Halley Trevanon could see it. “Captain Sands says that you were able to make a recording of Kelt Dalishaar’s private files. Is that true?”

Halley stared at the tile for a few seconds before nodding. She had been awakened a few minutes earlier by a nurse who had announced three visitors. She had barely made herself presentable when Lars, Kimber, and Taggart had surrounded the foot of her bed.

“Tell me exactly what you did to get this recording,” Taggart ordered.

Halley explained how they had forced Kelt Dalishaar to give them access to his personal workstation so she could monitor the raiders in Cloudcroft’s landing bay. She recounted how she had searched the first coordinator’s desk and how she had been surprised to find a high performance computer hidden in one of the pedestals.

“And you were able to obtain access to this machine?”

“Sure,” she said. “I ran a directory check, found the command Dalishaar used to switch to the machine in his desk, and activated it.”

“How did you know the access was to the machine in the desk? What convinced you that you weren’t merely talking to a different part of the main city computer?”

Halley shrugged. “The operating system prompts were entirely different. Besides, the box in the desk had a maintenance interface on it. I noticed that one of the panel lights would illuminate each time I accessed it. I think it must have been indicating that the communications link with the city computer was off line.”

“And what did you find in this computer?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “It was security locked, of course. I couldn’t get any farther than the first menu.”

“What happened next?”

“Lars came back about that time and I showed him what I had found. We decided to give Dalishaar one more thing to worry about; I used the computer’s housekeeping routines to copy everything in memory. Then we left Dalishaar a note telling him about what we had done. As Lars said, one more small revenge for Dane!”

Taggart shook his head. “That is what I don’t understand. You claim this was Dalishaar’s personal machine; yet, you were able to copy its memory. Any tyro in security knows not to allow housekeeping routines access to that sort of information without a password. My God, that’s been standard procedure for centuries!”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Halley said. “I do know that I checked the file statistics on my copy and they were identical to those displayed with the main directory.”

“Then someone in the Alliance was unforgivably sloppy in setting up that machine!”

Kimber smiled, as though something funny had just occurred to her. “Maybe Dalishaar did it himself.”

“Why would he do that, Miss Crawford?”

“Because he didn’t want anyone else to know about that computer. Maybe the information is so sensitive that he could not trust the usual techs to maintain it. That would explain his making such an elementary mistake.”

“That hardly seems likely.”

“Why? We know the Alliance has its various factions, some of which are opposed to everything Kelt Dalishaar stands for. If I were one of those people, I would consider it a coup to have the man who maintains the first councilor’s private computer on my payroll.”

Taggart held up the tile once more. “If true, this could be the greatest treasure stolen from Cloudcroft that night. It would also explain the incident in Captain Sands’s quarters.”

“That’s what we’ve been telling you!”

Taggart turned back to Halley. “What did you expect to do with this, Miss Trevanon? Surely you must have known that breaking a computer security code is a massive undertaking.”

“I don’t think we’d thought it through. Lars had this idea that we might be able to sell the tile to Micah Bolin’s employers. Mostly, though, I guess we were just trying to make Dalishaar nervous. We figured the more worried he was, the less efficient he would be at tracking us down. Considering the knot on my head, we may have been wrong about that last part.”

Taggart looked up to where Sands was listening to the exchange. “And you’ve been carrying this tile around ever since?”

“As sort of a souvenir. Can you break it?”

“We can try.”

#

Envon Crawford was as skeptical of the tile as Taggart had been. He insisted on hearing the story himself (this time from Sands) and questioning why Dalishaar would have something so sensitive lying about his office. Kimber once again made the point that the first councilor’s machine might have been a secret, even from those whose job it was to maintain such equipment. The factor agreed to order tests on the tile before authorizing an attempt to break its security code.

The tests took three days. They consisted of various analyses to determine the probability that the record tile contained more than randomly generated numbers. On the third day, Titania’s chief computer scientist made his report. Larson Sands was invited to the meeting.

“What say you, Doctor Palanquin?” Crawford asked

Eugene Palanquin, a small nervous man with a pinched face gazed at the half dozen expectant faces clustered around the table in the factor’s conference room. “Er, the structure of the tile is consistent with

a security coded data base, Factor. The probability that the tile has been randomized is less than fifteen percent, perhaps significantly less.”

“How do you know that?” Sands asked.

“Human language has certain statistical characteristics. While any number of coding methods can easily disguise meaning, the underlying characteristics of that information are not easily disguised. The same can be said for computer programming. Our analysis indicates that whatever information this tile contains, it is not ordered randomly.”

“What coding method did they use?” Crawford asked from the head of the table.

“Er, probably a cipher based on an easily remembered phrase.”

“How long to break it?”

“Hmmm ... on the order of one month. We will need the undivided attention of a full module of the city computer.

“What will be the effect on city services?”

“Er, minimal, I should think. None, in fact, so long as we are not called upon to perform some computer intensive task or suffer a malfunction elsewhere in the system.”

“And the cost?”

The specialist quoted a number that seemed inordinately high to Sands. However, it did not seem to bother anyone else.

“Very well,” Crawford said, nodding. “We can’t ignore the possibility that we have Alliance state secrets here. Go ahead.”

“Yes, sir,” the specialist replied. “There is one other thing you should know.”

“What is that?”

“The quantity of information recorded in the tile is not especially large. When we decipher it, we may find nothing more than a copy of the original computer’s operating system.”

“You mean Dalishaar may not have had anything stored in that machine in his desk?”

“Correct. As I said, our analysis shows ordered information scrambled via a sophisticated coding mechanism. If Miss Trevanon followed the technique she describes, she definitely recorded the machine’s operating routines. Whether she recorded anything else remains to be seen.”

“Proceed anyway.”

“Very well, Factor. I will keep you informed as to our progress.”

#

The intruder incident turned out to significantly affect Larson Sands’s life. Since the Alliance was aware that *SparrowHawk*’s three survivors were on Titan, it no longer made sense to hide out. Kimber celebrated their release by changing her hair back to its natural jet-black color and inviting Sands to a night at the theater. They dined at the most exclusive restaurant on The Promenade, then attended a

performance of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The next night they toured the extensive collection of Lunarian art in Titania's Art Museum.

A week later, they saw an ancient Earth movie in a large auditorium. It was the first time Sands had seen a movie on a big screen. He found the experience a moving one. The film was a western, with horses. He had seen pictures of horses often enough, but never on a scale that approximated their true size. That human beings had once perched atop those massive animals was nearly beyond belief. As Sands watched the awkward, yet curiously graceful motion, he felt a sudden pang of sadness. All across Saturn thousands of terrestrial species slumbered in life banks, their genetic material stored against the day when the sun loosed its grip on the home world. It was depressing to think that the race *Equus caballus* might never again grace the universe.

Halley joined Sands and Kimber on two of their evening excursions. Each time she was on the arm of a different young doctor. Halley, it seemed, had made the best of her stay in the hospital.

If the Northern Alliance had any reaction to the news that Kimber and two of her rescuers had survived, they showed no outward sign. Reports from Ganther Bartlett were that the Alliance was being surprisingly docile. Despite the good news, Envon Crawford's face seemed to blossom new worry lines almost daily.

Nor was Sands entirely happy. He had begun to chafe under the burden of idleness. As far as Lars was concerned, work was as necessary to living as breathing air. He resolved to speak to Kimber's father about it. Envon Crawford preempted the subject by summoning Lars to his office.

"Good of you to come," Crawford said as he crossed the office to shake hands. "May I get you something? Coffee, tea, possibly a soft drink?"

"No thank you, sir. It hasn't been that long since breakfast."

"My daughter tells me that you two have been seeing the sights of Titania. How do you like them?"

"I'm impressed. I always thought of Titan as an outpost culture. I had no idea you had so much nightlife."

"It's the Lunarian influence. The people who settled here came from an environment where going outside was a major undertaking. You Saturnians are lucky. Even though your cities are every bit as enclosed as ours, you have all those lovely vistas to stare at. I've always thought there was something in the human psyche that responds to unlimited horizons."

"Yes, sir. I was thinking the same thing at the movie Kimber and I saw last week."

"That's right! You went to that John Ford western, didn't you? How did you like it?"

"I found the motives a bit difficult to follow, but the scenery was beautiful." Sands told him of his reaction to seeing the horses.

The factor laughed. "We breed cattle over in Dome Three. It's a shame that we can't breed horses as well."

"Why can't you?"

"I understand they don't do well in low gravity. The lack of traction causes them to fall down." Crawford leaned back in his chair and regarded Sands through steepled fingers. "Lars, may I ask you a personal question?"

“Depends on the question.”

“I want to know how things are between you and Kimber.”

“Why, I love her, of course!”

“Do you plan to marry her?”

“We haven’t really discussed it.”

“Pardon my intrusion into your personal life, but I must know what you intend. You saved my daughter’s life and lost your ship in the process. I can never repay you for saving Kimber’s life. I can, however, help with the ship.”

“I beg your pardon.”

Crawford gazed at him intently. “If you would like to return to Saturn, I can help get you another ship. I’m not especially wealthy, but I can provide you with a down payment and arrange a low interest loan with a Titanian bank.”

“You would help me buy a new ship?”

“If that is what you want. You would have to be careful to avoid the Alliance, of course. Still, Saturn is a very large place and you should be safe if you remain in the southern hemisphere. That is your home, I believe.”

“I don’t know what to say, Factor.”

“Take your time to think about it. I can also arrange a commission for you in the Titanian merchant fleet. You would have your own freighter in a few years if you’re as good as I think.”

“I know nothing of spaceships, and I was spacesick all the way here.”

“You could learn what you have to know, and spacesickness is seldom permanent. As I said, you do not have to decide just now. I will consider the subject pending until you get back to me. Now then, let’s discuss another matter.” Crawford reached into his desk and pulled out a record tile. It was not the original tile from Dalishaar’s office. This one was a different color. “My geniuses broke the Alliance cipher in only 18 days. I am told that is a new record. The trigger phrase is from *The Bible* : ‘*His truth shall be thy shield and buckler.*’ ”

“And the information inside?”

“You were right. The tile contains information sufficient to hang Kelt Dalishaar if only we can get it into the right hands. The most important thing we’ve found so far is the Alliance timetable for taking over the North Temperate Belt.”

“The whole belt?”

“Just about. Several of my best customers are on their list.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Sands asked.

“We’ll see that the information gets to the proper people.”

“Too bad we couldn’t save New Philadelphia or Glasgow in time.”

Crawford frowned. “The funny thing is that neither city was supposed to be conquered just yet. New Philadelphia was not supposed to fall for another six years. Glasgow isn’t mentioned at all.”

“Perhaps someone else is working from their own timetable.”

Crawford pushed the tile in Sands’s direction. “I’d like you to read through this information and tell me what you think of it.”

Sands took the tile from Crawford and slipped it into a pocket. “I’ll try to have a report within the week.”

“That will be fine. As for that other matter, please think about it. I will abide by whatever you and my daughter decide. She’s the only family I have left, and I want her to be happy.”

“That is what I want as well.”

Chapter 18: Energy Screen

Kimber found Sands sitting in front of the work screen in her living room. He was so intent on what he was reading that he did not hear her come in. She moved up behind him, leaned forward and slipped her arms around his neck. When he started at the unexpected contact, she laughed and asked, “What are you doing, my love?”

He turned his head to regard her too close features. “If you are trying to give me a heart attack, you very nearly succeeded just now.”

“You wound me, sir!” she said with mock formality. “I plan to induce your heart attack by totally different means.”

“Sounds interesting. Too bad I have to work.”

“Which brings me back to my original question. What, in a frozen Titanian hell, are you doing?”

He turned back to the screen and gestured at the glowing letters. “I’m reading Kelt Dalishaar’s private mail. Your father’s wizards came through earlier than expected.”

“They broke the security code.”

He nodded. “Smashed it into a million pieces.” He told her about the code phrase and added, “Funny, I would never have guessed Dalishaar was religious.”

Kimber laughed. “Some of the worst butchers in history were upstanding church goers. What have you learned?”

He sighed. “I wish I knew. The more I read, the less I understand. Here, let me take you through it!”

Kimber watched as he keyed for the main menu. Among other things, Dr. Palanquin’s computerists had provided an index to the recovered information. Each file was annotated with its creation date, the dates and times when it had been accessed, and its level of classification. By analyzing this information, it was possible to assign a relative importance to each file. Palanquin’s people had made such assignments. Whether they were correct in their assessments, only Kelt Dalishaar could say.

“Your father was most interested in this item,” Sands said. He touched a control and caused the Northern Alliance’s timetable for conquest of the North Temperate Belt to appear. Kimber gasped as the list of cities appeared next to the dates when they were expected to fall.

“Shin Su Fong, the Corwin Confederation, the Moskvan Free State, the Harvard Cluster!” Kimber muttered. “No wonder they tried to take over our distribution network. Those are four of our largest customers.”

“That’s hardly surprising. Nearly every independent cluster in the North Temperate Belt is on this list. Look at the dates. See anything odd?”

Kimber pursed her lips as she scanned down the dates on the right side of the screen. Finally, she shook her head.

“What will happen if the Northern Alliance begins absorbing cities at the rate listed?”

“You mean against their will?”

“Is there another way someone joins the Alliance?”

“I suppose it could precipitate a war.”

“Not could. *Will!* And damned fast!” Sands shook his head as he contemplated the screen. “Hell, the Alliance’s neighbors are already nervous after their conquests of New Philadelphia and Glasgow. Every city in the NTB is out hiring privateers and looking to their defenses. The moment Dalishaar’s ships move again, half the cities in the belt will rush to support the victim. That will lead to pitched battles between massed fleets and could easily degenerate into the sort of unrestricted warfare nobody wants.

“Surely the Alliance rulers know that.”

“You would think so,” he agreed. “So why are they even considering this lunacy?”

“Could it be a contingency plan?”

“This doesn’t have the smell of contingency planning. It seems more an operational projection. Besides, if you read the supporting documentation, you discover that they expect most of these cities to capitulate without a fight.”

“That’s impossible!”

“Whoever wrote this thing assures Dalishaar that after the first few battles, most of their conquests will be bloodless. The timetable supports the idea. Notice how the pace picks up toward the end of the list. Their biggest planning problem seems to be having enough troops to garrison so many cities at once.”

Kimber shook her head. “Dalishaar isn’t that stupid.”

“Agreed,” Sands replied. “So what does he know that we don’t?”

“The tile doesn’t say?”

“Maybe it does.”

Sands returned to the main menu and its index of files. He pointed out one well down the list.

“But that isn’t very important,” she objected. “Look, he’s only accessed it a few times. The important

ones are the files he uses frequently.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. I think our classification scheme has a flaw in it.”

“What flaw?”

“Do you keep a file of your friends’ birthdays?”

“Of course. They pop up on my day list a full month in advance so I can plan what to get them.”

“Yet, I’ll bet you don’t keep your father’s birthday on that same list.”

“You’d lose the bet,” Kimber said with a smile. “I’m always forgetting my father’s birthday. He’s the reason I started my birthday file in the first place.”

“Okay, bad example. Still, the principle is sound. Dalishaar does not need to consult *really* important information very often because he has it committed to memory. It’s logical that the files with the most activity are working documents, and those with the least are prime documents.”

Kimber reached over his shoulder and pointed to the file. “And you think *this* is important information? What’s in it?”

“Not what you might think,” he replied. “It’s a report of an archeological expedition to Earth some twenty years ago.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

It had been more than a century since the Earth became so hot the oceans had boiled; turning the home world into a twin of cloud shrouded Venus. Most of humanity’s constructs had long since crumbled to dust in the thick atmosphere of superheated steam. Most, but not all. In sheltered places -- mostly deep underground -- much of what humankind had built remained largely intact. Periodic Saturnian expeditions sought out these installations and salvaged the remnants of a human culture long dead.

The report Sands called to the screen was the account of one such expedition. Twenty years earlier, a ship from the southern Saturnian city of Borman had been sent to Earth to salvage scientific apparatus from a string of underground laboratories. The labs had worked to discover a means by which the planet could be protected from the flaring sun. Some had sought the elusive goal up until the very end. The report dealt with a laboratory in a region of Earth once known as California. The facility had been devoted to a new technology developed in the last decade before the evacuation.

Scientists studying the underlying structure of the space-time continuum had discovered a way to generate a discontinuity in the very fabric of space, a discontinuity that was impervious to the transmission of matter and energy. The first discontinuities were perfectly mirrored spheres only a few angstroms in diameter. Because they were opaque to all known forms of energy, they were dubbed “energy screens.”

The invention had given humanity hope that at last they had found the salvation for which everyone had been searching. If the tiny impervious bubbles could be expanded sufficiently to envelop the Earth, then such a screen might be flickered on and off to deflect the excess solar energy from the flaring sun. A massive program was begun to perfect the new technology. Unfortunately, by the time it became necessary to evacuate the laboratory, the researchers’ largest screen was only a few hundred meters in diameter. And as humanity’s every resource was turned to the great migration to Saturn, energy screens, like so many other promising avenues of research, had been abandoned.

Kimber scanned the report through to the end. “I don’t understand, Lars. What has this to do with anything?”

“There’s a cover memo. The Alliance researcher who discovered the report of the Borman expedition wrote it. Let me read an excerpt:”

#

“... Although the laboratory was unsuccessful in creating a planetary energy screen, they had notable success with much smaller versions. In their last days on Earth, the scientists reported that given time, they might generate a screen several kilometers in diameter. It is noted that such a device might be used to shield a cloud city and protect it from attack...”

#

Kimber looked at Sands in horror.

“I see you understand the implications,” he said.

“But if they can defend their cities, while the other Saturnian cloud cities are helpless...”

He nodded. “Then their timetable for taking over the North Temperate Belt would appear to be reasonable. As soon as the other cities realize retaliation is no longer a viable option, they will surrender in droves rather than risk destruction. I only wonder why they are stopping at the North Temperate Belt. With an energy screen to shield their home cities, why not conquer all of Saturn?”

#

“They’re alive!”

Admiral Mikal Blount of the Alliance Navy looked up from the cluttered desk and frowned. He had been going over the never-ending flow of reports that had chained him in this office almost from the moment his fleet had taken the Glasgow Cluster. He was none too happy with his life of late, and this news did nothing to improve his outlook.

“Are you sure?”

His aide nodded. Captain Gregory Herrera had been with Blount for nearly ten years. Herrera was one of the few people Blount trusted to help him with planning the raid on Cloudcroft. That fact had forged a bond between them stronger than was normal between commanding officer and subordinate.

“We’ve been monitoring the news feeds out of Titan, Admiral. They carried a hologram of Kimber Crawford attending some sort of social event last night. She had Larson Sands on her arm.”

“Damn!” Blount rubbed his bald pate with one hand while he thought furiously. Finally, he leaned back in his chair and said. “This changes everything. So long as there was no evidence to the contrary, we could claim they all died in the battle ... or, at least, that we thought they did. We will have to break the news of their survival ourselves. If Dalishaar learns it from us, we might allay his suspicions long enough to get our people to Titan.”

“And if he already knows?”

“Then we will have lost nothing in the attempt. Who are our two best assassins?”

“Gunner Hardwick and Airman Quintana, sir. I have used them before. They’re reliable and they’ll get the job done.”

“Good. See that they are given a plausible cover story and documentation, then get them to a neutral city where they can book passage to Titan.”

“Aye, sir.”

“What about the rest of the fugitives?”

“We nearly caught Bailey and Reese down inside the support truss last night. Their beds were still warm when my men got there. We swept the whole sector and rounded up dozen or so witnesses. They are being put through questioning now.”

“And Garvich?”

“There’s been no word since the sighting report of last week.”

“Damn it, how can three men evade us so successfully in an occupied city?” Herrera moved to speak, but Blount held up his hand to silence him. “I know, the Scots are hiding them. I’ll be damned if I know why.”

“Perhaps we should put the question to Fitzroy again.”

“No. The doctor thinks one more session is liable to kill him. We need him alive. You will have to continue your sweeps and hope someone who knows something falls into your net. Dismissed.”

“Yes, sir!” Herrera snapped to attention and saluted. He then turned on his heel and marched out of the office.

Blount watched him go. After his aide left, he leaned back in his chair to contemplate the implications of Larson Sands’s reappearance. That Sands might have escaped his trap had long been a nightmare for Blount. The rest of *SparrowHawk*’s survivors were dangerous enough with their limited knowledge of the events leading up to the raid on Cloudcroft. Still, they could be handled. If one of them were to tell his story, there was a chance Blount’s cover story would hold up. Sands was another problem altogether. He would be able to testify under drugs concerning the meeting aboard Port Gregson. His death could not come too soon for Blount’s peace of mind.

Yet, Sands was not Blount’s only worry. There was the curious reaction of the first councilor to all of this. Admiral Samorset had had several meetings with Dalishaar since the raid. He had passed on his concern that the first councilor might suspect the truth. Inexplicably, Dalishaar had not ordered anyone arrested. Come to think of it, he had been uncharacteristically docile in all his dealings with the Navy. It was as though he had reasons of his own for not wanting the true story to come out.

The thought was a new one for Mikal Blount, yet it triggered a resonance in his brain. He toyed with it for long minutes, testing it against the known facts. The more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed. The hypothesis had the advantage of explaining several things that, up until now, had been mysterious.

As he reached for another in the interminable stack of occupation reports, Blount wondered what Kelt Dalishaar was afraid of. Whatever it was, if he (Blount) could find out, it would substantially improve his bargaining position if his part in the raid ever became known.

Envon Crawford stared at the screen and read the report of the archeological expedition to Earth. Kimber sat next to him, waiting for him to finish. Across the room, Larson Sands and Arvin Taggart sat on the couch in the factor's living room. In the dining room, the meal Crawford had been about to eat was long since cold.

"And you think this means that the Alliance plans to build an energy shield for their cities?"

"What else could it mean, father? Remember Dalishaar's password: 'His truth shall be thy *shield* and buckler.'"

"Possibly a coincidence." Crawford looked up from the screen and regarded his security chief. "What about it, Arvin? Do we have any corroboration for this?"

Taggart frowned. As he had remarked to one of his men that very day, he'd been doing a lot of that lately. "There just might be, Factor."

"Enlighten us!"

"Several weeks ago, one of our agents in the Alliance sent a report of a space expedition being organized by the Cloudcroft Museum. That was not news. The expedition has been a matter of common knowledge for quite some time. What piqued our interest was the additional information that the Accretionists are the real force behind this exploration."

"I want details," Crawford demanded.

Taggart glanced in Sands's direction. Like all security men, he had an inborn caution against revealing the sources or means by which his information was obtained. At a nod from the factor, he continued: "Our agent is posing as a visiting specialist in Earth history at the museum. One of his colleagues got drunk at a cocktail party and told him the first councilor's office was behind the museum's recruiting of historians, archaeologists, and computerists for an expedition to Earth. He further alleged that the truth was being kept from the Alliance Council. Apparently, he was quite incensed over science being perverted to political ends."

"What ends?"

"Up until now, we had no idea." Taggart gestured toward the workscreen where the report on the Borman archaeological expedition was still displayed. "Captain Sands's discovery may be the missing piece to the jigsaw puzzle."

"How much faith do you put in this agent's report?"

"It is quite difficult to be sure of *anything* in intelligence work. However, he's one of our best men and has excellent contacts within the upper echelons of Alliance society."

Crawford was silent for a long time. When he spoke again, it was with a heavy sigh. "I suppose that puts the matter back into our orbit. The stakes are high enough that we dare not be wrong on this."

"Agreed," Taggart said. "If the Alliance gains effective control of the NTB, they will destroy our independence of action. We'll be forced to sell our metal at their prices and on their terms."

Crawford nodded. His features were sunk in gloom as he contemplated his three visitors. "So what are we to do about it?"

"We'll just have to get to this laboratory and seize the secret of the energy screen first!" Kimber said.

Her father looked at her sharply. “You mean mount an expedition to Earth?”

“Why not? We know where the laboratory is and what to look for. If we get there first, we can block the Alliance from gaining a monopoly. In addition, Titanian possession of such a secret could be highly profitable! We could sell defense screens to the cloud cities much as we now sell metals.”

“Taggart?”

“I agree with Miss Crawford. It will be expensive, but a great deal cheaper than doing nothing.”

“Captain?”

Sands shrugged. “Not a bad idea, sir, if you can spare a ship.”

Crawford mulled it over for a few seconds, and then said, “*Vixen* will be coming out of overhaul at the end of the month. I suppose we could delay her return to the merchant fleet long enough to send her to Earth.”

“What about the special equipment we’ll need?” Taggart asked.

“Yes, there is that problem,” Crawford agreed. “We’ll need heavy duty environmental suits and a great deal of other specialized hardware. That we will have to obtain secretly on Saturn to keep the Alliance from getting wind of what we are about.”

“I once served a stint with New Holland in the southern hemisphere,” Sands said. “They harvest the complex organics that only occur in the lower atmosphere. They have suits and other equipment capable of withstanding heat and pressure.”

“I take it you are volunteering to purchase this equipment for us?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent! We will deposit you somewhere other than New Holland where you can charter a dirigible to fetch back whatever equipment we need.” Crawford turned to his security chief. “Arvin, you are in charge of selecting *Vixen*’s personnel. We will need a levelheaded captain and crew who can keep their mouths closed. We will also need the same sort of specialists the Alliance is recruiting. Kimber, you have been out of school a short enough time that you might be able to help with technical recruiting.”

“Yes, Father. I know a few people at Oxford-in-the-Clouds who would be good candidates.”

Taggart shook his head. “No one from Saturn. This expedition is to be limited to Titanians only.”

“Very well. I’ll start checking out the university roster.”

“Good,” Envon Crawford said. “One last thing. This is to remain a secret shared by the people in this room. No one else! Guard what you say. Are there any other questions? If not, Kimber, you and Lars are excused. Arvin and I have other security matters to discuss.”

Chapter 19: Return from Saturn

Sands sat in the forward passenger compartment of the Titanian freighter *Nightingale* and watched Saturn’s bloated form recede below him. The freighter was one of a dozen that transported spools of

wire and other finished metal products down to Saturn and then returned to the moon with the products of the cloud cities. Sands had joined the ship more than a month earlier at Titania spaceport for his mission to buy heavy-duty environment suits for the Titanian expedition to Earth. His mission was complete and he was returning to Titan a different man than when he left.

It had taken three days to cross the gulf of space between Titan and its oversize parent. Unlike his first trip into space, Sands had hardly been bothered by zero gee vertigo at all. Indeed, his weeks in Titan's one-sixth gee had acclimated him to the sensation of less than normal gravity.

The freighter's first scheduled stop had been the city of Columbus in the South Polar Belt. Sands had left the ship there to book passage via public airship to Garand in one of the cyclones of the South Temperate Zone. At Garand, he had changed transportation again. This time he had chartered a private dirigible to take him the final leg to New Holland. The circuitous route was the brainchild of Arvin Taggart. The security chief hoped it would minimize the possibility of Titan being connected to the purchase of protective equipment of the type needed to explore Earth's overheated surface.

Being back on Saturn had been like a tonic for Sands. The twice-a-day rhythm of sunrise and sunset, the steady pull of Saturnian gravity, the familiar sight of Arch and Notch at night, all had rejuvenated him. Their last night before New Holland, he and the airship captain had shared a bottle of wine on the chartered dirigible's upper observation deck.

At New Holland Sands had made the rounds of companies that manufactured high-pressure environment suits and had quickly discovered his first problem. The heavy-duty environment suits were specialty items. There were only four to be had in the whole city. He needed a dozen. The suit manufacturer explained that he could have eight more built within six months, but quickly changed his estimate when he learned of Sands's credit balance in the local bank. After much haggling over price and delivery, they agreed on a goal of two weeks, with unlimited overtime for the production crews. He sent a coded message to Titania notifying them of the delay, then settled down to await delivery.

By the end of the third day, Sands's cheery mood had all but vanished. He had been growing progressively more despondent. His mood was not improved when the manufacturer informed him there would be a one-week delay in delivering the suits. A necessary pressure fitting was not in stock and would have to be shipped in from halfway around the planet. It was after he returned to his hotel after a long day of cajoling and arguing that Sands realized the underlying cause of his general irritability.

It came as a shock to realize that he was suffering from homesickness! He, who had always prided himself on being rooted to no place or person, was mooning like a teenager. Whenever he'd come down with bouts of melancholy in the past, he always had a simple antidote. In every cloud city, there is a district where companionship may be bought for the price of a few drinks and a reasonable number of credits. Yet, finding a New Hollander joy girl was the last thing Lars wanted. After Kimber, it would be like drinking tepid water following a steady diet of the finest wines.

The realization that he had finally fallen in love gave him as much pause as the thought of going into battle. Love would interfere with his vow to avenge Dane. Somehow, that did not seem as important as it once had. There was another question to be asked: Was it fair to Kimber to carry on the vendetta? Already it had killed Ross Crandall and very nearly the rest of *SparrowHawk*'s crew. What of Garvich, Bailey, or Reese? Were they hunted men aboard Glasgow, or three more victims of his desire to strike back for Dane's death?

The painful truth he was beginning to face was that there had been nothing personal in Dane's death. Indeed, it had been about as impersonal as one of the big zonal cyclones. The Alliance had shot down the New Philadelphia flagship because they had considered it good tactics. It had been Dane Sands's

bad luck to be aboard at the time. That he had gone to his death in his brother's place had been an unlucky roll of the dice for Dane, but did it obligate Lars to avenge him?

Lars struggled most of the night with his dilemma. He made his decision at First Dawn. He would give up his unholy quest for revenge and build a future with the woman he loved. He would choose life over death!

#

"Captain says you can inspect your cargo now," one of *Nightingale*'s crewmen said as he swam past Sands in the zero gravity of the ship. It had only been minutes since the freighter's engines had ceased their growling and the steady pull of acceleration had died away to nothing. The winged spacecraft had climbed above Saturn's atmosphere and was rising upward at a velocity that would take them far beyond the outermost ring.

"Thanks," Sands replied, unbuckling from his acceleration couch. He levered out of his sitting position and rotated his feet to find purchase on the corrugated deck. Aligning himself along the long axis of the compartment, he kicked off to float aft. At the rear bulkhead, he caught himself on outstretched arms, absorbing the shock with bent elbows and tensed biceps.

The cargo hold was two compartments aft. Sands levered open the hatchway that let him into the darkened space beyond. He fumbled for the light control before sending a lengthwise glowtube into luminescence. The compartment was lined on both sides by sarcophagus shaped shipping containers. Sand had a momentary vision that he had entered one of the fabled pyramids of Egypt. He pulled himself to one of the cases and unhooked the latches that secured the hinged cover. He then pulled the cover open. Inside, cradled in the embrace of a formed cavity, was a New Hollander environment suit.

The suit bore a resemblance to a squat gorilla Sands had once seen in the Hurlberg City Zoo. The helmet was bulbous and mirrored. So too was the surface covering. The torso was made of a hard organic material layered with carefully aligned carbon fibers. The arms and legs of the suit were similarly formed. Unlike the environment suits he was familiar with, this suit was not pressurized to the level of the outside atmosphere. Rather, it was intended to hold back the pressure. To assist the wearer, the elbow and knee joints contained bulbous power assist mechanisms that responded to signals from thousands of pressure sensors lining the interior. The ankle, hip, and shoulder joints were likewise powered.

The suit's massive backpack was four times larger than any Sands had ever seen. In addition to providing the wearer with a breathing mix of oxygen and helium, it incorporated a massive cooling unit. The suit would keep its owner comfortable even when submerged in water boiling under the pressure that existed in most cloud cities. It had its limits, of course. Even the outer armor, power-assisted arms and legs, and the massive cooling unit would not protect someone who tried to reach the hydrogen sea.

Still, the suits were more than sufficient protection from the cauldron-like conditions of Earth. They would allow the Titanian expedition to seek the old energy screen laboratory and salvage whatever knowledge had been abandoned there.

Lars worked his way down the row of suits, checking each in turn. All had taken the stresses of launch well, cushioned as they were in their shipping cases. After closing the last sarcophagus, he moved to the other large containers bolted to the freighter's deck.

Although the explorers could conceivably live inside their suits the whole time they were on Earth, no one would look forward to such an ordeal. The old records from the Borman expedition had included a layout of the ancient underground laboratory. They told of a complex that was still structurally sound, protected from the corrosive atmosphere by meters of rock and concrete. The Bormans had conditioned

the laboratory's interior to a shirtsleeve environment while they had explored it.

In *Nightingale*'s hold were two oversize environment conditioners. When the Titanian expedition excavated the old laboratory, they would again take the time to condition the environment. That way, the search for the energy screen data would go more quickly.

Satisfied that his entire cargo had ridden out the launch well, Sands returned to his acceleration couch. It was three days to Titan and he had little to do other than eat, sleep, and play cards with the crew.

#

Titania Spaceport was as he had left it. The main dome rose toward the orange overcast while spaceport workers hurried to clear a path for the newly arrived *Nightingale*. In the distance, long slow waves rolled ashore from the sea of methane that bordered the moon's capital city. Flakes of methane snow and complex organics misted the viewport, causing the spaceport lights to break into a million droplets of scintillating color.

A sudden lurch signaled the attachment of the tow cable. As the freighter slowly moved into the bright lights of the debarkation dome, Sands noted that there was already another ship inside. The vessel was a freighter with the stubby wings and large cargo bay of such a vessel. As they pulled alongside, Sands was able to read the name *Vixen* stenciled across the ship's bow. This then was the ship that would carry the expedition to Earth.

Lars waited impatiently for the airlock to open. The air inside the dome had a metallic taste to it, and was frigid. His breath wreathed his head in exhalation fog as he quickly descended a long stair. He let his eyes scan the concourse beyond the thick glass windows at the edge of the dome. A scattering of pedestrians walked past, seemingly oblivious to the newly arrived ship. Here and there small clusters of people watched the activity in the dome. Lars felt a momentary disappointment when he failed to see Kimber among them.

Disappointment turned suddenly to fear as he asked himself what could have happened to keep her away. Suddenly, visions of disaster flashed through his head -- everything from his beloved wrapped in bandages to her lying dead in some deserted corridor. A sudden movement caught his eye. He turned his head to follow the motion and his fears popped like soap bubbles. There she was, waving wildly as she ran along the concourse toward the debarkation gate.

He stumbled as he rushed up the stair leading to the gate, then burst through into the brightly lighted concourse. Kimber rushed to meet him and the two collided in a sudden flurry of kisses.

"Welcome back, my love!" Kimber said breathlessly when they finally broke their embrace.

"I missed you!" he replied as he thrust her out to arms length to look at her. Her hair was longer than he remembered. Her mouth was set in a wide grin that complemented her sparkling green eyes. She was, he decided, more beautiful than ever. "Did you miss me?"

"Does Saturn have rings? I understand you were successful."

"So were you," he said, gesturing to where *Vixen* was visible beyond the wall of glass.

She nodded. "Expedition's all organized and ready to go. They're just waiting for your equipment."

"I had a few troubles getting all the suits together."

"So I understand."

“Where’s your father?”

“Waiting anxiously for you in his office. He did not want to come down to meet you in person. That would have called attention to the fact that someone important was arriving on *Nightingale*. He even asked me to stay away.”

“I thought you had.”

“Never! The damned spaceport authority had your ship listed for the far end of Dome 3. When I found out the truth, I ran the whole way here.”

“And I thought it was my presence that had you all out of breath.”

“That, too, my love.”

“We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

“Oh?” she asked, one eyebrow arching upwards.

He hurriedly told her of his decision to settle down. She listened quietly, her eyes getting rounder with each passing second. She did not say anything until he had finished.

“Pardon me if I misunderstand, but it sounds as though you are proposing marriage.”

He grinned. “I am, if you’ll have me.”

For a long moment, he thought she was about to refuse. Then she smiled broadly and threw her arms around his neck. She kissed him again. This time, he knew it was for keeps.

“May I take that for an affirmative response?”

“You may,” she replied. “Come on, let’s go find my father so you can deliver your report and we can be alone.”

She grabbed his arm and swung him around. Suddenly, her grip tightened. He winced and turned his head to look at her. Her expression was in transition to one of open-mouthed horror. Sands followed her gaze. The main concourse was circular, following as it did the outer periphery of Main Dome. Just coming into view around the curve some fifty meters away was a nondescript man with blond hair. Kimber had happened to be looking at him as he came into view. She had reacted to him, and upon seeing her reaction, the man’s right hand had snaked inside his businessman’s tunic.

Sands’s privateer honed reflexes took over. There is something about the way someone reaches for a weapon that is unlike any other motion a human being makes. It is not so much a movement of the arm as an action that involves the whole body. As the man’s hand reappeared, it had a metallic gleam to it. Sands pushed Kimber sideways toward a nearby pillar. He then dove forward, seeking the sanctuary of an alcove in which someone had installed a drinking fountain.

He was only halfway to safety when an explosion reverberated the length of the concourse. As though by magic, a shower of sparks flashed from the metal flooring just beyond his outstretched right hand.

Chapter 20: Assassin

Another shot rang out. The second round careened off the wall a few centimeters over his head, producing a sound that set his teeth on edge. Sands slid the last meter across the metal floor like an ancient baseball player sliding home. He ended his slide in the alcove hugging the wall, with the water fountain's drainpipe jabbing him in the kidneys. A nearby whimper, he realized, had come from his own lips.

Kimber faced him from across the concourse. She lay sprawled where she had landed, her eyes rimmed with white as she gazed in horror at the bright splash of metal on the floor between them. She was sprawled akimbo with body parts sticking out on both sides of the pillar.

"Get down behind that damned thing and stay there! Tuck in those legs!"

She scrambled to comply, and was soon lying on the floor, with her body pointing like the needle of a compass directly away from the unseen gunman. The terror and bewilderment began to go out of her eyes. He gave her a brief smile to tell her that everything was going to be all right. Then his battle-trained reflexes took over.

Sands had once tried to explain the feeling that came over him in combat. He had failed miserably. It was as though his mind had split into a dozen parts, and each was operating on its own. Somewhere near the top of his consciousness he was acutely aware of the fear reaction that had taken control of his body. His heart pounded in his ears, his bowels were tied in a knot, and his limbs threatened to begin shaking uncontrollably. Another part of his mind seemed to be living at a radically accelerated pace. Seconds stretched into minutes and the world moved in slow motion around him. Finally, somewhere deep within his brain, a skilled tactician ignored everything around him and took stock of the situation with a detachment rare even in contemplation.

The tactical situation was bad, but it could have been worse. The corridor was a segment of a circle. He was lying on the inside of the curve, with the wall shielding him from the gunman, who was once again out of sight. He had found additional cover in the shallow setback that kept people who used the drinking fountain from blocking traffic. Finally, the haste of the attack marked it as an impulsive act rather than a planned ambush. Sands suspected that had it been the latter, he would now be dead.

Once the scene was firmly fixed in his mind, Lars considered what he could do to improve matters. The most pressing problem was to determine the assassin's current location. The gunman might have taken cover, or could be running forward at full speed. In the latter case, Sands had only a few more seconds before he came under fire again. He thought of asking Kimber to locate their assailant and immediately pushed the idea from his mind. While he was alive, she would not be sticking her head around that pillar for anything.

Tensing, he propped himself on his left elbow, craned his neck, and quickly stuck his head out from behind the corner of his niche. The assassin had not attempted to take cover. Instead, he moved to the line of pillars and was loping forward in the long, skating motion of a low gravity sprint. His head was up and his eyes scanned continuously from side to side as his weapon waved to menace everyone in front of him. Something about the way he ran convinced Lars he was facing a professional.

The gunman spotted him and snapped off another shot as he ran. The round careened off the paneling that lined the concourse. Sands levered himself erect using one hand, thankful for the low gravity. The fountain scraped his back as he got to his feet. He considered his options, which were few. The curved corridor would offer him some protection if he chose to run in the opposite direction, hugging the inner wall. Yet, if he did so, the gunman would have a clear shot at Kimber as he came abreast of her pillar. The only other possibility was to attack, and Sands doubted he would take more than two steps out of his cowering place before being shot down.

He turned his head and looked over the fountain that had left a permanent impression on his back. It was the standard metal bowl whose design went back centuries. Even as he judged how difficult it would be to tear it off the wall, he knew he would have neither the time nor the cover. Besides, it would make a poor weapon against a man with a gun.

His mind was racing furiously when other shots reverberated through the concourse. He flinched, waiting for the bite of a bullet. It never came. Despite the seeming eternity since the first shot had been fired, in reality, less than fifteen seconds had passed. When there was no angry wasp sound of a near miss, nor the nerve-racking whine of a ricochet, he looked frantically around. This new firing seemed to be coming from behind him. Sands felt a new fear. Whoever they were, they had him trapped between them.

He caught his breath as he turned his head. Less than ten meters distant, a man and a woman stood in the open, crouched in firing stance with recoilless rocket pistols in their hands. Yet, their weapons were not aimed at Sands. They were aligned with the corridor, aimed in the direction of the unseen gunman. While Sands watched, the two fired again in unison. He hazarded another quick look up the corridor.

The assassin was down. He was still falling while a great geyser of red fountained from his body. He sank to the floor, twitched, and was still. The globular red haze slowly settled around him in the weak Titanian gravity.

The concourse seemed suddenly filled with armed people converging on the downed gunman. Lars recognized two of the agents who had accompanied them on their tour of the mine. He felt himself slump as reaction set in. He bent down with hands on thighs and gasped for air. After a dozen such breaths, he walked unsteadily to where Kimber still crouched behind the pillar.

“Are you all right?”

She got unsteadily to her feet. It was several seconds before she could speak as she fought the globular tears that welled up in her eyes. “I think I am. How about you?”

“Scared out of my wits, but otherwise whole. What was that all about?” He was amazed at how calm the words sounded as they came out. It was almost as though they had been spoken by someone else.

“I don’t know,” came the hesitant reply. “I noticed that man as he came around the curve in the corridor. I don’t know what caught my eye. I guess it was the way he reacted when he saw you.”

“Reacted how?”

She shivered as she remembered. “He seemed to be searching for something as he came into view, then he saw you, Lars! I could see the change in his eyes. They got hard, as though he were a hunter who had stumbled onto his prey. That was when I tensed up. He must have seen me react, because his eyes flicked to me for just an instant and he seemed to come to a decision. That was when he reached for his gun.”

“Sloppy of him,” Sands remarked. “If he’d just walked on past, he could have shot us both down from behind and we’d never have known what hit us.”

She nodded, shuddering at what might have been. “I think he was surprised to see you.”

Just then, one of the security people ran up to them. He holstered a weapon as he came.

“Are you all right, Miss Crawford, Captain Sands?”

“Fine ... now!” Lars replied. “Lucky you people were around.”

“No luck to it, Captain. Mr. Taggart assigned us to blanket the spaceport for your arrival. And we’ve been watching you, Miss Crawford, for the last month.”

Kimber nodded. “Those ‘other security measures’ my father arranged after we left his office that day.”

“Whatever the reason, I’m glad you were here. Things might have gotten sticky in another few seconds.”

“Do you two feel up to looking at the shooter?” the security man asked.

Both of them nodded in unison.

The gunman was not a pretty sight. He had been struck by at least five of the small rockets. One had caught him under the right eye, taking off the back of his head. Kimber grimaced at the sight, but still looked. Lars gazed at the body with open curiosity. Despite his years as a privateer and his battle experience, this was the first time he had seen someone killed up close. It was definitely not the same as watching blips fade from a sensor screen or the small, toy-like aircraft that heeled over and fluttered like leaves toward the hydrogen sea.

“Do you know him, Captain Sands?”

“Never seen him before.”

“Miss Crawford?”

Kimber frowned. “I’m not sure. I may have seen him now and then over the past few weeks. It’s hard to tell.”

“Saw him where?” the security man asked, his interest instantly intensified.

“I can’t be sure, but it seems to me that he was shopping in the mall last week when I was there. Come to think of it, he was having dinner at *Brindisi*’s with another man the night before last. I remember because I caught them looking at me a couple of times. I thought one of them was trying to work up his courage to try to pick me up.”

“There was another one, you say?”

“Yes, I’m certain of it.”

The security agent reached for his comm unit and ordered the spaceport sealed off. Meanwhile, the agents who had been clustered around the body took out their weapons and moved to take up station along the length of the concourse. Sands and Kimber were ignored for five minutes while the security people made their arrangements. Finally, the agent in command returned. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“Somewhere we can be sure you will be safe.

They were marched through a side door into a corridor that was deserted except for their security entourage. Ten minutes later, they were in Kimber’s apartment with guards three deep beyond the door.

#

“Damn it, I ought to resign!” Arvin Taggart growled. The Titanian security chief paced Kimber’s living

room like a caged lion. Lars had never seen a lion except in photographs. Nor had anyone else, for that matter. Still, the expression lived on in the language and now he knew precisely what it meant. There was something about Taggart's mood that suggested a coiled spring about to be released.

"Take it easy," Envon Crawford advised. The factor and his security man had arrived together. After Crawford made sure his daughter was all right, he had turned suddenly professional. The loving parent was gone, replaced by the iron-willed chief executive whose territory had been violated. Like Taggart, Crawford was in a murderous mood and working hard to control it. "Your people handled it as well as we could expect. Both of their charges are safe. That's what counts."

"No, sir, it isn't! Damn it, this assassin should never have gotten past our cordon. The fact that shots were fired at all means we failed. You don't live long in this business depending on dumb luck, which is precisely what saved us today!"

"I don't understand something," Kimber said. Like Sands, she had had an hour to calm down. "They had Halley helpless in Lars's apartment last month. Why didn't they kill her then? More to the point, if they spared her life then, why try to kill us now?"

"It wasn't the same man," Taggart said through clenched teeth. "We found identification on the body identifying him as a chemical salesman from Borodin in the North Equatorial Belt. He arrived aboard the *Julia Havler* only two weeks ago. He wasn't on Titan when Halley was attacked."

"Another Alliance agent?"

"Possibly the agent who knocked Halley out wasn't from the Alliance. There may be other players in the game that we don't know about."

"Another Alliance faction, perhaps?" Crawford asked.

"Possible," Taggart agreed. "We've been working our source at the Cloudcroft museum overtime. It seems Captain Sands's raid put more of a strain on the council than we recognized at the time. This assassin could be a response by either the Accretionists or Militarists."

"Are we sure he was a professional?"

Taggart frowned. "You told my men that he looked like one."

Sands shrugged. "At the time, I thought so. However, I have been thinking about it. Surely a professional would have been a better shot."

"He wasn't as bad as you might think," Taggart replied. "You have to consider the handicaps under which he was working."

"What handicaps?"

"The gravity for one. He was a Saturnian, used to one plus standard gee's of acceleration. People from Saturn tend to aim high in low gravity. From Kimber's testimony, it is obvious that your appearance surprised him. Probably, he was trailing her and had no idea she was going out to the spaceport to meet you. When he saw you, there was that single moment he let himself react. Kimber saw his unguarded reaction and recognized it for what it was, giving him no choice but to open fire."

"Yet, even though he was under pressure and firing in one-sixth his normal gravity, he was able to put rounds within a few centimeters of your head. He was undoubtedly concentrating so much on compensating for the lighter-than-normal gravity field that he forgot one other crucial point."

“What was that?”

“The spaceport concourse is on the outer ring of Main Dome. Subconsciously, he probably thought it was a straight corridor. That threw off his aim. Basically, his brain misprocessed the visual cues and so placed him in the wrong place for firing at you.”

“You mean he suffered an optical illusion?” Kimber asked.

“Something like that,” Taggart agreed. “I’ve got the behavioral psychologists looking into the situation. They’ll tell us if there’s anything to the theory.”

“At least he’s dead,” Kimber said. “We’re safe for the time being.”

“I’m not sure of that at all. “We ran *Havler*’s passenger list through the computer. We are attempting to locate the other passengers now. We have not had a lot of time to check, but we think one other is missing -- a man matching the description of the man you saw in *Brindisi*’s the other evening. The two of them were probably a team.”

“We’ve got to catch him!” Envon Crawford yelled.

“We’re trying, sir. However, he has undoubtedly heard about the shootout at the spaceport by now. If he is truly a professional, he will have prepared any number of contingency plans. He’s probably changed his looks and gone to ground somewhere we’ll not expect him.”

“What you are saying, Arvin, is that my daughter and Lars are still in danger?”

“We’ve doubled up on security, Factor. If they will agree to stay hidden until we’ve found this second agent, they ought to be reasonably safe.”

The factor shook his head. “Reasonably safe until the Alliance can send someone else! Remember, we have got at least one other agent loose in Titania. How many others are there? Two, three, a dozen?”

Taggart shrugged elaborately. “What else can we do? If Kelt Dalishaar’s people can reach them here, there is certainly no cloud city where they can take refuge. I suppose we could lock them up at the bottom of one of our deepest mine shafts. Even there, someone might bribe a member of the security force. There is no complete safety.”

Crawford frowned. He was obviously wrestling with some decision. Finally, he sighed and turned to his daughter. “You’re going to have to go away for awhile.”

“Go where?” she asked. “You heard Arvin. If the Alliance is truly after us, they can reach us anywhere we go.”

“Not *anywhere* ! There is one place where you will be beyond their reach. While you’re gone, we can work at resolving this situation.”

Confusion showed in Kimber’s expression. “Where are you sending me, father?”

“*Vixen* leaves tomorrow. You and Lars will be aboard when she leaves. You’re going to Earth!”

Chapter 21: Alliance

Admiral Mikal Blount of the Alliance Navy sat in the cockpit of the fast prowler and scanned the whole vast blue-white expanse of sky before him. In the near distance to port, a seemingly infinite cloud wall marched slowly astern; while to starboard, the great trough of the North Temperate Belt stretched endlessly into haze. Even in the pristine air, the immense cloud canyon was too wide for Blount to have any hope of seeing the other side. The prowler's pilot also searched the sky. His younger eyes proved their worth when he reached out a black clad arm and pointed to the right of the aircraft's needle shaped prow.

"There, sir! Home."

Blount strained his eyes to their limit and was rewarded after a few seconds by the appearance of a single, silver bubble in the azure haze. The cloud city danced at the limits of vision for long seconds, and then seemed to split in two. In fact, another city had come into view. In quick succession, two cities became five, then five became ten. Suddenly, there were more cities in sight than were easy to tally at a glance. Yet, they continued to multiply as the prowler closed the distance. Despite the cluster's numbers, its individual cities were still minuscule when compared to the vast cloudscape that engulfed them. They looked like a string of tiny pearls lost in the folds of a giant's bedding.

The sudden reminder of just how puny were humanity's biggest constructs did nothing to bolster Blount's confidence. His composure had already been badly shaken by the message he had received at his headquarters aboard Glasgow. The coded dispatch had read simply: "*Return immediately. Samorset .*"

His first thought had been that Dalishaar had discovered the Navy's complicity in the raid on Cloudcroft. After a few panic-stricken moments, he had reasoned that such an outcome was unlikely. Had the military's part in the raid become known, the summons would have come from Admiral Samorset's replacement. Indeed, it would likely not have come at all. The first Blount would hear of it would be when his own security chief arrived to arrest him.

Convinced that his precarious secret was still safe, Blount had run through the other possibilities. One distinct prospect was that Admiral Samorset feared exposure and was taking action to cover his tracks. If so, the summons could well be Blount's death warrant. He alone knew the full details of the grand admiral's involvement, and would make a most damning witness should the case ever come before the council.

Blount had considered refusing the return order and using Glasgow's unsettled condition as an excuse. He had rejected the idea out of hand. He had only his suspicions, and should they prove wrong, he would be destroying his career. The only way to find out what the admiral wanted was to face him directly. It had been with more than a little trepidation that Blount had ordered a fast ship to take him to Cloudcroft. It had taken six hours at top speed to reach the Alliance. The waiting was nearly over.

"Approach control is challenging us," the copilot reported.

"Answer them," Blount replied. He was aware that his presence in the cockpit made the two young officers nervous. He could not help that. If this were to be his last journey, he wanted it to be a memorable one. There are few sights as grand as watching Saturn's ever changing cloudscape unfold through a cockpit windscreen.

The two pilots banked their aircraft several times in response to directions from the city controllers. Blount could not help letting a thin, humorless smile mark his lips as he watched them. This, too, was in response to his handiwork. Ever since the raid, the Navy was patrolling out to a radius of a thousand kilometers. Once a ship got in close, traffic control was rigid and unyielding, with city lasers focused continuously on everything within range.

Ten minutes later, the admiral found himself among the giant balloons into which humanity had packed a few cubic kilometers of Earthlike environment. Blount never got over how fragile cloud cities looked when viewed from a moderate distance. Closer in it was easy to be overwhelmed by their sheer volume, but out here, their true fragility was all too apparent.

Cloud cities were the most delicate flying machines ever built by man. Even the strongest would quickly break up if it entered the storms that roiled vast portions of Saturn's atmosphere. Only in the clear rivers of air that marked the descending legs of convection cells, or the interiors of cyclones, could the delicate balloons survive. Even then, constant vigilance was required to avoid the turbulence and wind shears that dotted the major flyways.

"We have landing clearance," the pilot announced over his shoulder.

The prowler arrowed at one city that looked much like the others. Except this one, Blount knew, was the only city on Saturn that really counted. Government tower was clearly visible as they spiraled down toward the military landing bay that was their destination. As they drew even with the top of the Cloudcroft gasbag, Blount's eyes were drawn to the instrument package that belatedly scanned the skies for free-flying raiders. That, too, was a product of his handiwork.

As the prowler slowed to a hover and was then winched aboard, Mikal Blount was struck by the realization that the waiting was over. He would soon know what fate awaited him.

#

Naval Headquarters was not like Government Tower, perched ostentatiously atop the city deck. Headquarters was located deep inside the support truss, a cubical fortress suspended from the open framework that was the backbone of the city. It was physically separated from the other truss spaces, with only a few tubeways providing access. Headquarters contained the main switching station through which electrical power from the fusion generator was delivered to the rest of the city. Its location made it nearly impregnable. Whether invading enemy or rampaging mob, no one would put the nerve center of the Alliance Navy out of action by anything less than the total destruction of the city.

Blount marched through the gently swaying length of access tube that bridged the gap between the military landing bay and headquarters. Daylight flooded upward through the walls of the transparent tube, highlighting the complex forest of braces that formed the interior of the support truss. He could sense through the soles of his boots the deep thrumming noise of the nearby city engines as they strove to keep Cloudcroft in the most favorable wind currents. The open gridwork of the tube floor allowed him to see the hanging black mass of the fusion generator. The generator's tiny size belied its great mass and volume. The generator served as the counterweight that kept the city upright.

The access tube was uncomfortably warm as the heated hydrogen rose around it to buoy the city. Blount knew that beyond the thin layer of plastic of the tubeway, the atmosphere was devoid of oxygen. Only the hydrogen-helium mix of Saturn's atmosphere was present. Like all enclosed spaces within the support truss, headquarters was sealed and pressurized. Only on the city's upper deck, beneath the habitat barrier, was there any illusion that human beings could breath the Saturnian atmosphere.

Blount came to the end of the long tube and crossed through an open hydrogen lock into a heavily armored entry chamber. There he found himself under the watchful eyes of a dozen security personnel. He presented his credentials and stepped up to an instrument with a binocular eyepiece. He stared at the red dot that seemed to hang in space inside the machine. Somewhere deep inside headquarters, a computer compared the pattern of his retinas with those on file and found them the same. It sounded a beep and displayed a message visible only to the young lieutenant who was serving as Officer of the

Deck. Blount watched the boy's reaction carefully for some clue as to the reception he would receive. There was nothing to indicate that this was anything but routine. The lieutenant handed Blount's identity card back to him and saluted smartly.

"The grand admiral will see you immediately, sir. Do you wish an escort?"

Blount smiled in what he hoped was a nonchalant manner. "No need, son! I was walking these decks when you were still in diapers."

Somewhat relieved, Blount marched out of the entry chamber and toward the grand admiral's sanctum sanctorum. As he walked, his spirits were buoyed by the familiar sounds and activity around him. Here lay the Alliance's destiny. If Cloudfcroft were to be the capital of Saturn one day, the men and women in his vast fortified cube would make it so.

He reached the grand admiral's office and was ushered inside after another check of his identity. Admiral Samorset glanced up from his workscreen as Blount saluted. The scowl on his face told Blount all he needed to know about his superior's mood.

"Your two assassins missed, Mikal!"

"Beg your pardon, sir."

"You heard me. The two fumble fingered idiots you assigned to kill Larson Sands have bungled the job! One of them was killed outright and the other either has been captured or has gone into hiding. That is not the worst of it. The quarry has also fled."

"Fled where, sir?"

"To Earth, by all the furies!"

Blount blinked in surprise. In all his imaginings of what was behind Samorset's summons, this possibility had never occurred to him. It was galling enough to learn that his two handpicked men had failed, but to hear it from the grand admiral himself was especially irksome. He wondered where his superior was getting his information.

"Please, sir. Start at the beginning. What happened?"

As Samorset explained, a pattern became clear. Hardwick and Quintana had reached Titan without incident. They had spent two weeks locating and studying their targets. Halley Trevanon and Kimber Crawford had been easy to spot, but Larson Sands had proved more elusive. Apparently, he had been off Titan on some mission, a fact that had become obvious when Hardwick, trailing Kimber Crawford, had come upon him in the Titania spaceport. What had happened next was far from clear. Hardwick had been killed while trying to shoot Larson Sands and no one had heard from Airman Quintana in nearly thirty hours.

"How do you know all of this?" Blount asked finally.

"That's the worst part," the grand admiral replied with a growl. "I was called into the first councilor's office just before second sunset yesterday. He briefed me in detail."

"Dalishaar knows we sent assassins to Titan?"

The grand admiral shook his head. "He has his own agent in Titania. That agent reported the attempt to kill Sands. He could hardly have missed it. The Titanians are broadcasting it to anyone who will listen. I

do not think Dalishaar has connected the assassins with the Navy yet. Of course, he would hardly say so if he had. He had pictures of the dead man. I was able to recognize Hardwick from his service photo.”

“Can anyone else do the same?”

Samorset shook his head. “The record has been expunged.”

“And this other report? The one that has Sands fleeing to Earth. Does that come from the same agent?”

“It does. The agent reports seeing Sands, his female accomplice, and the Crawford woman all board a ship yesterday. The vessel’s destination was not publicized, but some of the equipment convinced the first councilor that they are bound for Earth. I did some checking. There is a spacecraft out of Titania for Earth. Its time of launch corresponds to that reported by the agent.”

“Did the first councilor also check the shipping records?”

Samorset shook his head. “The ship’s destination wasn’t posted at the time of our meeting.”

“Then how did he know its destination?”

“A good question. A better one is how we are going to silence Sands. Earth is as far beyond our reach as it is possible to get.”

“Not necessarily,” Blount replied. “The Cloudfcroft museum has been organizing an expedition for months. Perhaps we could use that to get at them.”

The grand admiral sighed. “Not possible, I’m afraid. The officer in charge of the expedition is unreliable. I know him to be one of Dalishaar’s stooges. I’d have him drummed out of the service if he weren’t such a useful conduit for false information.”

“All the more reason to replace him.”

Samorset shook his head. “Too risky. To replace him would draw attention to the fact that we considered the museum expedition important.”

“He could easily have an accident. You could then replace him with one of your own people. The crew would also have a number of loyal people added to it. Once on Earth, the scientists could dig wherever they wish while the naval personnel take care of the Titanians. If we arrange things properly, the scientists need never know.”

Samorset looked thoughtful for a moment, then asked, “Any recommendations as to who should command this expedition?”

“Reluctantly, sir, I think I had better do it.”

“I agree.”

“What of Glasgow?”

“I’ll send a replacement to take over your command, one who knows the importance of tracking down those renegade privateers.”

“Then the only thing left is come up with a plausible explanation for why I am being put in charge.”

The grand admiral thought for a moment, then laughed. “That will be the easiest of all. I’m afraid you

won't like what I have in mind, but it's still better than walking the plank.”

#

Kelt Dalishaar sat on the couch in his living room and watched appreciatively as his favorite mistress poured a cup of tea. The supple way in which she moved almost made him forgive her for being in the pay of the grand admiral. He would have to do something about that someday, but not until the secret of the energy screen was his. And, he thought with a smile, it might not even be necessary then. Once he was in an unassailable position, Jasmine would quickly find that she had no employer to which to report her gossip.

Dalishaar was jarred out of his fantasy of revenge by the sound of an annunciator. Jasmine went to answer it and came back with Pierre Lamarque.

“What brings you here tonight, Pierre?” Dalishaar asked with more joviality than he felt. Something had to have gone wrong for his political assistant to disturb him at home.

“A matter has come up, First Councilor.” Lamarque glanced significantly at the woman who had returned to her duties. “May we speak in your office?”

“Certainly.”

Dalishaar got to his feet and led his political assistant to the office the pirates had violated so recently. He glanced at the desk with the concealed computer and shuddered as he thought about what had been risked when its memory was copied. He felt a momentary surge of anger that he moved immediately to bring under control. If he were to give vent to his emotions, his judgment would be affected.

Dalishaar flicked on the anti-eavesdropping circuits. The office walls began to buzz quietly in a pattern of white noise designed to defeat any electronic listening device. The noise would also do a good job on human ears. Next, he turned on the sound-canceling field that surrounded his desk. Only when he was encircled by a curious deadness did he allow himself to relax.

“All right, what is it?”

“Professor Garcia called from the museum. He was just notified that there will be a new operations leader for the expedition.”

“A new leader? What happened to Captain Masters?”

“Masters had an accident. A cargo transporter suffered a malfunction inside Navy Headquarters. It raced out of control and pinned him against a corridor wall, breaking his leg and several ribs.”

“Is he all right?”

“The doctors say he will have a long, difficult convalescence, but that there should be no permanent damage.”

“Who is his replacement?”

“You know him,” Lamarque deadpanned. “He's that bald headed admiral who commanded the assault on Glasgow.”

“Blount? Impossible!”

“Why?”

“Because they would never replace a mere captain with a full admiral, for God’s sake!”

“Impossible or not, they have named Blount to replace Masters.”

“What reason do they give?”

“None ... officially. I have it from a confidential source on Samorset’s staff that Blount is being disciplined for the sloppy way he handled the Glasgow envelopment, and for his inability to quell the resistance.”

“It’s a ploy! They suspect the real reason we are sending an expedition to Earth.”

“How can they?”

“I don’t know, but they must! It’s too neat to be a coincidence.”

“They *do* happen, you know.”

Dalishaar shook his head violently. “Not this time. What are we to do?”

“We could have Garcia refuse to accept Blount.”

“They would just replace him as chief archaeologist. He’s the one person who knows the secret of the energy screen laboratory.”

“Then we do nothing. If they are merely suspicious, perhaps Professor Garcia can still obtain the information we need under the pretext of a simple archaeology dig.”

Dalishaar thought for a moment, then nodded. “If they don’t know what we are looking for, it just might work. Still, I don’t like it.”

“Nor do I. However, it’s the best I can think of at the moment.”

“Get Professor Garcia up here. Let’s see what he has to say about all of this.”

Chapter 22: Preparations for a Homecoming

Larson Sands stirred in his sleep and slowly became aware of the warm body next to his. Still on the edges of slumber, he turned over and wrapped his arms around Kimber, who fitted herself more closely to him in unconscious response to his presence. Sands luxuriated in her nearness for long minutes before he released her and opened his eyes. He stared at the far bulkhead for seconds before his droopy eyelids snapped wide as he remembered what day it was.

Today was the day they would reach Earth!

For four long months, *Vixen* had fallen sunward in a high velocity, hyperbolic orbit. They had left the cold darkness of the outer system behind to descend into the heat and sunlight nearer Sol. The ancient evacuation ships, burdened with their millions of refugees in cryogenic suspension, had taken six years to make the crossing. The difference in travel time was the result of advances in propulsion technology since those terrible years. Not that modern man could make the same claim in every field. Their mission to relearn the lost technology of energy screens was proof enough of that melancholy fact.

The century before Earth’s abandonment had been one of the most scientifically prolific in history. Fully

twenty percent of the human race's gross product had gone into pure research, reaping dividends in every field. Much that had been learned had subsequently been lost during the evacuation, however. The struggle to establish humanity on Saturn had been all encompassing, and had not left much time for research. As a result, entire branches of learning had died almost as they were born.

For the last week or so, the twin crescents of Earth and Luna had grown perceptibly larger and brighter. Since they were approaching Earth from above and behind, there was not a great deal to see. Nor would there be. The boiling of the home planet's oceans had covered the globe in a thick layer of perpetual cloud, turning it into a virtual twin of Venus.

Sands sat up to remove his sleeping straps. As he did so, Kimber stirred and opened her eyes. Like him, she wore a sleep harness that kept her from floating away in the zero gravity of the cabin. Each night, they literally hung themselves from an anchor point on the bulkhead.

"What's the matter?" Kimber mumbled.

"Time to get up, sleepyhead! Today's the day we reach Earth."

She glanced at the chronometer inset in the bulkhead across from them. "It's barely 06:00. They will not retrofire for several hours yet. Go back to sleep."

"You can sleep if you want to. I'm going up to the dome."

He finished removing the sleep harness. After four months, he was bothered by none of the symptoms that had marred his first space journey. If anything, he found weightlessness to be highly restful.

Sands performed his morning chores in the small head adjoining the cabin, then dressed quietly. As he let himself out, he noticed that Kimber's arms were bent upward at the elbow, floating free in front of her. It was the position a weightless human body assumes naturally in repose. Kimber had gone back to sleep.

Sands made his way via corridor handholds to the crew wardroom, where he discovered Professor Paolo Renzi eating breakfast. Renzi was a small, nervous man with a bullet shaped head and a nose too large for his face. He was Titan's leading expert on electromagnetism. The factor had drafted him from Titania University to head the expedition. Despite Renzi's initial reluctance to leave the experiments he had in progress, once convinced of the importance of the job, he had proved a dynamo in organizing the rest of the scientists.

"Good morning, Lars. What's the matter, couldn't sleep?" Renzi asked around the edges of a piece of toast.

Sands shook his head. "Too excited, I guess. I thought I would take a look at Earth."

"A good idea! What say we take our food forward to the observation compartment?" Renzi did not pause for a response. He picked up a drinking bulb of tea and his toast, and then kicked off toward the hatch. Sands stopped at the meal dispenser and dialed for a piece of fruit and a bulb of coffee.

Vixen was a winged spacecraft of the sort that plied the Saturn-Titan run. As such, it had a cargo hold designed to transport bulk materials. The unpressurized hold was covered by two doors similar to those used on the first space shuttles. For the trip to Earth, the bay doors had been opened and a series of habitat modules installed for added living space. The modules extended beyond the limits of the bay, giving *Vixen* a curious humpbacked look.

The extra living quarters prevented the doors from being closed, which made it impossible for the ship to enter atmosphere. That was not a problem since *Vixen*'s captain did not intend to subject his vessel to

the rigors of Earth's current environment. For that a specially designed landing craft was needed. They carried such a craft tight against *Vixen*'s flattened belly, further distorting the freighter's sleek aerodynamic lines.

One of the habitat modules in the cargo bay was topped by a clear dome. On launch, the module had been filled solid with foodstuffs. The last of these had been eaten the month before, allowing *Vixen*'s passengers and crew to obtain a panoramic view of the black sky overhead. For all of that time, *Vixen*'s captain had oriented the ship with the dome facing the Earth-Moon system.

Renzi and Sands pulled themselves through the pressurized tube leading to the observation compartment. Once inside, they strapped down to the low circle of benches in the compartment's center. They continued eating as they gazed at the world that had once been the Mother of Men.

Earth had grown considerably since it first began to show a perceptible disk. It now covered a full five degrees of arc. Luna, which was on the far side of the planet, looked tiny in comparison, although much larger than Titan does when compared to Saturn. Actually, Luna was only half the size of Titan. Despite this, the gravitational pull of the two moons was practically the same. The difference was due to Titan's lower density.

The same comparison could be made for Saturn and Earth. The ringed world was a hundred times more massive than its smaller counterpart was; yet, the two had comparable surface gravities. Once again, the culprit was density. Saturn's average density was only one-eighth that of the home world. Had it been possible to drop Saturn into water, it would have floated. The combination of large diameter and low density gave Saturn a much lower gravitational pull than would have been expected for such a big planet.

"What a beautiful world," Renzi said with awe in his voice as he craned his neck to gaze up at the silver crescent. The sunlit section was bright enough to be painful. Nor was the dark hemisphere totally invisible. The flood of energetic particles from the sun caused both polar regions to be wreathed in auroras. The high level of solar energy also caused perpetual storms. These in turn produced displays of lightning that lit up the night hemisphere.

"It was more beautiful before the sun flared."

Perhaps it will be that way again."

"Do you really think so?"

Renzi shrugged. "The current storm should pass in another few centuries. When it does, the Earth will cool off again, causing the atmospheric steam to condense. Once that happens, the reversion process will go to fruition rather quickly, I should think. There's a good chance humanity can reseed the planet and reclaim it in another thousand years, or so."

"We can only hope," Sands replied. The dream of reclaiming Earth was one that nearly every Saturnian shared. Gazing up at the lighted crescent etched against an obsidian sky, it was easy to believe in the dream.

#

"Two minutes until retrofire. All hands report status!"

Kimber Crawford glanced up at the overhead speaker from which the voice of *Vixen*'s captain issued, then back at Lars. He was fidgeting with the straps that held him atop the acceleration pad the two of them shared. Around them, the other six members of the Titanian expedition -- five scientists from Titania

University and Halley Trevanon -- were similarly tied down. *Vixen*'s crew of four were all at their stations in other parts of the ship.

"Relax," Kimber told Lars. "It won't be long now."

He grinned at her. "Sorry. It is just that I cannot wait to get on with it. This space travel would be all right if it didn't take so long to get anywhere."

"I know what you mean," she replied. Actually, the outbound trip had been a busy one for *SparrowHawk*'s three survivors. To make a place for them on the expedition, Envon Crawford had ordered three university research assistants left behind. That meant that Kimber, Lars, and Halley had had to learn the assistants' jobs. Professor Renzi had accepted them readily enough, but some of the other scientists had been resentful.

They waited in silence until the captain came on the intercom and began to count off the seconds until retrofire. His words were paralleled by the countdown display in one corner of the bulkhead holoscreen in front of them. When the numerals reached 00:00:00, a soft roaring noise suffused the ship. Simultaneously, an invisible hand reached out to push the waiting expedition members into their acceleration pads.

Kimber felt a moment of panic when she thought something had gone wrong. The flight plan called for half an hour of deceleration at one-quarter gee. Yet, to judge by the difficulty with which she was breathing, the acceleration level must be several times that!

"Are you all right?" Lars asked in a strained voice.

She reached out and sought his comforting hand. The runaway rockets continued their steady hum while no one around them seemed overly concerned. After a few seconds, she smiled sheepishly. "I guess I got more used to zero gravity than I realized."

Nothing changed for the next twenty minutes, except that Kimber found it a little easier to breathe as her body adjusted to the return of gravity. Then, when the countdown clock indicated another two minutes to go until engine cutoff, something large enough to block their view of the Earth filled the screen. The apparition was gone as quickly as it had appeared, leaving her with an impression of a round shape adorned by row after row of empty windows.

Her sudden yelp was not the only one in the compartment. Somewhere nearby, a male voice issued forth with a high-pitched, nervous giggle. It took a few seconds before the captain's voice flooded from the intercom once again.

"Sorry about that, people! What you just witnessed was our passing close abeam of an abandoned orbital station. There was never any danger. It appeared closer than it was because of the magnification we are using to show you the Earth. Do not be alarmed! We will remain comfortably clear of all objects on or near our flight path. Captain out!"

"He could have warned us first!" Kimber grumbled as she attempted to gain control of her racing heart. In that moment, she had felt all of the legends generated by half a thousand years of space flight come boiling up out of her subconscious. There had been stories of strange lights in the sky since before humanity first climbed above atmosphere. For just an instant Kimber's brain was filled with visions of alien spacecraft.

Far from being an alien construct, the object on the screen was a relic of the distant past. Evacuating the race had been a colossal job that had taken most of a century to accomplish. Thousands of orbital

installations had been constructed to aid in the task. Some had been orbital shipyards to build the giant evacuation craft. Others had been used as way stations for the transfer of human cargoes from the ground-to-orbit ferries to the ships of deep space. These latter had been several kilometers in diameter and had held populations numbering in the millions while the big evacuation ships were loaded.

The evacuation ships were no more. Most had been broken up, their materials used in the construction of the oldest cloud cities. The orbital stations, however, were too far from humanity's new home for economical salvage. Thus, the Earth was surrounded by these jumping off points to deep space. They circled the dead planet in silence, waiting a time when humanity might again need them.

Vixen's engines shut down on schedule, causing Kimber to rebound into the restraining straps. Her stomach, newly acclimated to gravity, gave a quiet flip-flop. She turned her head to look at Lars. He was already reaching to unhook his restraining straps.

"Where are you going?"

"Observation compartment. I want to look out."

Kimber began to unhook herself. As she worked, she became aware that everyone else seemed to have come independently to the same idea. Suddenly, the holographic image was not enough. The urge to gaze upon the home world with one's own eyes had become overpowering.

#

Vixen's wardroom was crowded. Nearly the entire expedition had managed to stuff themselves into the small compartment. They were anchored in a large globular formation, with everyone's head pointed down toward the table where Professor Renzi was unfolding an ancient map.

When he had secured the map with small magnetic disks, Renzi glanced up to gaze at the expectant faces englobing him. In addition to Larson Sands, Kimber Crawford, and Halley Trevanon, the onlookers included every expedition scientist and Captain McCarver.

"Well, friends, we've made it," the small scientist said. "Now comes the hard part. We will launch a scouting expedition at the beginning of first watch tomorrow. Those taking part will be myself, Professor Linder, Mr. Sands, and Spacer Forbes."

A quiet buzz of conversation suddenly filled the compartment. Competition for the first landing had been keen. Renzi had advised Sands of his selection only an hour earlier, and had warned him to be prepared for some objections. He did not have long to wait.

"Why Sands?" Professor Taren LeBlanc demanded. LeBlanc was the youngest of the expedition's scientists, and a man who did not trouble himself overly with the feelings of others.

"Mr. Sands will be in charge of site security. He is an accomplished marksman and has military experience. Except for Miss Trevanon, that makes him unique among us."

"Security? What in hell do we need security for? The damned planet's been dead for two centuries!"

"There are six other expeditions in orbit about Earth," Renzi replied. "Captain McCarver received calls from most of them as soon as we took up orbit. They are naturally curious as to what we are about."

"He hasn't told them has he?"

McCarver, *Vixen*'s captain, was an oversize man who looked out of place in the crowded compartment.

“I kept my explanation general, Professor LeBlanc. However, I managed to leave the impression that we are merely stopping here preparatory to going on to Luna.”

Professor Renzi nodded. “That will be our cover story. We are historians here to research the lives of our Lunar ancestors. We are stopping at Earth to retrieve some records pertaining to the earliest lunar colonies. We do not know why these other expeditions are here. Some of them may be after the same data we are. For that reason, we will establish strict rules concerning what may be said during ground to orbit communications and will establish a sensor perimeter around the laboratory site.”

“Damned silliness if you ask me,” LeBlanc grumped. Nor was he alone in his attitude.

“Perhaps so,” Sands replied, “but the factor wants it that way.”

Renzi glanced up at the surrounding faces. “If that matter is cleared up, let us get on with the briefing. I direct your attention to the map. The Borman expedition found the energy screen laboratory here at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in what was once California. We will scout the site from the air and pick a safe landing area. From there, we will determine the amount of effort required to seal the old laboratory and environmentally condition it. If we find conditions to our liking, we will send the landing boat back to begin ferrying the rest of you down.”

“How do we know the Bormans didn’t take the data we are looking for?” someone asked. The subject had been a major topic of debate on the trip from Titan.

“The one record we have speaks of experiment summary reports. The Bormans did not, as far as we know, find any detailed data on screen construction or principles of operation. Since energy screens were not the reason they came to Earth, we can assume they did not spend a great deal of time looking. Now then, if there is nothing else, let’s make all preparations for first landing!”

Chapter 23: Earth

Larsen Sands sat in the cramped seat and gazed at the limb of the planet through the landing boat’s windscreen. They were high above the night hemisphere, racing toward the sunrise terminator. The atmosphere was an absurdly thin line of color backlit by the spotted sun -- a band of orange, red and yellow outlining the obsidian sphere of the planet. The sight fascinated Lars. Thousands of generations had lived beneath that impossibly thin envelope of air, never understanding the fragility of their existence.

Like the other three men in the cramped passenger compartment, Lars was encased in a bulky New Hollander environment suit. The air he breathed was cool enough, but saturated with the odor of plasticizers and other organic compounds. The smell was making him queasy. There was also an annoying squeak in his recirculation fan, something he had missed when he had worn the suit during the factory acceptance test. He wondered how many other problems he had let by and who would die because of them. The thought was a chilling one, more frightening even than the prospect of battle.

A tiny tug at his body signaled the landing boat’s arrival at the outer limit of Earth’s atmosphere. After several long minutes, a high-pitched keening filled the cabin. The sound was at the very limits of audibility, a noise more felt than heard. It set Lars’s teeth on edge.

The landing boat began to lurch from turbulence, a harbinger of what it was like to fly through the roiled daytime skies of Earth. At a distance of only 150 million kilometers, the sun had the power to boil oceans and set up vast convection cells. Only one raised in Saturn’s atmosphere could appreciate how violent

such phenomena could get.

Twenty minutes after entering atmosphere, the landing boat passed from night into day. The rocking and shaking grew more violent, as though the shafts of sunlight were a tangible barrier to be cleaved. The faceplate on Sands's suit darkened automatically as he found himself staring directly into the sun. Then the landing boat dipped into cloud, leaving him momentarily blinded until his suit's polarizing circuits had time to react.

The clouds were gray, just like the uppermost layer of ammonia clouds on Saturn. There was no hint that they were boiling hot. Sands remarked on that fact over the intercom.

"They aren't," Renzi's voice replied. "In fact, these clouds are composed of ice crystals. The real heat occurs much lower in the atmosphere."

"We should be out of the clouds in another few minutes," the pilot announced.

There was a general stirring as each of the landing boat's passengers shifted in their seats for the best possible view. Lars found himself straining to look down the tunnel formed by Forbes's and Renzi's helmets and past the obstruction of the windscreen's centerline brace. For long minutes, he could see nothing but white. Then, with only a moment's warning, the clouds parted to reveal the bare Earth stretched out below them.

Four gasps echoed in unison over the intercom. The air was filled with haze. The panoramic view was softened into invisibility in the middle distance, leaving the landing boat inside a bubble of scenery that was dominated by the white covered hillocks and slope sided canyons far below. Sands had seen pictures of snowscapes and thought for a moment this must be one. Then he realized what this vast, white plain had once been the floor of an ocean. The covering was the salt that had been left behind when all the water boiled away.

"Where are we?" Renzi asked. There was a tinge of reverence in his words.

"About two hundred kilometers from the ancient coastline," Professor Linder, their navigator, replied. "This was all deep water once."

A quick glance at the cockpit displays told Sands they were ten kilometers up and descending slowly. Distance and haze made it difficult to make out anything but the largest details. Even so, the view was daunting. He wondered if they would find the ocean floor littered with the wreckage of ships when they dropped lower.

The plain of bleached ground marched steadily astern as their engines pushed them forward. Then the white wasteland came to an abrupt end, to be replaced by a different desolation. It was as though some giant had run low on white paint and had substituted brown instead. This, Sands realized, must have been the western shore of North America.

"Let's fly south," Renzi ordered as they flew over a line of ragged bluffs. "I want to see Los Angeles."

The landing boat made a sharp turn and followed the coast. Since Sands was on the right side, he had to content himself with viewing the desiccated seabed. After fifteen minutes of level flight, he was alerted by the oaths of the others.

All of them had seen photographs, of course. Earth's cities were largely destroyed. When the oceans had boiled, the reduction in weight on the crust had redistributed all manner of stresses. The result had been a series of continent shattering earthquakes. Most manmade structures had collapsed. Much of the rubble

had then been eaten away, scoured by superheated hurricanes and corroded by the effects of steam and oxygen. The constant winds had stirred up the cubic kilometers of salt and chalk to the west and dumped much of it onto the city's corpse. One could still make out a few manmade details beneath the shroud of white. Scattered straight lines showed where city streets had been. Here and there, the skeletal remains of a particularly stout skyscraper thrust rust red girders toward the clouds.

They orbited for fifteen minutes, allowing each of them to see what the flaring sun had done to one of the planet's great cities. Then Renzi gave the order to turn back northeast. As the boat flew on, a mountain range came into view. Forbes banked to the left and began to fly parallel to it. Every few minutes, Linder would call out the name of some long dead city as a position check.

As they droned northward, Sands gazed out at the brown and gray land beyond the mountains. Here the landscape had been sundered by a range of volcanoes that followed some ancient fault. Some still smoked on the horizon.

Professor Linder's comments became more frequent as he directed Forbes to change his course slightly and to slow down. The land below them was no different from what they had been traversing for nearly half an hour. Still, it was possible to hear Linder's excitement as he directed them toward their goal. Finally, he looked up from his navigation display and pointed toward a nondescript landscape of rolling hills.

"Land at the base of that big one on the right. The laboratory's somewhere near there."

"Acknowledged," came the pilot's terse reply.

The landing boat slowed to a hover just as though it were preparing to go aboard a cloud city. Instead, they dropped toward the ground, kicking up clouds of dust with the underjets. The ground was obscured for the last few seconds before Sands felt the satisfying bump that signaled their arrival. There was a moment of silence while Forbes shut down the reactors. Then Professor Renzi ordered the canopy raised.

One by one, the members of Titan's first expedition to Earth clambered awkwardly to their feet. They stepped over the raised coaming of the flight cabin and strode clumsily across the boat's wing to where a ladder let them down. Then they worked their way slowly down the rungs until they stepped off onto the powdery soil.

#

"Why the hell didn't they leave a beacon?"

Sands glanced up at the muttered complaint. He did not answer right away. He was too out of breath. For the past six hours, they had searched in vain for some sign of the underground laboratory. So far, they had found nothing. Out of frustration, he and Arthur Linder had climbed a small hill for a panoramic view of the search area. The hill had proven taller than expected, and by the time they reached the top, every breath was like inhaling live flame. Beads of sweat poured down Sands's face and into his eyes, obscuring his vision. Even their cooling systems were laboring against the steam bath atmosphere. The radiators on Linder's suit -- and he suspected his own -- were glowing a dull red after their climb.

"What good would it have done?" he asked finally when he had regained some control over his breathing. "Anything they left would be corroded into uselessness by now. Besides, I don't think they planned to come back."

The geologist's sigh was like a hurricane in Sands's earphones. "I know. Still, it would have made finding

this place a damned sight easier if they'd just stuck a flag up or something.”

“Amen to that!”

The record of the Borman expedition had given precise coordinates for the location of the energy screen laboratory. Precise, that is, until one realized just how big a planet truly is. They had been crisscrossing the landscape for some sign the other expedition had been there. They had found nothing but bare rock and blowing dust. Even the remains of vegetation, if indeed there had ever been any in the vicinity, had been uprooted by the steady wind that scoured the landscape.

“See anything?” Linder asked.

Sands shook his head, and then remembered that the professor could not see the gesture inside his helmet. “Nothing. Maybe this isn't the place.”

“These are the coordinates in the Borman record.”

“Maybe they recorded the location wrong. It could have been a typo. Or maybe Kelt Dalishaar altered the coordinates for security reasons.”

“I hope you're wrong. Let's sweep down the west side of the hill.”

Sands turned awkwardly in the bulky suit. The few minutes they had rested had allowed his cooling unit to get rid of most of the heat of his exertions. Now the sweat on his face felt cold. Linder started down the hill at a right angle to the way they had come up. He moved cautiously, testing each step before putting his full weight down. Sands did the same. If either of them were to slip, they could easily damage a radiator. That would mean death by slow broiling.

“What's this?” Linder asked as he stopped halfway down the slope. He poked at something in the soft ground with his boot. The toe caught and dragged a long, black object to the surface. Sands leaned forward for a closer look, being careful not to overbalance. The long ribbon turned out to be an electrical cable, and not one of Earthly manufacture. The insulation was of a variety much favored by Saturnian cloud cities for its toughness and lightweight. It had not been invented until more than a century after the Earth had been abandoned.

“How much do you want to bet that this cable is from the Borman expedition?” Linder asked. He, too, had recognized the insulation.

“No bet. Where do you suppose it leads?”

“Only one way to find out.” The scientist wrapped the cable around both gauntleted hands and pulled it taut. He stopped when he had exposed cable running five meters in both directions.

“Which way?” Sands asked.

“Pick one.”

“Downhill!”

They took turns pulling the cable out of its shallow trench and following it down the side of the hill. For the most part, it came to the surface easily enough. On the few occasions when it hung up, Sands would carefully unearth more cable with a shovel further down the line. Then they would start over. In that way, they were able to traverse 300 meters in only fifteen minutes. It was like following some living thing as it burrowed through the ground. The black cable disappeared into the ground at the base of the hill and no

amount of pulling would bring it into view.

“Shovel!” Linder ordered.

Sands unshipped the tool and began to dig in line with the trench they had already uncovered. After two minutes, he frowned. He was down nearly thirty centimeters and had found nothing.

“What do you think?”

The expansive shrug was evident even through the intervening barrier of Linder’s suit. “Maybe it took a sharp turn,” the scientist said. “Tell you what, let’s dig down and see what has us hung up.”

Sands dug again where the cable entered the ground. It soon became evident that the cable was headed deep. Sands followed it, taking care to ensure the sharp blade did not slice through the long black ribbon. He dug continuously for five minutes, and then stopped when the blade struck something hard. The shock on his arms was sufficient to rattle his teeth.

“What’s the matter?” Linder asked.

“I just hit something solid.”

The scientist unclipped his own shovel and for several minutes they worked furiously to uncover the object buried in the ground. What they found was a round metal disk nearly a meter across set in a rocky material Sands recognized from photographs he had seen. The stuff was concrete.

“What is it?”

“Manhole cover,” Linder diagnosed. “I think we’re on to something.”

“How do we get it up out of there?”

“I don’t think we do. It looks to be rusted solid into its frame. We’ll have to burn it.”

“Is this part of the laboratory?”

“It probably leads to a utility tunnel feeding the laboratory. The Bormans spliced into the old distribution network to power the laboratory. They wouldn’t have strung their cable any farther than necessary.”

“Shall we keep digging?”

“No, that’s enough,” Linder replied. “Let’s mark this spot with a flag and get back to the others. We’ll need one of our small excavators down from orbit before we can go much farther.”

“What if this isn’t the laboratory?”

“Then we keep looking. Still, I am hopeful. Someone from Saturn passed this way.”

“Just as long as I don’t have to shovel any more dirt.”

Linder’s chuckle was a base rumble in Sands’s earphones. “Before this is over, Lars, you will probably hold the Saturnian record for dirt shoveling!”

Sands groaned as he felt the ache that had already begun to suffuse his shoulders. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Chapter 24: Laboratory

Kimber Crawford sat in the cockpit of the landing boat and chewed her lower lip as the pallid hills and valleys of the ancient seabed crawled slowly astern. The sight stirred something deep within her, something she did not fully understand. Her first sight of Earth through the viewdome had left her speaking in hushed tones. It had been as though normal speech would have disturbed the rest of the billions of honored dead who remained on the once-green world.

Her reaction surprised her. Like most inhabitants of the Saturn system, she enjoyed view walls and the Earth dioramas of the cloud cities. Even so, nothing in her past hinted at the depth of feeling for a world she had never expected to visit. She wondered if there weren't something in the human makeup that instinctively yearned for 1.00 standard gees and a 24-hour day.

It had taken five such days to excavate the energy screen laboratory and to make it livable. During that time Kimber had chafed with impatience as the landing boat returned repeatedly to the ship, only to be loaded with vital equipment and sent Earthward without her. Her turn had finally come. She donned her environment suit, climbed into the seat next to Spacer Forbes, and waited patiently while *Vixen*'s crew filled every cubic centimeter of available space with supplies and equipment. When they finally cast off, Kimber had been packed into her seat like an emergency ration in a squeeze tube.

The boat entered atmosphere over the daylight hemisphere and was quickly enveloped by the turbulence of the upper stratosphere. Despite Forbes's assurance that this was normal, Kimber began to worry. The shaking got progressively worse as they descended. Only the thick padding of her helmet kept her from injuring herself as her head bounced around freely inside. The turbulence reached a maximum as the boat crossed the boundary of the uppermost layer of clouds. Yet, when they finally broke out into thin haze, Kimber instantly forgot the discomfort she had endured. Her feeling for the planet overwhelmed her fear.

The boat crossed an ancient shoreline and dropped down toward the jagged inland mountain range where the energy screen laboratory was located. As they approached the landing site, Kimber saw a scattering of equipment around a tunnel cut into the side of a low hill. Mixed among the machines were three tiny figures in environment suits. She imagined one of them was Lars. At the thought of him, her heart began to beat faster.

Forbes made one circuit of the hill to check which way the wind was blowing, and then slowed to a hover on the landing boat's underjets. There was a brief flurry of dust and then they were down. Kimber waited with ill-concealed impatience for the pilot to raise the canopy. As she unbuckled her safety straps, a shadow fell across her. She glanced up to see a figure in an environment suit towering above her.

"Hello, stranger," Lars's familiar voice said into her earphones. "Welcome to Earth!"

She nearly stumbled in her haste to rise. Lars steadied her and then the two of them clasped arms. It was an unsatisfactory embrace encased in a centimeter of protective armor. Still, she imagined she could feel his touch as they pressed faceplates together to stare for long seconds into each other's eyes.

"How are things going?" she asked when he finally released her.

"Better than expected. We have excavated the laboratory entrance, sealed it as best we can, and have the refrigeration pack working overtime. The lab temperature is down to the high side of livable."

"Sounds lovely."

"Let's just say that it will give your sweat glands a good checkout. Where's your luggage?"

Kimber gestured to the small bag that had been wedged behind her legs during the trip down from the ship. "That was all Captain McCarver would allow other than my suit."

Sands reached down in a movement that Kimber would not have thought possible. His time on the ground had obviously taught him a great deal about maneuvering in the bulky suit. He picked up the bag and steadied her as he led her across the wing toward the rear of the boat.

"Let me go first. I'll steady you as you come down the ladder."

"I can manage."

"Professor Eald said the same thing the day before yesterday. He very nearly broke his leg when he fell off. Be sensible. I don't want you getting hurt."

"As you will, my chivalrous knight!"

A minute later Kimber strode the dusty soil of Earth as she followed Sands toward the newly excavated tunnel entrance.

#

The long ramp had originally been cut from bedrock and lined with concrete, the terminus of a two-lane highway that had wound its way up through the foothills from the coastal plain below. Two centuries of flare weather had eliminated nearly every trace of the facility. The asphalt that had surfaced the road had softened in the heat and dribbled away in soft, black rivers of tar. The cut through which the road had run had slowly filled with blowing debris until it was at the same level as the surrounding ground. Beneath the surface, the concrete lining had cracked and fallen; leaving only an occasional patch of the manmade stone attached to the ramp sidewalls.

Kimber noticed these and a thousand other details as she followed Lars down the shallow incline that led into the underground installation. It was as though her senses had been sharpened a thousandfold as she swiveled her head from side to side to take in the sights. She could not remember ever feeling more alive.

"Watch your breathing," Lars warned.

"What?" she asked, drawing herself back from the wonders around her.

"You're starting to breathe erratically. It takes a conscious effort to control your breathing in these suits. It's easy to hyperventilate."

"I guess I got excited," she said, puzzled at how he could know. Of course, she thought, he could hear her breath over the commlink just as she could hear him.

"Happens to everyone. You see something, get excited, forget to control your respiration, and end up dizzy. Don't worry. The excitement wears off after a few hours. Then you'll begin to notice the discomfort."

"That's something to look forward to, I guess," she said with just the right touch of mirth in her voice.

He led her down the tunnel and through an old airlock, but not one that had been part of the original laboratory. This construct bore the unmistakable signs of Saturnian manufacture.

"I don't remember sending this down from the ship," she said, fingering the fragile construct of lightweight beams and plastic sheeting.

“We didn’t.”

“Then *this* is the place the Bormans investigated!”

“It is, indeed. We’ve found their garbage dump and a whole bunch of petrified food they left behind.”

The airlock doors were simple sheets of thick plastic attached to the opening by strips of everstick tape. Lars peeled back one strip and lifted the plastic sheet that served as a door. Kimber ducked inside and Lars followed. They repeated the ritual and were soon standing inside the gloomy laboratory interior.

“You can unsuit now,” Lars said. He immediately reached up and began unsealing his helmet.

Out of habit, Kimber checked her helmet displays. Already the outside temperature readout was falling. Conditions inside the laboratory were livable, but as Lars had intimated, far from comfortable. She reached up, unsealed her own helmet, and lifted it over her head.

She dropped the helmet to the end of its tether and inhaled deeply. Despite the musty smell and the mugginess of a tepid sauna, this was air that had been breathed by Galileo, Einstein, Christ, Mohammed, Ransome, Hitler. The feeling that flooded through her was as close as she had ever come to a religious experience. She opened her mouth to remark on that fact, then choked as a bass croak burst forth from her lips.

Lars, who had been watching her, grinned broadly. It was obvious that he had been expecting it. When he spoke, his own voice had the overtones of a kettledrum.

“Strange, isn’t it?”

“What’s the matter with our voices?”

“Earth has a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere.”

“So?”

“So, think back to your secondary school physics class. The speed of sound here is a hell of a lot slower than it is at home.”

“That’s right,” she stammered as a horribly low-pitched sound issued from her mouth and a fact from long ago floated into her consciousness. “Vocal chords vibrate at a lower frequency in nitrogen-oxygen, don’t they?”

He nodded.

The cloud cities of Saturn used helium in their breathing mixes. They had to. Pure oxygen under the pressure at which the cloud cities floated was both poisonous and highly flammable. Titan mimicked the cloud cities in order to use their atmospheric control equipment. The result was that among the contemporary human race, everyone was a soprano.

“Why didn’t you sound any different on the radio?” Kimber asked.

“I’m still using a helium-oxygen mix in my suit. I am about to run out, however, and will have to switch to local air. The switchover means a change to the suit software, so I suspect we’ll switch you over with the rest of us.”

“Are we going to sound like this *all the time* ?”

“All the time you’re breathing Earth standard atmosphere,” he said with a grin. “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it. Just keep telling yourself that this is what human beings are supposed to sound like.”

She grimaced.

“Yeah, I know. I haven’t felt like this since my voice changed the first time.”

They removed their suit torsos and indulged in an orgy of mutual scratching. Beneath her suit, Kimber wore the usual body stocking of low friction fabric. Already, perspiration stains were appearing at her armpits and down her back. She asked Sands if anything could be done about the temperature inside the laboratory.

“We’ve got the cooling turned up high. Remember we are fighting a thirty-year heat soak. Still, we gain about three degrees a day. At that rate we ought to be comfortable in relatively short order.”

“In the meantime, we sweat!”

“Fraid so. Come on, I will give you the quick tour. That ought to get your mind off it.”

They hung their suits from a variety of pegs jutting from the wall in what had been turned into an impromptu suiting room. Kimber wondered what this area had originally been used for. Lars then led her down a long tunnel lit by widely spaced glow tubes. Kimber recognized the lights. She had helped load them aboard the landing boat two days earlier.

The energy screen laboratory had been laid out as a giant cross, with two subterranean tunnels running several hundred meters at right angles to one another. The intersection of the tunnels had been hollowed out into a large hemispherical cavern. It was in this cavern that they found Halley Trevanon stringing cables.

“Welcome to Hell City!” Halley exclaimed upon seeing Kimber. She was dressed in shorts and a halter, and her hair was matted down with perspiration.

“Thanks, I think.”

Halley laughed. “You should have been here yesterday. It was really hot then.”

“I’m going to take Kimber to see The Vault,” Lars said. “Are the lights still on back there?”

Halley shook her head. “I unplugged them to check out the lights on Broadway. Wait a minute and I’ll switch them back.”

She unplugged one set of wires from the general tangle and switched them to another. When she was finished, she said, “There. Vault’s lit up again.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s this vault?” Kimber asked.

“You’ll see,” Lars responded cryptically.

He took her by the arm and guided her into the tunnel at right angles to the one they had entered. He warned her to watch her step because the ceiling had fallen in places. They passed a large crack in the tunnel wall where it was possible to feel a hot, wet wind.

“That’s one of our problems. We are going to have to find and plug all of those if we are going to make

this place truly livable. That ‘we’ is you, Halley, and I. The scientists will be too busy sorting through whatever data we find.”

Kimber nodded.

Lars continued to lead her down the tunnel past offices, workrooms, and other enclosed spaces whose purpose was not obvious. They reached what appeared at first to be a dead end. Then, as they got closer, Kimber noted that the tunnel was sealed off by a huge hatch. In the moment she saw it, she knew why it had been named “The Vault.”

The door was four meters high by six wide, completely filling the tunnel cross-section. It had solidity unknown on Saturn, and only rarely approached on Titan. It was of indeterminate thickness, although to judge by the size of the rusted hinges, it had been designed to withstand considerable force.

“We think their test facilities are behind this,” Lars said. “At least, we haven’t found them anywhere else. We’ll know as soon as we open it.”

“*Can* we open it?” Kimber asked dubiously. In addition to the rusted hinges, the giant door’s frame was askew, twisted out of alignment as though by a giant hand. That had undoubtedly been done by the earthquakes that had accompanied the boiling of the oceans.

“Not the normal way, that’s for sure! On the other hand, we know the Bormans did not get inside. They left a few marks on the door, but didn’t come anywhere close to forcing it. Professor LeBlanc is trying to decide whether it would be easier to drill through or to tunnel around. He’s arranging to have the equipment we’ll need sent down from *Vixen* .”

Kimber gazed at the massive construct for a few seconds. “I wonder what they were afraid of,” she mused.

“Pardon?”

“You build something like this to either keep people out or to keep something else in. I wonder why they went to all the trouble.”

“A good question,” Lars replied. His eyes were serious as he surveyed the massive barrier. “I think we’d better find an answer before we try to drill our way in.”

#

Professor Paolo Renzi looked at the two neat stacks of glass tiles and smiled. The tiles were the size and shape of dominoes. When held up to the light they sparkled with a rainbow of internal holographic color. They were holographic storage modules of a type in general use two centuries earlier. Renzi reached out, took one from the smaller of the two piles, and popped it into the receptacle of his modified data reader. The screen cleared to show the front page of a newsfax. The date at the top was from a time three decades before the flaring sun had forced the Earth’s evacuation. Renzi’s smile grew even broader as he scanned the tile to discover it filled with other news from the period. He ejected the tile from the reader and added it to the larger of his two piles. As he did so, he thanked whatever gods there were that Factor Crawford had chosen him as leader of the expedition. To miss this opportunity would have been the greatest disappointment of his life.

During their first sweep of the laboratory facilities, the Titanian ground party had discovered nearly two dozen of the tiles. Most had been found in drawers or other out of the way places. Some had dropped behind filing cabinets. So far, the harvest had revealed nothing at all about the operation of the energy

screen laboratory. Most of the modules were mass media recordings of periodicals and newsfaxes. Despite their lack of bearing on his mission, Renzi considered the tiles an important find. The period of humanity's last century on Earth had long fascinated him. The thought that these record tiles might contain new insights into the period left Renzi anxious with anticipation.

As might have been expected, news that Sol was about to enter a period of long term instability had produced a tidal wave of shock on Earth, Luna, and throughout the space habitats. For a time it had appeared the news would trigger the suicidal tendencies humanity had managed to suppress for more than a century. The peace held ... barely, but the race entered a decade-long dark age. It was a time when societies disintegrated under the strain of rioting, crime, drug use, and a philosophy of unrestrained hedonism. Eventually, however, a hidden strength had emerged from the ruins. Increasingly, people had begun to raise their clenched fists to the traitor star in the sky and shout their defiance. Out of that defiance had come one of the grandest plans ever devised.

For nearly a century, the human race had concentrated on pure scientific research as never before. Any possibility of escaping the flaring sun, no matter how remote, was explored. The period had become known as the Golden Age of Science.

Paulo Renzi had long made the study of those years his avocation. As one who was forever battling for larger budgets and a more resources, Paulo Renzi had long wished that he had been born into an age where these had not been considerations. Nor had the Golden Age been a complete failure. Much good had come out of the striving. Without discoveries in those hectic years, cloud cities would not have been possible.

One result of such research had been a tenfold increase in the scientists' understanding of solar processes. In the end, it had been the solar physicists who had convinced the planetary government that they had no choice but to seek sanctuary in the outer system.

"Still drooling over your tiles, Paulo?" Arthur Linder, the expedition's number two man asked from the open doorway.

Renzi glanced up and grinned at his colleague. "You know me far too well, Arthur. I am afraid it takes all of my willpower merely to scan the data. I want to dive in with both feet."

"How is the catalog coming?"

"Just about done. I'm afraid the information we are really looking for isn't here."

Linder shrugged. "Hardly surprising. The Bormans would have harvested it thirty years ago if it had been easily accessible. If we're going to find anything, it will be in The Vault."

"What progress there?"

"LeBlanc thinks he can cut through in about three days. They are setting up the laser now. I can tell you that Captain McCarver didn't like sending down his spare reactor."

"Can't say I blame him. Still, we have to get through that door. We've swept everything else clean."

Linder pulled up a chair, knit his fingers behind his head, and propped his grimy boots onto the tabletop where Renzi had stacked the tiles. "Sands just reported that he's nearly got the leaks plugged. He should have them done tomorrow. After that, he wants to start working on improving our defenses."

"A waste of time," Renzi muttered.

“That may be true,” Linder responded. “Still, it’s orders and we’d best follow them. Just remember, ‘It don’t have to make sense...’”

“... It’s government policy,” Renzi said, completing the quotation that had probably been old when Julius Caesar was in diapers.

Chapter 25: Discovery

The white spot of the cutting laser crawled slowly across the black and rust surface of the vault door. As it moved, the spot left a river of molten metal behind, a river that dripped from the deep cut onto the concrete floor. The spot was cutting along a circular path centered on a pilot hole. The small bore had been cut through into the cavern beyond, and then a camera and light source inserted. The camera showed a large hemispherical cavern receding into dark. The volume illuminated by the light was filled with ancient equipment and massive machines, with more extending into darkness. Whatever hazard might exist beyond the door was not obvious. Everything appeared quiet. Atmosphere samples showed no detectable poisons, toxins, or contaminants.

Arthur Linder crouched over the drill’s control panel, guiding its movements. The rest of the ground party stood well back and watched the operation from behind darkened lenses. Eventually the incandescent plume that marked the laser spot ceased. The interior camera had detected the first laser light within the cavern and had automatically cut power to the drill. They would now have to slice slowly through the last few centimeters of metal to prevent the laser from damaging the cavern’s contents.

Everything went black for Lars as the spot disappeared. He lifted his goggles and rubbed his eyes to remove the green afterimage.

“How long to finish the job?” he asked Linder.

The scientist’s shrug was expansive as he stretched aching back muscles. Three hours crouched over the drill had left him stiff. “Another hour, I’d say.”

“Want me to spell you?”

“Think you can stay in the groove?”

“I think so.”

“Then have at it, and thanks.”

Sands took Linder’s place at the control panel and lined up the crosshairs on the sighting screen. The vault door was a meter-thick sandwich of alternating soft and hard metals. The plug they had cut was two meters in diameter. It would have long since sagged under its own weight except for the wedges they’d driven into the lower cutting channel for support.

Lars’s own back ached before he finally finished cutting away the last metal holding the circular plug in place. His success was signaled by a hollow *clunk* that could be felt through the soles of their feet as the heavy plug settled a few millimeters. Sands shut down the laser and made sure that its safety interlocks were engaged.

Park Eald, the computer specialist, strode forward while the cut metal still glowed a dull red. He pulled the camera from the pilot hole and inserted an oversize eyebolt. He then used a two-meter long metal bar

to screw the bolt into place. After it was well seated, he carefully threaded maxi-filament line through the eye, then snaked it down the tunnel to where a winch had been anchored to bedrock. He energized the winch, and then stood back with the rest of the onlookers while the mechanism took up the slack.

The filament line drew taut, and then all progress seemed to halt for a few seconds until there was a loud screech of metal against metal. They watched as the circular plug began to slowly extrude from the hole. When the plug had been pulled back three quarters of a meter, it overbalanced and crashed to the floor.

The roar echoed the length of the tunnel as everyone waded through a cloud of choking dust to cluster around the still glowing hole. Close to the cutting face, there was a strong smell of ozone. Paolo Renzi sent a beam into the cavern beyond the vault door, playing its spot across the same machinery they had photographed with the camera. Beyond the vault door, machines that had once been the hope of humanity patiently awaited the return of their masters.

#

Three days later, Paulo Renzi made an announcement at dinner. The evening meal was a formal affair for the team, a time when they discussed the day's progress. In the early days, the meal had been marked by jokes. No longer. The endless labor was beginning to take its toll on everyone.

"I've found a data base with technical details of the energy screen experiments," Renzi announced without fanfare as he peeled back the cover on an emergency ration and made a face at what he found inside.

"How complete?" Linder asked. The geologist had dark bags under his eyes. At Renzi's announcement, he seemed to momentarily forget his fatigue.

"Hard to tell. We'll have to do a complete catalog check, then organize the data into some sort of intelligible structure."

"Yet you believe it is what we came after?"

"I do," Renzi replied. He paused to bite the end off a nutrition bar, and then chewed it slowly before continuing. "Though I've only scanned the summary, I can already give you a fair explanation of the basic science of energy screens. It seems that our ancestors discovered a unique solution to the space tensor equations."

"And forgot it again?" Professor LeBlanc exclaimed. Unlike the rest of them, he showed few signs of strain after nearly two weeks on the ground. "How is that possible?"

"It wasn't so much forgotten as downgraded," Renzi explained. "We use the space tensor equations for many of our own technologies. They are essential to the operation of neutrino detectors, for instance. What the scientists here attempted to do was to apply them on a much more massive scale than anyone ever thought possible."

Sands listened as the scientists lapsed into their arcane lingo and Renzi explained the mathematical principles behind what the ancients had done. He gathered that they had managed to turn an infinitesimally thin shell of the space-time in upon itself. The result was a closed surface through which neither matter nor energy could pass. As the expedition leader spoke, Sands envisioned what a cloud city equipped with an energy screen would be like.

If the screen were flickered fast enough, light would pass, but gas molecules would not have enough time to traverse the boundary of the screen. In effect, the screen would replace the city's gasbag. As he

considered the implications, Sands realized that he had been thinking too parochially. Rather than build a city *inside* a screen, one could suspend it below in the manner of an ancient terrestrial balloon. All atmosphere could be pumped from the giant silver sphere, leaving a vacuum filled shell to provide the ultimate in lifting power.

With such a screen, there would be no practical limit to how large a city might grow. Sands pictured cities hundreds of kilometers in diameter floating serenely among the clouds, equipped with defensive energy screens to be turned on at the first sign of danger. Such cities would fear neither their neighbors nor the weather.

Sands sat with his back against the wall and chewed listlessly on a nutrition bar while he listened to the scientists' excited chatter. He was only dimly aware when Kimber entered the dining hall and sought him out.

"Captain McCarver is on the comm. He wants to speak to you."

"What about?"

"He didn't say."

Kimber led him to the office they had converted into a comm center. Sands sat down in front of a screen that displayed the features of *Vixen*'s captain. He was frowning.

"Ah, there you are, Sands!"

"What's up, Captain?"

McCarver frowned even more. "Perhaps nothing. I just got a call from the Yerban flagship."

"What did they want?" Sands asked. The Yerbans were sponsoring the most elaborate of the current archaeological expeditions. Their ground party was excavating the ruins of both Athens and Rome.

"I need to discuss that in person. I have sent Forbes down to fetch you back. He'll be there in an hour."

"The sun has already set topside," Sands reminded him. "Wouldn't it be better to wait until morning?"

"No."

"Very well, Captain. We'll fire up the landing beacon and I'll be ready when the boat arrives."

"Do you have to go?" Kimber asked after McCarver had signed off.

"Fraid so. Don't worry, I'll be back tomorrow or the next day."

"I'll miss you."

He took her in his arms and kissed her. "I'll miss you, too." With that, she accompanied him to where they had laid out their sleeping bags side by side and helped him into the environment suit he had shed less than an hour earlier.

#

"What's so important that we couldn't discuss it on the comm?" Sands asked. He was in the chamber just inside *Vixen*'s midships airlock. It felt odd to be back in zero gravity after so much time at one gee. After Earth's oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, he was not sure he liked the normal sound of his voice. He

had never noticed before how much he tended to squeak.

Captain McCarver was helping him out of his suit. “The Yerban expedition detected a ship decelerating to take up parking orbit, then lost it when it disappeared behind the planet.”

“Did it land?”

“Possible. More likely, it transferred to a different orbit and turned off its beacon. Space is a big place and it’s easy to hide if you want to.”

“What ship was it?”

“That is what they were interested in. Since we were the last to arrive, they thought it might be part of our expedition. I told them it didn’t belong to us.”

Sands frowned. A mystery ship that had not communicated during its approach and had then disappeared ... he could think of only one possibility. Since McCarver had been unwilling to discuss it on an open comm channel, he had obviously come to the same conclusion.

“It’s the Northern Alliance, of course.”

McCarver nodded. “That is the way I would vote.”

“Damn it, Titania was supposed to report when they launched!” Sands exclaimed, thinking about the agent Arvin Taggart had planted in the Cloudfcroft Museum. They had assumed the lack of news meant the Alliance expedition was still being organized.

“They were more clever than we gave them credit for. It’s easy enough to disguise a spaceship’s true destination.”

“How?”

“Any number of ways. The most straightforward is to send a ship drifting out along Saturn’s orbit a few million kilometers before diving for the inner system. With luck, Sky Watch will never notice the drive flare.”

“If it’s the Alliance,” Sands mused, “then they may attack *Vixen* . What can we do to protect this ship?”

“Depends on the attack,” McCarver replied. “We don’t stand a chance against missiles. Maybe we could repel boarders, maybe not. If you want to be completely safe, I recommend that we break orbit and head for home.”

“The timing’s lousy!” Sands said. He went on to explain Renzi’s discovery.

“Even so, all nonessential personnel should be returned to the ship immediately. That will allow us to evacuate the planet quickly if we have to. Remember, the landing boat only carries three passengers.”

Sands mulled the problem over, then nodded. “Point well taken. I think we’d better talk to Renzi about this.”

“You’ll be wanting to head back down in the morning then.”

“No, it would take too long. We’ll just have to chance eavesdroppers.”

“Right,” McCarver said. He led Sands forward to the communications compartment. As they floated

inside, Lars pulled himself into the operator's seat and strapped down. He keyed the signal that would bring the ground party's communicator-on-duty running.

"Hello, my love," Kimber said, smiling out of the screen at him.

"You should have gone off duty hours ago!"

"I had nothing better to do. Besides, I was hoping you would call."

"Where is Professor Renzi?"

"In the vault. He and the others are poring over the data he found."

"Get him."

"Right," she said, turning away from the camera. It was at that moment that the scene shivered as something shook the camera mount. An instant later, a loud *whump!* issued from the bulkhead-mounted speaker. Kimber snapped her head around to look at something behind her, but out of camera range. Other voices were yelling in the background. Suddenly, wild eyed, Kimber turned back to face the camera. "Help, we are under attack. I repeat, we are under..."

Suddenly, the screen went black.

Chapter 26: Disaster

"We've got to get down there!"

McCarver shook his head. "You'll have to wait at least four hours."

"For God's sake, why?" Sands asked.

"It's the middle of the night, remember?"

"Forbes can put down in the dark. He proved that a couple of hours ago."

"He had the beacon and a well lighted landing pad. You will have neither. The boat is not equipped for a night landing in the wilderness. You'll just have to wait for dawn."

"Damn it, they could all be dead by dawn!"

"They may already be dead," the captain replied coldly. "Neither you nor I can do anything to help them until the sun comes up. All we can do is lose more people in a foolish attempt at action."

Sands growled, yet admitted to himself that McCarver was right. When that screen went dark, a chill wind had begun whistling through his soul. It was still blowing. If he were to be of any help to Kimber at all, he would have to ignore his emotions.

The chronometer slowed to a crawl as they planned their strategy and waited for dawn. There would only be three of them going down to the planet. McCarver and his chief engineer would stay aboard to maneuver the ship in the event the Alliance vessel attempted to rendezvous with *Vixen*. That left only the freighter's apprentice third mate to go down to the planet with Sands and Forbes. The apprentice third mate was also the captain's younger brother.

James McCarver arrived in the airlock anteroom suited up and cradling a riot gun in the crook of his arm. He carried two more of the weapons slung over his shoulder. The weapons were from the space freighter's small armory, and had been reloaded with explosive armor piercing rounds. Sands did not ask the captain how it was that a spaceship carried such guns. He was merely happy they were available. Whether they would be any use against Alliance Marines was something Lars had no desire to find out.

"Take care of him," the captain said, referring to his brother. "He's just about all the family I have in the world."

"I'll bring him back safe and sound, Captain."

#

The boat swept low over the top layer of clouds after a fiery entry into atmosphere. Even though there was no hint of dawn in the east, the scene was far from dark. A bright aurora danced across much of the northern sky while lightning lit up the clouds from within. The Earth was also awash with the silver white glow from a full Luna. The effect reminded Sands of Saturn by Archlight.

As they entered into the first of the clouds, Sands tuned into the frequency of the expedition's landing beacon. He was greeted with silence save for the occasional hash of lightning induced static.

"No beacon?" Forbes asked from beside him.

"Nothing." Sands reached out to turn off the radio receiver. His fingers stopped a centimeter from the control as his earphones were filled with a scratchy fragment of speech. The signal was too garbled to determine what had been said, but there was no mistaking the human voice that had spoken the short, sharp command. He waited for long seconds, but there was nothing more.

"What was that?" Forbes asked.

"A call for help? The raiders?"

"Call up a bearing and see where it came from."

Sands keyed to have the source of the signal plotted on the navigational display. As he had suspected, the signal source lay on a direct bearing to the energy screen laboratory."

"Was that the Alliance?" Spacer McCarver asked from the landing boat's right rear seat.

Sands grunted his agreement. "We're still well below their horizon. We must have picked up a ground reflection."

"Do you suppose they were talking to their ship?" Forbes mused.

"Does that worry you?"

"Damned right it does! If they're above the horizon, they probably saw our ion wake as we reentered."

"Maybe the ship is on the ground," James McCarver said.

Sands considered the possibility. If McCarver were right, it would alter the tactical situation considerably. A ship on the ground might be put out of commission by high explosive slugs if a marksman could get close enough without being seen.

Sands glanced at the course readout. They were flying northeast, aiming at a point several hundred

kilometers north of the laboratory. They planned to fly eastward until they were behind the coastal mountain range, then turn south and use the mountains to shield them from any Alliance sensors that might be watching the sky. Since they were moving slantwise with respect to the direct line to the laboratory, it would be possible to triangulate the position of any additional signal. With luck, they might be led to a grounded Alliance spaceship.

The next signal was gone almost as soon as they detected it. Despite this, Sands carefully recorded the bearing and added it to the moving map. The new bearing intersected the first at the energy screen laboratory. Over the next five minutes, he detected three more signals. All originated at the laboratory site.

While Sands worked to locate the enemy, the landing boat dropped through the clouds and into clear air. By the light of an occasional lightning flash, Sands made out the ancient sea bottom. Then they were at the long, irregular line of the coast and headed eastward toward the tall mountains. They crossed the mountains, and then dropped down low as they swung south. The boat flew for some fifteen minutes before they drew abreast of the laboratory. Forbes turned west and sought out a pass through the mountains.

“Nothing,” Sands growled as the mountains cut off any hope of intercepting further signals. “And there’s no sign of a second source.”

“Maybe the ship is aground at the laboratory and we’re picking up chatter between them and the ground party,” McCarver suggested.

“We’ll know soon enough,” Forbes muttered as he concentrated on his nap-of-the-earth flying.

The eastern sky had gradually brightened all through the trip south. The landscape had taken on a dead gray color as dawn seeped through the clouds. The morning light revealed the rugged beauty of the mountain range as they streaked between peaks at nearly a thousand kilometers per hour. They hugged the floor of a valley that had once been cut by a small stream. It reminded Sands of dodging in and out of the clouds back home.

They came out of the mountain pass and skimmed low over rolling foothills. Then Forbes pulled the nose up and fired the underjets. All three of them went “Oof!” as deceleration dragged them down into their seats.

The landing boat dropped like a stone. Sands felt his sphincter muscles automatically clamp down as the ground rushed up below them. The underjets fired again just before they hit. The boat grounded in a cloud of dust, bounced once, and then was still. Sands was conscious that he had been holding his breath. He inhaled sharply and began undoing his restraining straps.

He climbed out of his seat and clambered quickly to the rear of the wing. The steely gray light was stronger than ever as his boots touched the powder dry earth. He looked around. Before him was a tall hill. Beyond it lay the energy screen laboratory.

#

He and James McCarver loaded their packs and set out on foot. Behind them, Forbes fired the boat’s landing jets and brought it to a hover. Once in the air, he moved close to a vertical cliff face where it would be less conspicuous. It had been agreed that the pilot would remain with the boat and wait for their call.

It took nearly half an hour to gain the top of the ridge. They arrived puffing and out of breath. They

crawled the last hundred meters on their bellies to ensure that they would not be silhouetted against the clouds. By the time Sands reached a vantage point from which he could see the laboratory site, his suit was covered with a fine coating of dust that caused him to blend into the surrounding landscape.

Lying prone in an environment suit is a good way to develop a stiff neck, Lars discovered. He ignored the discomfort as he levered himself up on his elbows and brought a pair of binoculars to his faceplate. Their perch allowed them to look down on the energy screen laboratory some three kilometers distant. The first thing Sands noticed was that the communications tower had been toppled. That had undoubtedly been the cause of Kimber's signal being cut off.

He turned his attention to the small cluster of machines that marked the entrance ramp. He watched for nearly ten minutes without seeing any movement. He then scanned the hill, searching for any sign that would indicate the raiders were still occupying the laboratory. He found nothing. At the end of his survey, he signaled McCarver to hook up a hard commline. The young spacer reached out and plugged a cable into the base of Sands's helmet.

"See anything?"

"Nothing."

"Maybe they've gone."

"And maybe they are lying in wait for us. I wish I could see into the roadway leading to the main entrance."

"What do you want to do?"

Sands hesitated. It would take at least forty minutes to reach the laboratory site via the direct route, and possibly twice that long if they were to avoid being seen. He considered his options and decided to play it safe.

"We work our way down that valley to the hill, then up that ravine on the south until we reach the comm station at the summit.

"And once we get there?"

"We can get in through the utility tunnel. Chances are they haven't discovered it yet."

"Good enough for me," McCarver said. "Let's get started."

As they trekked across the dead landscape, Lars was thankful for the long days he had spent toughening his muscles. His newfound physical condition allowed him to set a pace the younger man was hard pressed to match. They made it to the base of the hill in just under an hour. As they started up, Sands could not shake the feeling that a dozen pairs of eyes were watching his every move.

It took another twenty minutes to reach the ruined communications gear. Once again, they slithered the last hundred meters on their bellies. From up close it was obvious that the comm station had been demolished by a bomb. Once again, Sands signaled for a hard line conference.

"You stay here. I am going to reconnoiter the utility tunnel. If I'm not back in an hour, get back to the boat."

"I should cover you."

Sands shook his head violently inside his helmet. “No! Someone has to report back. You stay here. That’s an order!”

“Yes, sir.”

Lars unplugged from McCarver, then worked his way toward where they had found the buried Borman cable. At the end of it, he came to the manhole through which they had first entered the underground facility. He pried the cover off, moving with care to make a minimum of noise that might carry underground. He dropped awkwardly through the hole and levered the cover back into place. The tunnel was dark. He switched on his helmet lamp and was momentarily dazzled by the beam.

He began crawling in the direction of the laboratory. It was nearly five hundred meters from the manhole cover to the cable room where the utility tunnel ended. Every muscle in his body ached before he had covered half the distance. Sweat poured down his face such that he had to stop every few seconds and wipe his forehead on the wiper pad built into the helmet. As a result, he did not notice the body sprawled face down in the tunnel until his gauntleted hand touched someone’s leg.

Lars’s heart stuck in his throat as he got on his knees and flipped the body over. It was Paolo Renzi.

#

The scientist at first appeared to be dead. Lars let his helmet light wash over Renzi’s face and was rewarded by a slight twitching of eyelids. Renzi’s mouth moved and Sands’s receptors picked up a croaking sound. It was a moment before he realized the scientist was asking for water. Lars detached the spare water reservoir from his suit’s backpack and awkwardly held it to Renzi’s lips.

Renzi gulped instinctively. Sands glanced at his external temperature indicator. The air inside the utility tunnel was at 65°C, uncomfortably warm, but far below the killing 150°C outside. Obviously, air-conditioned air from the laboratory was seeping into the utility tunnel, moderating the effect of the hot rock around them.

Sands switched in his helmet speaker and chinned the control for minimum volume. “Wake up, Professor!”

Renzi’s eyes flickered open and he recoiled from the sight of the armored figure leaning over him.

“It’s Larson Sands, Professor. You are safe. Do you understand me?”

Renzi’s eyes seemed to focus. “Sands?”

“That’s right, Professor. What happened here?”

“The Alliance,” Renzi replied in a hoarse whisper. “Everyone was in the vault looking over the data. I had returned to my quarters to pick up some notes. That was when they blasted the front entrance. The others were trapped while I hid behind a set of filing cabinets. Then while they were busy elsewhere, I made my way here.”

“Where are the others, Professor?” Sands asked so softly that he wondered if Renzi had heard him. He was about to repeat the question when the scientist stirred once more.

“They’re dead, I think. There was shooting, then an explosion.”

The strain of those few words proved too much for him. Renzi lapsed into unconsciousness. Lars set his jaw and carefully lowered the professor to the tunnel floor. Then he crawled the final few meters to

where the utility tunnel entered the laboratory. He noted that the access panel had been torn loose, then hurriedly propped back into place. A gap of several centimeters allowed the laboratory air to mix with that in the tunnel. He switched off his light before carefully moving the panel out of the way. He then squirmed into the main laboratory complex.

The main tunnel was alight with the widely spaced emergency lamps they had installed shortly after excavating the entrance ramp. One glance at the outside temperature indicator told him that the environmental system was no longer working. The laboratory was heating up minute by minute. Sands got to his feet and slowly worked his way toward the vault. He stepped cautiously, sweeping his riot gun from side to side slowly as he walked.

At first, he searched with great care lest he stumble upon the enemy. As it became evident that the raiders had gone, Sands stepped up the pace. He reached the vault door and found scorch marks around the hole they had cut. Stepping through, he found the inside of the vault a burned out hulk.

The source of the destruction was obvious. Explosives had been carefully placed in the heart of the massive apparatus inside and then set off. Following the blast there had been a brief, violent fire that had burned until all of the oxygen had been consumed.

As Sands walked through the ashes, he braced himself for what he knew he would find. There, near the far end of the vault, was a pile of bodies. The fire, which had undoubtedly been intended to consume them fully, had gone out too quickly. Although scorched, Sands could make out enough details to identify the dead.

He recognized Arthur Linder first. The geologist had been shot in the forehead and lay sprawled on his back. Park Eald and Taren LeBlanc were lying side by side. All showed evidence of having been shot. As Sands continued the grisly task, his tension rose until it was nearly unbearable. Each moment he expected to discover Kimber's body. Yet, when he was through, he had found no sign of Kimber or Halley. Even though some of the bodies were damaged badly enough to make identification difficult, one thing was clear: All were male.

Sands was overcome with the same rage he had felt at seeing his brother shot down aboard *Delphi*. With his rage came fear. The absence of Kimber and Halley among the dead in the vault made him think of rape. He searched the full vault before heading for the living quarters. His heart was a drum pounding in his temples as he hurried through the chambers they had used for sleeping. There was no one to be found.

His next stop was the communications room. The equipment had all been smashed by a blunt instrument. The cables that fed signals to the comm station at the top of the hill were still intact. Sands pulling the commlink line from his belt, touched it to the bare end of an antenna cable, and said, "McCarver?"

"Here, Mr. Drake," came the reassuring answer.

"We've got a lot of casualties down here, but no bad guys. I think they must have lifted off while we were behind the mountains. That would explain all the chatter we picked up during our approach. Come in through the utility tunnel. You will find Professor Renzi near the exit. He is in bad shape. Stay with him."

"Yes, sir."

Feeling emotionally drained, Sands retraced his steps. He searched the laboratory again. This time he searched meticulously, checking every possible hiding place to make sure no one else had escaped and then been overcome by the heat. It took him nearly half an hour to finish the grim exploration. He found

nothing save smashed equipment and ransacked record cabinets. The raiders had removed every record tile in the place.

A great exhaustion overcame Sands as he made his way back to the utility tunnel. He found McCarver cradling Renzi in his lap.

“How is he?”

McCarver glanced up. “Better. I have been pouring water down him. He was awfully dehydrated. How are we going to get him out of here?”

“There are still environment suits near the entrance. They’ve been pretty well worked over, but we should be able to cobble together one that will get him to the ship.”

“What about the others?”

Sands described what he had found in the vault. The young spacer’s features grew grim in the gloom of his helmet. Sands finished by telling him his suspicions that Kimber and Halley had been taken to the raiders’ ship.

“What do we do now?”

“We get Renzi back to our own ship. Come on. You grab his legs and I’ll take his arms.” They carried the unconscious scientist into the main tunnel where it was cooler. He woke as they lay him on the floor.

“The energy screen data!” he croaked.

“I’m sorry, Professor, but they got it.”

“We must have it back.”

“Not much chance of that. They blew the vault. It is so much scrap metal. They’ve destroyed just about everything.”

The scientist gripped Sands’s gauntleted arm and tried to pull himself erect. Sands gently pressed him back. “You rest. James and I will get you a suit.”

“You don’t understand,” came the urgent gasp. “We’ve got to get that information back! The ancients didn’t know enough...” With that, he collapsed again. Sands watched him gasping for breath in the pool of light made from his and McCarver’s helmet lamps. When Renzi spoke again, each word was an obvious struggle.

“We were reviewing the energy screen data when I realized that I recognized the derivation of one of the space tensors. The ancients limited themselves to a special case because they knew nothing of hypersets! They could never have built a planet size energy screen with what they knew.”

“Take it easy, Professor,” McCarver said. “You can tell us the rest when we get you up to the ship.”

“No, I must speak now. Don’t you understand? I recognized their mistake! We have learned a great deal in the past two centuries. We can succeed where they failed. *We can* build an energy screen capable of cooling the Earth!”

Chapter 27: Prisoners and Pursuers

Mikal Blount lifted the helmet of his environment suit and let it drop to the end of its tether. He then ran a hand across his bald pate, rubbing vigorously to restore scalp circulation. It was an automatic gesture of which he was completely unaware. All of his attention was focused instead on the angry, red-faced man with the quivering mustache. Renault Garcia, nominal head of the Alliance expedition to Earth, had doffed his helmet a few seconds earlier. His face showed the contortions of long hours of rage.

“What sort of a butcher shop are you running, Blount?” Garcia screamed at him. “You killed unarmed men down there.”

“They were our enemies, Dr. Garcia,” Blount replied coldly. “Would you have set them free to take what they knew back to Titan?”

“No, but damn it, I wouldn’t murder them either.”

“What would you have had me do? Take them prisoner so they could eat our supplies until we all starved? Perhaps we could have sworn them to secrecy.”

“I notice that you spared the women,” Garcia said with scathing sarcasm. “Scruples, or merely looking for a playmate?”

Blount’s eyes drilled a hole through the archaeologist. “My reasons are my own. They do not concern you.”

Garcia opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, turned, and kicked off down the long axis corridor. Blount watched him until he reached the far bulkhead, bounced expertly around a corner and sailed from view.

Outbound from Saturn, Blount had pegged Garcia for a fool. The scientist had reinforced that impression almost daily. He had had a habit of carrying *onad nauseam* about his pet theories and the sad state of modern archaeology. Now, however, Blount wondered if he had misjudged the tall scientist.

His first doubts had come when Garcia insisted on accompanying the raiding party to the surface. Blount had tried to dissuade him, explaining that they were after a criminal known to be with the Titanian expedition. Uncharacteristically, Garcia had persisted. Blount found it strange, but had not really begun to wonder about the scientist’s real motivation until later.

Gregory Herrera, Blount’s aide, had selected one of the senior prisoners for detailed interrogation. It had taken only a matter of minutes for the man to describe the theory of energy screens, how they could be used as an impenetrable defense, and where the records on these devices might be found. The prisoner’s answer to the next question had caused Herrera to send for Blount.

“Tell the admiral what you told me.”

The prisoner glared at them from out of two blackened eyes. When he finally spoke, his voice was slurred by bruised and bleeding lips. “You asked how we first became aware of this laboratory. I told you that the information came originally from the Northern Alliance.”

“From us?” Blount asked. “*Who* in the Alliance?”

“I don’t know the details. You will have to ask Miss Crawford or Miss Trevanon about it. They were directly involved.”

Herrera had worked the prisoner over for nearly half an hour longer without learning anything new. Then, when the captive's abused body finally surrendered its hold on consciousness, Blount had given orders that he be put out of his misery.

"Shall we bring in the women?" Herrera asked after administering the coup de grâce.

"No," Blount replied. "We'll take them to the ship with us. Both are undoubtedly aware of my role in the raid on Cloudcroft. We dare not risk what they might blurt out under standard interrogation."

"I trust my men implicitly," Herrera said.

"I don't," Blount had countered. "The fewer people who know this secret, the better. Now, get them ready for transport and make sure they talk to no one."

"Yes, sir."

For the rest of the hours they had spent aground, Blount grilled the remaining prisoners relentlessly about everything they knew concerning energy screens. Repeatedly he had been told that the original information had come from the Alliance. Finally, with the sun about to rise and their launch window closing, he had ordered the captured information transferred to the landing boat. One group of Marines had liquidated the remaining prisoners and piled their bodies in the large hemispherical cavern where all of the experimental equipment was located. A second group had set demolition charges. The charges exploded just as the raiding party sealed themselves inside their ship and prepared for a return to orbit.

Blount spent the hours following launch deep in thought. The implications of what the prisoners had told him were frightening. If true, then someone had discovered a way to make the Alliance invincible, yet withheld that knowledge from the ruling council. It was then that he had begun to suspect Renauld Garcia of being more than he appeared. After all, the Cloudcroft Museum archaeological expedition had been planned long before the Navy involved itself. Garcia, Blount remembered, was one of Kelt Dalishaar's people. That fact spoke volumes concerning the identity of the ultimate culprit in this affair.

Blount was still angry with Garcia when the landing boat rendezvoused with its mother ship. It had been all he could do to hold his tongue while the archaeologist screamed at him. After Garcia stormed off, Blount hurriedly doffed the remainder of his armor, and then pulled himself hand over hand to his small shipboard office. Once settled behind his desk, he buzzed Herrera aboard the landing boat.

"Yes, sir?"

"Are your prisoners still gagged?"

"Yes, sir. They have spoken to no one."

"Very well. Bring them to my office. Make sure that you don't let them out of your sight."

"We're on our way."

#

Herrera towed Kimber Crawford and Halley Trevanon into the admiral's cabin and strapped them to a bulkhead. Their hands were still tied behind them and their mouths covered with a tape used to seal air leaks. Both women showed a tinge of the wild-eyed desperation with which the body greets incipient suffocation.

"Remove their gags, Gregori," Blount said. "Can't you see they are having trouble breathing?"

Each woman flinched as Herrera pulled the adhesive strips away, and then gasped hungrily for air. Blount let them breathe and calm down a bit.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked in a conversational tone a minute later. Neither woman answered, but their eyes told him all he needed to know. “I thought so. Then you know that I have every reason to kill you. Therefore, I suggest that you cooperate and give me a reason to keep you alive. Shall we discuss the whereabouts of our mutual friend, Larson Sands?”

“We don’t know where he is,” Halley said, her gaze defiant now that she had regained her breath.

“I think you do. Several of the other captives told us he was with your group until only a few hours before our arrival. Where did he go?”

“Where you’ll never find him!” Kimber shouted.

“Keep your voice down!” Blount said. “I want this kept between us. Now then, did Sands return to your ship? Answer me, or by God, I’ll have Herrera dump one of you out the airlock!”

Both women hesitated, and then Kimber said, “He was called back to the ship. I don’t know the reason.”

“Then he must still be there!” Blount said in triumph.

“I don’t think so. We were talking when your gorillas broke into the laboratory. He probably headed back down five minutes after our communications failed.”

Herrera said, “That may have been the reentry trail the ship reported seeing.”

“Too bad we were on such a tight schedule,” Blount mused. “If we’d waited, Captain Sands might have saved us the trouble of searching him out.”

“You’re lucky he didn’t,” Halley snapped. “He would have killed you!”

“I doubt that. Still, the man does lead a charmed existence. Consider my current dilemma. Normally, we would move against your ship and destroy it to ensure Sands’s death. However, not knowing whether he is aboard, I would be risking my own ship in an action that might prove worse than useless. Then there is the energy screen data we carry. That information makes even the smallest risk unacceptable. So you see, events have conspired to force me to take my prize and go home.”

“What about us?” Kimber asked.

“You ladies present me with a different sort of dilemma. You know about my part in the raid and, given the opportunity, would pass that knowledge on to any number of the uninitiated aboard this ship. You will have to be silenced. Killing you would solve the problem, but would aggravate other factors of the same problem.”

“What ‘other factors’?”

“Why, Captain Sands, of course. With you dead, I will cease to have a hold over him. Furthermore, he will become reckless and will probably broadcast my identity to anyone who will listen. We must keep you alive to give him an incentive to remain silent. Then, Miss Crawford, there is your father and his various functionaries. They, too, must be given the same incentive. The dilemma is how to keep you from infecting this ship with your information without killing you? Gregori!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell the captain that we have two passengers for cold sleep. We will keep our prisoners out of mischief, yet available should we find it necessary to prove they are still alive.”

“Yes, sir.”

Blount turned back to Kimber and Halley. “I hope you have pleasant dreams, ladies. With a little luck, Captain Sands will be there to greet you when you wake in a few months.”

#

None of the four men aboard the landing boat said anything as they left Earth for the last time. Three of them were lost deep in their own angry thoughts, while the fourth slipped fitfully into and out of unconsciousness. Larson Sands, seated once again next to the pilot, was the angriest of all.

After he and Jim McCarver had gotten Paulo Renzi into an environment suit, they had called Forbes down from the hills. The landing boat had set down in front of the main laboratory entrance. The three of them had taken a holocamera from the boat and filmed the whole grisly scene. Then they had undertaken the grim task of laying out the dead. They had arranged the bodies in one of the laboratory’s office spaces, sealed the door, and scrawled a marker with their names. As they worked, Sands could not quench the white fire of rage that threatened to consume him.

Each time his body’s natural defense against strong emotion calmed him, Sands thought of Kimber and wondered at her fate. That would be sufficient catalyst to begin the cycle once more. He was physically sickened by the surge of adrenaline that coursed through his veins, with every attack worse than the one before it. He knew that he had to get himself under control if he were to save Kimber and Halley -- if indeed, they *could* be saved.

“Coming up on rendezvous,” Forbes said beside him. The words intruded on Sands’s destructive reverie. With a conscious effort, he drew himself back to reality. For the first time in hours, the taste of bile in his mouth was not quite so strong.

“How is Professor Renzi?”

“The same,” came McCarver’s answer from the rear seat. “He’s nodded off again.”

“Keep an eye on him.”

“Mr. Sands?” McCarver asked.

“Yes?”

“Do you think he knew what he was saying back there about being able to shield the Earth from the sun?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I’ve been thinking about it. What if it were possible? Could you put things back the way they were?”

“It would be difficult,” Sands replied. Prodded by McCarver’s question, the analytical part of his mind began chewing on the problem. To his surprise, the activity soothed him. It was good to think about something other than Bolin, even for a minute.

“What about all of the dead animals and plants?”

“That would be a problem, of course. But every cloud city has its life banks, zoos, arboreta, and dioramas. Our ancestors made a concerted effort to save as many species as possible, if only in the form of genetic material. Once the planet cooled off enough for liquid water to form, you could probably reseed it with life.”

“Sounds like it would take a long time.”

“A century at least, I should think. Still, that is not very long on the grand scheme of things. Our great grandchildren could live there if they wanted to.”

“Don’t you think they would go home to Earth?”

“Would you?”

“Of course!” Forbes answered. “Wouldn’t you?”

Sands shrugged inside his suit. “I don’t know. I like living among the clouds.”

None of them spoke for long minutes until Forbes called the ship for instructions. “Hello, *Vixen*, ready for final approach.”

Ten minutes later, there was the satisfying *thump!* of docking latches as the landing boat returned to its mother. They waited for air pressure to be built up around their canopy before opening it. Even though they were in zero gravity, it took the efforts of all three of them to maneuver Professor Renzi’s limp body out of its seat. They handed Renzi up to *Vixen*’s chief engineer, who manhandled him through the docking port and into the ship. The three of them followed single file. They were met by Captain McCarver just inside the open airlock.

“Mr. Sands,” McCarver said as soon as Lars had his helmet off. The captain seemed uncharacteristically excited.

“What is it?”

“We received a communication from the Alliance ship.”

“When?” Sands asked.

“Ten minutes ago.”

“What did they want?”

“They sent you a message. I’ve got it all set up for playback in my cabin.”

“Let’s go!”

The screen in the captain’s cabin flashed alight at the touch of a button. It cleared to show Micah Bolin’s grinning features staring out at Lars. For a moment, he thought those eyes were looking right at him. He shook off the feeling. After all, this was a recording. Bolin began to speak immediately:

“To Privateer Captain Larson Sands aboard the Titanian freighter *Vixen*. This is Admiral Mikal Blount of the Northern Alliance Navy. Today my forces captured Kimber Crawford and Halley Trevanon, both wanted for complicity in crimes that you perpetrated against the Alliance. It is our intent to return them to Cloudcroft to stand trial. We will be lenient if you surrender yourself to us on Saturn. If you do not, they alone will pay for your crimes. Think carefully before you do anything hasty. Blount out!”

Sands stared at the screen for long minutes without speaking. He was interrupted by a call from Forbes on *Vixen*'s bridge.

“What is it Mr. Forbes?” the captain asked.

“The computer has just spotted a drive flare, Captain. It appears that a vessel is leaving Earth orbit.”

“I’ll be up momentarily, Mr. Forbes,” the captain replied. He turned to Sands. “What would you have me do?”

Sands looked up. To his own surprise, all of the rage of the past few hours was gone. In its place was the cold calculation of a heartless machine. “Prepare the ship for space, Captain. We are following them home.”

Chapter 28: Council of War

Kelt Dalishaar stood on the balcony of his residence and gazed into the blue-white haze that surrounded the city. Cloudcroft was back in the center of the North Temperate Belt, with the cloud walls of the flyway invisible in the far distance. The narrows associated with Dardenelles Cyclone were either six months astern or eight months ahead, depending on one’s outlook.

It had been a bad six months for the First Councilor of the Northern Alliance. Ever since that terrible night of the raid, his careful plans had gone seriously awry. Nor had his streak of bad luck yet run itself out, not if the latest report from their agent on Titan was correct.

“Admiral Samorset is here,” his newest mistress announced from the wide doorway behind him. Felice could not yet anticipate his every mood as Jasmine had done, but she also was not on the payroll of any other council faction ... at least, not so far as he knew. That one advantage made up for a great deal. Besides, she would learn.

“I’ll be in presently.” He took one last glance at the city he ruled as he composed his thoughts. This interview with Samorset was likely to be a difficult one. It had been a week since Renauld Garcia’s expedition had departed Earth unexpectedly. That fact, as much as any other, seemed to confirm the rumblings he was receiving from Titan.

The Grand Admiral stood stiffly as Dalishaar entered the study.

“A pleasant afternoon to you, Admiral.” On all the cloud cities, “afternoon” was defined as the period between second dawn and second dusk. The term had very little bearing on the position of the sun in the sky.

“And to you, First Councilor.”

“I have just received a very disturbing report from Titan. They are talking war because of what your people did to their expedition on Earth.”

“I am aware of those reports.”

“Would you mind telling me then, what the hell happened?”

Samorset shrugged. “You tasked the Navy to bring in the pirates who raided Cloudcroft. We recently

learned that the leader was a member of a Titanian expedition to Earth. We used our own expedition as cover to send Marines to arrest him. The Titanians resisted and I'm afraid there were casualties."

"How many?"

"Quite a few. Also, we arrested the factor's daughter in the company of the pirates."

"Am I to understand that we have taken Kimber Crawford prisoner?"

"Yes, First Councilor, along with Halley Federova Trevanon, the pirate second-in-command. I'm afraid the leader evaded capture."

Dalishaar barely noted Samorset's last comments. The news that Kimber Crawford was back in custody gave him renewed optimism. Her earlier escape had destroyed his plan to gain control of metals throughout the northern hemisphere. Worse, the Titanians were now demanding twice the going rate for their products. With the factor's daughter in Alliance hands once more, the ruinous surcharge would have to be lifted. Possibly, other concessions might be wrung from the Titanians as well.

"What condition is the Crawford woman in? Has she been harmed?"

"No, sir. Both the prisoners have been put in cold sleep in order to keep them from ... injuring themselves."

"I am somewhat relieved, Admiral. How long before your people arrive?"

"They are taking a fast hyperbolic orbit back, First Councilor. The return will take twelve more weeks."

"We will have to defuse the situation before then. I am going to give Factor Crawford my word that no harm will come to his daughter. I expect the Navy to honor that pledge."

"Of course, sir. I will see that the proper orders are dispatched. Anything else?"

"No, Admiral. You are dismissed."

"Thank you, sir."

Dalishaar watched Samorset until he had passed out of sight. The interview had been highly enlightening, both for what had been said and for what had not. There had been no mention of energy screens. Dalishaar smiled. It would be just like Samorset's hotheads to jump the Titanians and then not even inquire into why they were on Earth. If the Titanian expedition had been truly decimated, then another Alliance expedition could still obtain the secret of the energy screen. Perhaps all was not lost after all.

Having made his decision, he reached out and keyed the intercom for his personal secretary.

"Yes, First Councilor?"

"Please contact the Titanian trade representative and ask him to honor me with his presence. Tell him that I have good news."

#

Ganther Bartlett had been aboard Cloudcroft for half a standard year. He did not like it and would be happy to see it behind him. In addition to the high Saturnian gravity, there was the arrogance of the ruling elite with which to contend.

The summons from Kelt Dalishaar surprised Bartlett. The First Councilor had not spoken to him since he had demanded the surcharge as restitution for holding the trade delegation hostage. After the new trade agreement had been negotiated, Bartlett had stayed on to make sure the Alliance was not cheating. His tenure had come to an unexpected end two days earlier when he had received a coded communiqué from Titania. It had detailed the massacre on Earth and ordered him home.

“Good of you to come, Mr. Ambassador,” Dalishaar said as Bartlett was ushered into his office.

“Hardly ‘ambassador,’ Mr. First Councilor. I’m just an old man trying to ensure that my people are free to trade where they will.”

“Nonsense, Ganth. You are an ambassador in everything but name. We both know it, so what harm if I choose to treat you with the proper respect? I understand that you will be leaving on the next ship.”

“Yes, First Councilor.”

“May I ask why?”

“What did you expect when your people murdered our scientists and made off with our women?”

Dalishaar’s mouth dropped open in a perfect imitation of astonishment. “What are you saying?”

Bartlett reminded him of what his troops had done on Earth. The coded dispatch from home had given the full account, including a list of casualties. Bartlett had known two of the dead men.

As Bartlett finished, Dalishaar’s expression turned angry. “Who has been spreading these false rumors?”

“False rumors, First Councilor?”

“You heard me. Our people perform an act of heroism and someone goes about spreading lies! The truth is that we had a shipload of scientists under the auspices of the Cloudcroft Museum on Earth. They responded to a distress signal. It seemed that there had been some sort of an explosion. Our people went to help at considerable risk to themselves and are even now transporting the two survivors back to Saturn for medical treatment.”

“Is that your story?”

“It’s the truth. You will hear the whole thing on this evening’s newscasts. I suggest that you transmit this information to your government before these vicious rumors spread further.”

“You can, of course, prove what you say.”

“I can give you sworn affidavits from all of my people who took part in the rescue.”

“What about the survivors? Will they swear to it also?”

“By all means. However, I understand they are extremely upset. Our medical people have them under cold sleep to prevent them from injuring themselves. You will have to wait until the doctors judge that it is safe to revive them.”

“Will you turn them over to us as soon as they return to Saturn?”

“Of course. Please transmit this true version of events to your government, and assure Factor Crawford that his daughter is physically unharmed and on her way home.”

“I will do as you say,” Bartlett replied. “I will not guarantee that he will believe me.”

“He must, Mr. Ambassador. Even though we of the Northern Alliance have no desire to fight Titan, I would remind you that we have a space faring capability of our own. Titania is no more immune to bombardment than is Cloudcroft. Please convey this to the factor. It would be better for all concerned if he adopts our version of events rather than listen to baseless gossip. Otherwise, thousands may die.”

#

Envon Crawford leaned back in his chair and gazed at the dozen most powerful people in the Titanian government. They were gathered in what was traditionally called “the war room.” Yet, until today, Crawford had never expected that name to be taken literally.

“You have to admit that the man has balls!” one of his ministers muttered after Arvin Taggart finished reporting on Kelt Dalishaar’s version of events on Earth. “His people slaughter a dozen innocent people and he makes it out a rescue mission.”

“Surely no one will believe him,” the Minister for Mines said from the foot of the table.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Taggart answered. “Anyone with a vested interest in the Alliance will want to believe it.”

That brought a chorus of low mutterings from around the long table.

“Then you think this lie will gain converts, Arvin?” Crawford asked.

“It covers all of the facts known to the Alliance,” the security chief replied. “Who could fault them for rushing to aid the survivors of this terrible explosion they refer to? Of course, they don’t know the bodies did not burn in the fire. They probably think all we have is a pile of ash and a few scattered bones. They don’t know about our holograms.”

Crawford shuddered at the reminder. He had watched the entire grisly record of the carnage at the energy screen laboratory. Even now, Titan’s emissaries all over Saturn were showing the recording to potential allies. Every cloud city on the Alliance’s list of future conquests was being contacted. Reactions had been mostly positive. It was too early to tell, but Crawford thought he could raise an armada if he needed one.

“Are you all right, Factor?”

Envon Crawford looked at his security chief with pain in his eyes, and said, “Let’s move on. I know Ganth Bartlett is anxious to come home. However, I think he should stay aboard Cloudcroft a bit longer. We may need an open diplomatic channel to resolve this.”

“I’ll so order him,” the Minister for Trade responded.

“Let’s turn to what we are going to do about this Alliance spacecraft that’s on its way home,” Crawford said, continuing. “How long before it arrives?”

“Eighty two days, sir.”

“Any chance of intercepting it before it reaches the planet?” There was an uncomfortable silence and several people around the table shifted nervously in their seats. Crawford let his gaze scan each face. About half of them averted their eyes. Crawford nodded. “I didn’t think so. What’s the best you can do, Heinreid?”

Among those invited to the council was the senior captain of the Titanian merchant service. Joseph Heinreid did not evade the factor's gaze. He shrugged expansively. "As you know, we could easily shoot them down if we wanted to. It's not difficult to send a ship out along their incoming orbit and fill their path with gravel."

"We can't match orbits with them?"

"No, sir. It is a physical impossibility. Nothing we have has sufficient delta V capability."

"What about *Vixen*?" someone asked. "They are only two days behind the Alliance craft."

"McCarver could match orbits if he wanted to. He would have to use reaction mass he needs to slow down, but he could do it. The only problem is that there are only six people on that ship, and probably two dozen on the Northern Alliance craft. It makes no sense to board someone with four times your manpower."

"What about waiting for them in atmosphere? We know where they are going. We could station a squadron of ships on their path and jump them as they slow to atmospheric speed."

"That might work," Heinreid agreed, "but only if we know their precise route. Do we know that they will make directly for Cloudcroft? If I were them, I would be unconventional in how I got home."

"Aren't we forgetting something?" the Minister for Trade asked.

"What's that?"

"Any attempt to stop or board that ship is liable to get Miss Crawford killed. Worse, it could lose us the secret of the energy screen."

"Do you think Professor Renzi's analysis is correct?" one of the other ministers asked. By now each of them had had a chance to read Renzi's report concerning the uses of the energy screen. They had all been struck by his conclusion that it was theoretically possible to shield the Earth from the sun.

"Who knows?" the Minister for Trade responded. "Still, if there is truly a chance Earth might be returned to a habitable state, we have a duty not to risk the secret."

"Pardon me, Factor," Joseph Heinreid said. "I hate to be the one to suggest this, but someone must. Is not the important point here to keep the energy screen out of Alliance hands? If they shield their cities, they will be invincible. Would it not be better to destroy that ship rather than allow the secret to fall into their hands?"

Crawford grimaced. The same thought had occurred to him, but the consequence for Kimber had made him shy away from the obvious solution. He hoped it was not merely rationalization when he answered, "Perhaps it is already in their hands. Who is to say that the information hasn't been transmitted to Cloudcroft already?"

"I don't think so," Taggart replied. "We've kept a close watch on the ship since we learned of its existence. At their current range, they cannot transmit a beam that does not completely cover the Saturnian system. If they were sending the volume of data required, we would know it. I doubt they would risk transmitting it anyway. To be effective, the energy screen must be theirs alone."

Crawford gave his chief of security a cold look. "Are you suggesting that we destroy the ship with my daughter aboard?"

“I would never contemplate such a thing, Factor. I merely point out that our adversaries have not yet begun to work on developing the energy screen.”

“Then there is nothing we can do to the ship,” Joseph Heinreid concluded.

“Are we agreed on that?” Crawford asked. Once again, his gaze was greeted by uncomfortable looks. He waited a moment, then said, “Very well. We know what we cannot do. Let’s talk about what we *can* do.”

“We’ll have to whip them in a fight,” Taggart said. “We use the time before the vessel gets here to raise a fleet. Then we defeat the Alliance fleet before they can perfect the energy shield. With our ships hovering alongside their cities, they will listen to reason right enough.”

“And what of Miss Crawford’s safety while we are pounding on the Alliance navy?” the Minister for Trade asked.

“I have a few suggestions on that score as well,” Taggart replied. The others listened as he laid out his plan.

Chapter 29: The Gathering Storm

Larsen Sands sat alone beneath *Vixen*’s viewdome and gazed upward to where Saturn dominated half the sky. The white zones and darker belts were obscured by the high atmospheric haze that shrouded the planet. Two days earlier, the ship carrying Kimber and Halley had disappeared beneath that concealing layer after a thirteen-week chase from Earth.

Both pursued and pursuer had rushed outward along identical hyperbolic orbits. For thirteen weeks, they had held their positions, neither closing nor opening the gap between them. For thirteen weeks, Lars had wracked his brain, seeking a way to overtake and defeat Bolin before he reached Saturn. For thirteen weeks, he had failed in his quest. For the laws of orbital mechanics take no notice of the rightness of one’s cause. Without extra fuel for maneuvering, neither ship could change its course through space. Therefore, they had arrived at Saturn in the order in which they had left Earth. The Northern Alliance ship had won the race and was now lost in the vastness of Saturn’s atmosphere.

“Mr. Sands to the bridge,” came the announcement from Captain McCarver. Lars took one last look and kicked off toward the open hatchway. A few seconds later he arrived at the bridge.

“What is it, Captain?”

“I thought you’d like to know that we just received orders to reroute,” McCarver said.

“We’re not going to Titan?”

“Nope. They’ve directed us to a rendezvous in the North Temperate Belt.”

Lars let his eyebrows lift at the news. “What about the observation dome and landing boat? We can’t very well enter atmosphere with that junk hanging off us.”

“My orders are to jettison everything and get her aerodynamic.”

Lars whistled. Someone was in a hurry. “How far is this rendezvous point from the Alliance?”

“About ten thousand kilometers.”

“Any cloud cities near there?”

“Not unless someone’s moved while we’ve been away.”

“Then the rumors are true!”

“Looks like it,” the captain agreed.

Throughout the homeward journey, they had monitored the Saturnian news. There had been consistent reports of a combined fleet being raised to oppose the Northern Alliance. Although no one would confirm the stories, the cities reputed to be taking part were all on Dalishaar’s list for conquest.

“How long before we start slowing down?” Sands asked.

McCarver glanced up at the chronometer display. “Two hours and twelve minutes. We’ll jettison everything and button up in precisely two hours.”

Two hours later Lars was in his own acceleration couch watching the view from an aft facing camera. Saturn had grown until it blocked out most of the sky. They were headed for the western limb of the planet. The original plan had been to decelerate to the ringed planet’s orbital velocity, then swing around in a slingshot maneuver toward the big moon. Now they would alter their approach to contact atmosphere. At that point, *Vixen* would transform herself from spacecraft to aircraft. Instead of a three-day flight to Titan, they would be at the rendezvous point a mere six hours after touching atmosphere.

The scene on Sands’s screen switched to show the cargo bay with its collection of life support systems and additional living space.

“Inner airlocks closed and sealed,” McCarver ordered.

“Closed and sealed,” came the immediately reply of his chief engineer over the intercom. “All lights show green. Ready to jettison.”

“Personnel check!”

“Bostwick,” the engineer reported. “After power room.”

“Ensign McCarver, auxiliary control.”

“Spacer Forbes, forward engineering.”

“Paulo Renzi, in his cabin.”

“Larson Sands, on the bridge!”

“Captain McCarver,” McCarver said, completing the roll call. “On the bridge. All right, Mr. Bostwick. You may jettison the living quarters!”

“Jettisoning now, Captain,” came the reply.

There was the sudden sound of latches being disengaged and the hiss of pressurized air. Slowly, the observation dome and extra living quarters rose out of the cargo compartment and sailed off on their own orbit.

The camera switched again. This time McCarver and Bostwick ran down another check list before the landing craft was released from its carrying point beneath *Vixen*'s flat belly. Since they were still at hyperbolic velocity, both the living quarters and landing boat would eventually wend their way out into interstellar space.

The two clumps of excess equipment had shrunk to near invisibility when the captain announced they should prepare for prolonged acceleration. Then there was a two-minute wait before a dull roar suffused the ship and a gentle hand clamped down on Sands's chest.

The aft view of Saturn wavered as the ship's exhaust expanded behind them in a wide cone. They were close enough to the planet that they would soon pass inside the radius of the rings. Lars felt a sudden surge of adrenaline. The waiting was nearly over. It would soon be time for action.

#

Kimber Crawford was cold. She could not remember a time when she had not been. The air conditioning had failed full on and she had gone to bed without any blankets. Worse, her parents did not seem to notice, or maybe they just didn't care. Her mother liked the cold. She remembered how cold her mother's skin had been the last time she had seen her. That had been at her funeral with the frost white flowers around her bier. It had been dreadfully cold in that room, too. Why did they have to do that? Did anyone deserve to spend eternity in the cold ground of Titan? Why couldn't the dead be warm? Why couldn't she wake up long enough to retrieve a blanket from the hall closet? Surely, her mother would not mind. She liked the cold...

Kimber came slowly awake, aware of a thousand frigid knives on her back, buttocks, and legs. She opened her eyes to find a figure in white leaning over her. Beyond the usual bright lights of an operating theater, there was nothing to see. Was that it? Had she been injured and her body frozen until the doctors could treat her? If so, where was Lars? Surely, he would not let them operate on her until he was present!

Then her memory came flooding back. She remembered the horrible deaths the Alliance Marines had inflicted on the entire ground party. She remembered the ride to orbit with Halley Trevanon beside her. She remembered the final interview with Mikal Blount before they had dumped her in a tank and put her to sleep.

"Where am I?" she groaned, unaware of how unoriginal that query was. Despite its familiarity, the doctor misunderstood her intent.

"You are just coming out of subtemperature suspension. Do you remember who you are?"

She nodded weakly, and then asked again, "Who are you and where am I?"

The doctor peeled back first one eyelid and then the other, shining a bright light in her eyes as he did so. "I am Doctor Sprague and you are in Navy Headquarters aboard Cloudcroft."

He ignored her groan. The doctor finished examining her in an efficient manner, then injected her with something to make her sleep again.

The next time she woke, she was in a hospital bed. She recognized it by the high, narrow design. The white painted room had a privacy curtain that slid in a track on the ceiling. The curtain was retracted, and beyond it was a door with a square window. Someone was standing with his back to the window, undoubtedly a guard.

She lay in bed for long minutes, taking stock of her situation. She was clothed in a hospital gown with a slit up the back, had no idea where her clothes were, and was locked in a guarded room (at least, she assumed the door was locked). She wondered idly why she was alive, and where Halley was.

At the thought of Halley, another memory came flooding back to her. Bolin had planned to use the two of them as bait to capture Lars! Suddenly, she felt almost as bad as she had when she first came out of cold sleep. She began to weep uncontrollably.

Thirty seconds later the door opened and a man in the uniform of a Navy captain stepped inside. She stopped the flow of tears with an effort of will, reaching up to quickly wipe away the evidence.

“No need to panic, Miss Crawford. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

“Who are you?”

“The name is Berghoff. I work for Grand Admiral Samorset.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

The man sighed, and said, “I really don’t know how to answer that. You really know too much for us to let you go. On the other hand, your father is raising a fleet to rescue you. We may need to trade you at some future time in order to make him desist. How does it feel to be the ‘face that launched a thousand ships?’”

“You’re lying!”

He shrugged. “Why would I lie? It would obviously be better to keep this information from you. I am being honest so you will not give up hope and do something stupid, like trying to escape. You *can’t*, of course. You are at the heart of our most secure facility. Still, if you should make the attempt, you might be harmed. We can’t take that chance.”

“My father will never negotiate with you after what your people did on Earth!”

“Then it will be war for sure,” Berghoff replied with a diffident shrug.

“What about Halley Trevanon? Is she here?”

Berghoff hesitated a moment, then smiled. “No reason I shouldn’t tell you, I suppose. She is in the next room. Naturally, the two of you will not be allowed to speak. Is there something I can get you? Some service I might perform to make your stay more comfortable?”

“You can let me go.”

“I’m sorry, but that is something I cannot do. I will check on you from time to time. Good bye.”

She watched him go, then lay back to consider what he had told her. She had no way to know whether he had lied or not. Was her father really organizing a rescue, or was that some sort of psychological game they were playing with her? Maybe she *should* try to escape! But how? She laid back and closed her eyes, choosing to rest before considering the problem at greater length. The corners of her mouth turned upward in a brief smile just before she drifted off. There was one thing she could be certain of. They had yet to capture Lars. If he had fallen into their hands, they would have no reason to keep anyone alive.

#

Vixen had entered Saturn’s atmosphere moving west to east. Now, deep within the North Temperate

Belt, they made for the southern cloud wall. There they found a split leading to a small eddy storm. Within the eye of that storm, a fleet of ships waited for them. Sands watched in amazement as the long-range scanner painted the fleet's composition. There were six large airships, the smallest of which was half a kilometer in length. Around them swarmed nearly a hundred smaller craft: cruisers, destroyers, prowlers, air sharks, patrollers, and single seat fighters.

As impressive as the diversity of ships were the transponder codes that proclaimed each vessel's city of origin. The screen flashed the identities of aircraft from New Rochelle, Moskva Free State, Shin Nippon, Sturdevant, Halloway, and the Corwin Confederation. Nor were all the cities located in the North Temperate Belt. There were several contingents from cities in the North Equatorial Belt. All had one thing in common. Each had made the Alliance's list for future conquest, or had dependencies that had.

"Hello, *Vixen*, this is fleet final approach control. Come right to one-seven-eight true."

"Coming right," McCarver said.

They had first been challenged several hundred kilometers out by roving patrol craft. Sands had no doubt that the surrounding cloud walls were alive with vessels and saturated by all manner of sensors. In addition, Titanian spacecraft orbiting overhead kept watch on the Northern Alliance and its fleet. They would signal the moment they detected a sortie. Whoever was in command of this fleet was taking no chance of another surprise like that at the Battle of New Philadelphia.

Approach control sent the Titanian spacecraft toward the largest of the airships, a flagship of the Corwin fleet. As they approached to within ten kilometers, they slowed to two hundred kilometers per hour. That was the slowest *Vixen* could go in atmosphere without having to use underjets. By the time they had closed to one kilometer, approach control ordered them to halt completely. Captain McCarver did as ordered and balanced his ship on the hot flame of her jets.

They hovered for five minutes while a small prowler transferred six figures in environment suits to the freighter's upper fuselage. Bostwick let them in through the overhead hatch. The boarding party made a quick search of the ship to confirm its identity. Then following a quick consultation with the flagship, the leader of the boarding party gave McCarver permission to proceed with docking.

Sands watched as the silver airship grew in the forward windscreen until there was nothing else to see. *Vixen* edged forward on her underjets toward the black maw of the hangar bay. They crossed over a landing stage whose open grillwork allowed their jet blast to pass unimpeded. McCarver lowered his ship to the stage and shut down all engines. A working party attached a cable to *Vixen*'s nose and winched the freighter into the landing bay. Once inside, it was immediately surrounded by armed guards.

"All right," the leader of the boarding party ordered, "everyone out!"

They filed out one at a time. They found themselves in a cavernous space inside the giant airship. Even though the landing bay was huge, it was stuffed to capacity with smaller vessels of every description. Sands suddenly realized why there were so many heavier-than-hydrogen craft buzzing about outside. There just was not enough docking capacity to land all vessels at once. Unless an aircraft was undergoing maintenance, it had to orbit continuously under its own power.

As the six survivors of the expedition to Earth descended from *Vixen*'s port airlock, they were met by an officer in the livery of the Moskvian Navy.

"Gentlemen, you will come with me," he said in the rough Moskvian accent.

"Where are we going?"

“To meet the Fleet Council,” the officer replied. “Please, we must hurry. There is much to do. We move on the Alliance in only four more days!”

Chapter 30: Strike Force Redemption

The officer escorted Sands and Paolo Renzi from the landing bay to a conference room with a transparent wall. Beyond the wall was the flagship’s Combat Information Center. The rows of consoles and tactical displays reminded Sands of his last night aboard *Delphi*. Those screens too had shown clear sky out to the limits of detection. He remembered how quickly that had changed.

“Hello, Lars,” a voice said as he gazed out across the ranks of ship controllers. Sands turned to discover Envon Crawford standing behind him. The factor was one of several who had entered the compartment a few moments after Sands and Renzi.

“Hello, sir. Any word on Kimber?”

Crawford grimaced. “She’s aboard Cloudcroft. We think they are holding her in Naval Headquarters.”

“Have they made any demands?”

“Dalishaar assures Ganth Bartlett that everything will be cleared up in a few days. I hear through other channels that she is to stand trial. The only consistent demand we’re getting is that you surrender for unspecified ‘crimes against the Alliance.’”

Sands bit his lower lip. “Then maybe that is what I should do.”

“Don’t talk crazy!”

“It isn’t crazy if I can save Kimber and Halley. It is simple mathematics. One life for two.”

“Mathematics is *never* simple when the equation is written in human lives.”

“What about everyone who will die if this armada goes head to head with the Alliance fleet? Don’t they count for something?”

Crawford looked shocked. “Surely you don’t think this armada has gathered for the sole purpose of rescuing my daughter!”

“Why else?”

“Those ships are out there because their cities’ independence is threatened by the Alliance’s possession of energy screens. They would rather fight now than surrender later. If we win, we will require the Alliance cities to disperse. If we lose, it won’t matter because Cloudcroft will then be the undisputed master of the North Temperate Belt.”

Crawford put his hand on Sands’s shoulder before continuing in a softer voice. “You and I love Kimber, Lars. We want her safe. That is natural. However, to the rest of the strike force, the issue is just not relevant. The attack will proceed regardless. Kimber would not want you to throw your life away, and neither do I.”

Lars nodded somberly. “Message received. I’ll put my hair shirt back into storage.”

Just then, a short man with a chocolate complexion and eyes to match entered the compartment. His insignia proclaimed him a fleet admiral of the Corwin Confederation. The admiral strode to the head of the conference table and waited for everyone to take their assigned seats.

“For our two guests, I am Fleet Admiral Ramadan Vishnu, commanding Strike Force Redemption. These other officers are members of my battle staff.” Vishnu’s gaze rested on Paolo Renzi. “I presume you are Professor Renzi, sir.”

“I am.”

“Each man here has studied your report concerning the expedition to Earth. Would you favor us with a summary of your discovery and its significance?”

“If you wish, Admiral.” Renzi leaned forward and gave a simplified explanation of energy screens and the physical principles involved. He then went on to describe the screen’s potential as both a defensive barrier and a shield against the flaring sun.

A Moskvan captain at the far end of the table cleared his throat. “These screens, Professor. They are impervious to *all* forms of matter and energy?”

“That is true.”

“Surely there must be some countermeasure we can take against them. What about nuclear weapons?”

Renzi shrugged. “Any large scale nearby explosion would buffet an encapsulated city with its expanding shock wave, of course. The effect on those inside would be similar to a terrestrial trembler.”

“Then we *could* hurt them.”

Renzi nodded. “If you happen to possess nuclear explosives and can deliver them to within a kilometer of the target city before detonation. Not otherwise, I fear.”

“Then perhaps we should get busy constructing such weapons.”

“How? Saturn has no ready supply of fissionables, and even if it did, the industrial processes involved are cumbersome. The aggregate equipment involved in fission weapon manufacture exceeds an average cloud city in mass. Nor can Titan offer much help. True, we have not your mass constraints, but our production of fissionables is strictly a byproduct of our other activities. The total supply is inadequate for any serious dissuasion of Alliance imperialism.”

“We could rig fusion generators to explode.”

Renzi nodded. “True enough. Still, such a bomb would be low yield and difficult to deliver. Worse, while you are jarring the Alliance cities out of their complacency, they will be sending yours plummeting into the hydrogen sea. Hardly an equitable exchange.”

“You seem to know a great deal about these screens,” another officer noted. “Can’t you reproduce the data the Alliance stole?”

“Eventually.”

“How long is ‘eventually?’”

Renzi shrugged. “If provided with unlimited sources and a team of good people, I could probably learn what our ancestors knew within fifteen to twenty years. Unfortunately, the data from the laboratory will

allow the Alliance to have a working screen within the next five years.”

“That quickly?” Vishnu asked.

“If the data base they stole is a complete one, it may not take *that* long.”

“Can Earth really be protected from the sun?” a commander in the uniform of Shin Nippon asked.

Renzi swung around to regard his new interrogator. “From a purely theoretical standpoint, yes. There are a number of practical problems, of course. For one thing, we would need to modulate the screen to shield the daylight hemisphere while letting the night hemisphere radiate heat out into space. Even without that complication, building a planet-size energy screen will be the work of many decades.”

“But it can be done?”

“It can indeed. Had our ancestors possessed our knowledge of space tensors, they might have saved Earth from the sun.”

Vishnu let his eyes scan the assembled officers. “In that case, gentlemen, we prepare for more than a battle to see who will control this flyway. The fate of all humanity rides with your ships. Please keep that in mind when you meet the enemy.”

After hearing from Renzi, the battle staff turned to discussions of strategy. The session went on for two hours. At the end of that time, Sands’s head was reeling from the multitude of factors that had gone into planning this campaign against the Alliance. The tone of the discussion was what impressed him. There was the mixture of excitement and fear that grips men on the eve of battle, but also a quiet confidence. This was no spur-of-the-moment operation. Someone had been planning an assault on the Alliance much longer than the few weeks it had taken the strike force to gather.

The talk of thrust and counter thrust finally ended. As the officers from half a dozen navies filed out of compartment, Envon Crawford laid a restraining hand on Sands’s shoulder.

“A moment, Lars.”

“Something wrong?”

“Admiral Vishnu and I would like to talk to you about a special operation we have arranged.”

“What sort of operation?”

“One we think will interest you greatly.”

#

Kelt Dalishaar sat in his office and gazed at the tactical map displayed in his wall-mounted holoscreen. The display was a repeat of the big situation display down in fleet headquarters. It showed the known locations of enemy and friendly forces and made projections as to what the enemy was likely to do next. So far, they were still concentrated in the stormlet that had served as their gathering place. He wondered how much longer they would remain there.

Dalishaar reached out and angrily changed to another display. This was the view from one of the overhead satellites. It showed more than fifty small silver beads floating in a densely packed cluster in the middle of the flyway. The cities of the Alliance had drawn together for mutual protection. Their staggered altitudes allowed each city’s heavy lasers to cover the others should that become necessary. The

firepower thus arrayed was greater than that of all the battleships that had ever graced Earth's seas. That fact did not particularly impress Kelt Dalishaar, however. He knew that if the enemy fleet ever came within range of the city lasers, the Alliance would already have lost the battle.

"Professor Garcia to see you, First Councilor," his secretary announced over the intercom.

"Send him in," Dalishaar replied. He wiped the screen and swiveled to face the door as the archaeologist appeared. He was struck by the change in the scientist's appearance. The Renault Garcia who had gone to Earth had been confident, even a little arrogant. This new Garcia's eyes shifted nervously from point to point, never seeming to alight anywhere. Garcia was obviously a haunted man."

"Hello, Renault. Drink?"

"Thank you, yes. Have you any brandy?"

Dalishaar depressed the key on his desk intercom. "Mai, bring in two glasses of Sorrell Premium. Make them doubles!"

"Yes, sir."

"How was the trip?" the first councilor asked after Garcia had two gulps of the golden liquid in him.

"Horrible, First Councilor, just horrible! Those butchers cut down innocent men without a qualm. I was afraid they might even kill *me* !"

"I know," the first councilor said, his tone sympathetic. Actually, the massacre of the Titanian scientists was about the only thing Mikal Blount had done on Earth of which he approved. Not only had Blount protected the secret of the energy screen, he had eliminated virtually everyone who might have learned it. "What about the energy screen data?"

"What about it?"

"Is it still on Earth?"

"Hell, no! Blount got every record tile in the whole damned laboratory."

The news was like a knife thrust into Dalishaar's intestines. "You're sure?"

"I practically rested my feet on the box they used to transport the tiles back to orbit. It was all I could do to pretend they weren't important to me."

"Does Blount know the significance of what he has?"

"The talk was of little else the whole trip back."

Dalishaar paused to consider his options. The loss of the energy screen data was a major blow. With that data went his plans to make the Northern Alliance the dominant power on Saturn, and himself the most powerful man in the Alliance. Its possession by the Militarists put his Accretionists in an untenable position.

Then there was the matter of Strike Force Redemption. If the Navy managed to beat off the combined fleets of Titan, the Corwin Confederation, and the Moskvan Free State, the Militarists would gain control of the council by acclamation. Whether the coming battle was won or lost, the results would be the same for Kelt Dalishaar and his people. Thus, the battle must not be joined. All that remained was to find a way to abort the fighting and rob Admiral Samorset of his victory.

One thing was certain. Envon Crawford would not renounce his crusade so long as his daughter languished in an Alliance prison. The Militarists had him stymied even in this minor matter. Rather than turn her over to the civil authorities, they held her deep inside their fortress headquarters. Still, the matter of Kimber Crawford was the one element of this quandary where Dalishaar had the power to affect events. It would have to be made to serve his purposes.

“What of the women prisoners Blount brought back with him?” the first councilor asked Garcia.

“I don’t know,” the professor responded. “He seemed anxious that they not talk to anyone. Herrera had them gagged the whole time they were in the landing boat. Blount put them in cold sleep as soon as they were aboard ship.”

“Odd,” Dalishaar muttered. “What did he expect them to say?”

“At first I thought he was trying to protect the secret of the energy screen. When he made no effort to stop the speculation later, I decided he must be protecting some other secret. What, I have no idea.”

Dalishaar leaned across the desk and poured his own drink into Garcia’s empty snifter. There was only one secret Kimber Crawford and Halley Trevanon might know that would worry the Navy -- the identity of the individual or group who had contracted for Larson Sands to raid Cloudcroft. Slowly, a thin smile appeared on Kelt Dalishaar’s face.

Suddenly his problems did not seem nearly so insurmountable. Perhaps he had more to bargain with than he had realized.

Chapter 31: Prisoner Exchange

Larson Sands crouched in the underside hydrogen lock of a strike force swift and tried to take his mind off his discomfort. He was encased in a black environment suit with a flight wing pack on his back. The belly hydrogen lock for a swift is a short cylinder with hatches at both ends. Used primarily for maintenance access, it is too small in every dimension for a man. There was not enough diameter to stretch out one’s legs, or sufficient height to stand erect. All Sands could do was crouch with his back jammed against the side of the lock. It is a position for which the human body is not designed. Lars’s thigh muscles had long since knotted up and the ache that had begun in his lower back had long since reached his shoulder blades. It did not help to know that a full squadron of enemy ships was somewhere nearby and would not hesitate to blast the swift from the sky if they suspected treachery.

Treachery was precisely what Sands was engaged in.

As he had surmised, Strike Force Redemption’s battle plan had not been thrown together in a few short weeks. Rather, it was the product of a decade of studies by both the Corwins and Moskvans. Both governments had realized that so long as they rode in the N.T.B., eventually they would have to face the Alliance’s imperialism. When Envon Crawford had called for a coalition to stand against the Alliance, the strike force battle planners had combined the best features of both plans.

One of the major aspects of the strategy was to sow confusion within the Alliance by launching a campaign of sabotage inside the cloud cities themselves. Agents had been infiltrating the Alliance for several weeks, helped by the Cloudcroft government’s sluggish response to the threat. By the time Kelt Dalishaar had finally sealed his cities, more than thirty agents had been successfully put into position to perform their missions. Not included in that number were another dozen sleeper agents, people who had

been infiltrated years earlier.

On cue from the flagship, the infiltrators and sleeper agents would attack critical installations. Their mission was to sow confusion among the Alliance leaders in those last critical hours before battle.

“What sort of confusion?” Sands had asked after Admiral Vishnu explained the sabotage plan.

“Anything that will rattle them. There will be explosions, power failures, communications disruptions, and even a few assassinations. There will be one other effort that we think will interest you. Sometime during the excitement, we will try to rescue Envon’s daughter and your copilot.”

“You’re sending a team in after Kimber and Halley?”

Vishnu nodded. “If we can discover where they are and the risk to our team can be held to acceptable levels.”

Sands’s laugh was almost a bark. “Thank, God!”

“I take it from your reaction that you approve. How would you like to be in on the rescue?”

“Are you serious?”

“I am.”

“How can I get there? Even if they were accepting tourists, I would be stopped at the first check point.”

Vishnu explained how someone might be smuggled aboard Cloudcroft even at this late date. He finished with, “I warn you that it may be dangerous.”

“I’ll do it! When do I leave?”

“Immediately. We will send the coded message now. If for any reason we fail to get an acknowledgement in time, we will recall you. If that happens, we’ll find a place for you in the battle line.”

#

The swift droned on into the blackness of First Midnight. The Notch stood at zenith overhead. Far to port the southern cloud wall was a barely discernable silver line. Much closer, but still far below, the lightning of the flyway floor illuminated the scene in sporadic flashes of actinic fire.

The swift’s pilot was the first to notice the arrival of the fast moving ships. The fact that they were expected did nothing to minimize the surge of fear he felt. He directed his comely passenger’s attention to the long-range screen, and while she was preoccupied, reached down to touch a control near his left knee. A small blue light illuminated on the instrument panel, then went out. While the light burned, the ship shuddered subtly, as though its aerodynamic sleekness had been momentarily marred. The passenger noticed none of this, being too engrossed in watching the approach of the squadron of warships.

The pilot glanced at the passenger who sat in the jumpseat between him and the copilot. Her features were illuminated by the glow from the instrument panel. She had blue eyes set wide apart in an intelligent face, a straight nose, and full lips that were currently pursed in a hint of a smile. Funny, he thought, she did not look like an Alliance spy!

Following the assault on Halley Trevanon, Arvin Taggart had begun a campaign to identify the Alliance agent in Titania. He had succeeded two weeks earlier, and had arrested Almy Breck. Taggart’s first impulse had been to toss her out of the nearest airlock without a suit, but he had suggested trading her for

Kimber and Halley instead. The Alliance had made a counter offer: Almy Breck for Ganther Bartlett. Since he did not know of the plan to infiltrate Sands into Cloudcroft, Taggart was surprised when Envon Crawford accepted the deal.

“Not very trusting, are they?” the pilot remarked to his prisoner as he slowed the swift to a hover in front of the oncoming Alliance ships.

“Would you trust them if the situation were reversed?” Almy Breck asked in her husky voice.

“Hell, I don’t trust them right now!”

Half-a-dozen Alliance warcraft surged around the swift, orbiting it like a pack of wolves. One ship continued past and took up a picket position several kilometers to the east. It was this last vessel that the swift’s pilot watched closely on his sensor readouts.

Meanwhile, the copilot unstrapped from his seat and moved to the rear. “All right, Miss Breck. Time to go home. Come on, I’ll help you with your breathing gear and the midships hydrogen lock.”

#

Sands soared high above the flyway. Suspended below his black flight wing, he watched the approach of the enemy prowler with a tight knot in his stomach. The ship arrowed directly for him, as though the crew could see the pulses of invisible light being broadcast by the ultraviolet beacon at his belt. The ship’s exhaust glowed purple in the false color display of his night goggles. When the ship closed to within a kilometer of him, it slowed its headlong rush and came to a hover. In his goggles, the underjets appeared to be emitting a soft, violet fog.

Sands heeled over and dove directly for the enemy craft. Two eternal minutes passed while he approached the craft. In his mind’s eye, he could see the defensive lasers tracking him, ready to burn him at the twitch of an unseen crewman’s finger. The stabbing beam of light never came. He swooped high above the stationary vessel, and then spiraled down to ground against its fuselage near the dorsal hydrogen lock. It was the work of a few seconds to shed the flight wing.

“Hurry,” a voice called to him. A crewman in an environment suit stood with his torso protruding from the lock. “They’re liable to notice that we’ve slowed to a hover.”

The crewman disappeared into the lock and Sands followed. He was no sooner inside than the outer door snapped closed above him and the inner door opened at his feet. The crewman descended a ladder into the prowler’s interior.

Sands joined him and doffed his helmet. The sandy haired crewman looked him over before muttering, “You don’t look worth risking my neck over!”

Sands ignored the outburst and stuck out his hand instead. “I’m Sands.”

“Yarbro, Captain of Moskvan Intelligence, masquerading as a Flight Lieutenant for the Alliance. I am the copilot of this tub. My pilot is Murphy, Senior Commander in the Confederation, and a full commander for the Alliance.”

“I was surprised to learn that we have people in the Alliance Navy.”

“No more surprised than we were to receive orders about you, Mr. Sands. You don’t know what sort of tricks we had to pull to make sure we were the ship on picket duty.”

“I’m glad you pulled them. I would hate to fly home from here on my own power.”

“You and me both!”

“How difficult will it be to smuggle me aboard Cloudcroft?”

“That’s the easy part,” the copilot said. “We’re supposed to have a three man crew. Our gunner -- a loyal citizen of the Alliance -- got a little drunk before this mission. No one will think much of it when three of us disembark at Cloudcroft, especially since we are normally based on Persephone. If anyone stops you, tell them that you’re just one more flight monkey trying to get some sleep before the shooting starts.”

“Uniform?”

“We’ve got one for you. It might be a little big for you. No one told us your size. Still, you ought to pass muster.”

#

As the copilot had said, no one took a second look as Sands crossed the cavernlike expanse of the Cloudcroft landing bay. He was just one more Alliance airman among hundreds. It felt odd to be aboard Cloudcroft again, especially, in this particular bay. For it had been here that *SparrowHawk* had loaded her loot.

As he followed the two sleeper agents to the exit from the bay, he took in the frenzied activity around him without appearing to do so. The bay was alive with prowlers. There were dozens of them. The ships were jammed so close together that Sands and his two companions had to thread their way between wing tips. After they had crossed half the distance to the exit portal, he was able to catch a glimpse into the next bay, the one where ships were normally parked. It, too, was filled with warships. Most had access panels removed and maintenance crews swarming over them.

Murphy and Yarbrow reached the exit portal and got in line to go through the guarded checkpoint. Sands got in line behind them. When it came his turn, he inserted the identification card the two agents had given him. No alarm sounded and the three of them took a tube car to a district deep inside the support truss. They were soon walking down a corridor flanked on both sides by the oversize doors that marked a manufacturing area.

They stopped in front of a nondescript door on which Murphy knocked three times. It slid a centimeter into its recess as someone gazed cautiously out through the resulting crack. The pilot spoke a code phrase and the door slid wide. A pudgy man with red hair gazed at them with hands on hips.

“Inside,” he ordered.

Sands stepped forward. Behind him, the two prowler pilots turned to go.

“Aren’t you coming in?”

Yarbrow shook his head. “We have other work to do.”

“Well, thanks for the pickup.”

“You’re welcome. Good luck!”

“You, too.”

Sands crossed the threshold and heard the door snap closed behind him. The compartment was similar to the one where he had met Micah Bolin that night aboard Port Gregson. It consisted of a large square room with a mezzanine office overlooking the main floor. The compartment was filled with machinery of the sort used to synthesize the lightweight and decorative wall panels used to enclose living space throughout the cloud city.

Sands gestured after the two officers. "I wonder what they will do when the shooting starts."

"They'll go out with their squadron, and at a critical moment, will turn their guns on people they've lived and worked with for years. They will do as much damage as they can before they are shot down themselves."

Sands felt a cold chill go through him. He had faced death in the sky before, but always as a privateer. No matter how good the money, privateers did not sign up for suicide missions.

"The name's Caen. Rugillio Caen. I've been ordered to place myself and my team under your command, Captain Sands."

"You don't sound very happy about it."

Green eyes stared unwaveringly at him from beneath folds of skin. "I'm not."

"Care to tell me why?"

"It's nothing personal. I just do not like last minute changes. We were supposed to hit the main data bus serving Alliance Military Headquarters. Now we have been diverted to this rescue mission, and *then* have to hit the bus after they have been alerted. Complications like that are what get people killed."

"I understand your objections, Caen. We will try to pull this mission off with a minimum of risk. How many others are there in your team?"

"Three."

"Where are they?"

"In safe houses spread around the city."

"Can you contact them?"

"Through a blind message drop in the city computer. We have a meeting arranged for this evening. You'll get to meet them then."

"What about Kimber Crawford and Halley Trevanon? Where are they being held?"

The agent guided Sands to a bench where a multilevel map of Cloudcroft had been spread out. Apparently, he had been going over the route before Sands's arrival.

"We've had some luck on that score. They *were* being held in cells deep within Military Headquarters. We could never have gotten them out of there. Last night, they were moved to Government Tower.

"How do you know that?"

The look Caen gave Lars was one of suffering tolerance. "I wouldn't be much of a spy if I didn't, would I?"

Sands ignored the comment “Any reason for the move?”

“Word is that the first councilor has taken them into custody.”

“Dalishaar himself?”

“That’s what the rumor is.”

Sands thought about that for a moment. He did not like the implications. “Where are they being held in Government Tower?”

“Here,” Caen said, pointing to a residential section in the upper third of the tower.

Sands smiled. That was the same section where he had first met Kimber. They might even be keeping her in the same VIP apartment.

“Is something wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s just that this is turning into Old Home Week!”

Sands noticed the cryptic look Caen gave him, but did not elaborate.

Chapter 32: Peace Talks

Kimber Crawford’s eyes opened to narrow slits. She was lying on her right side with her head pillowed on her arm. In front of her was an open window framed by the leaves of trees sprouting from foam filled planters at the edge of a balcony. Intermittent chirping noises told her the trees were infested with songbirds. A beam of sunlight shone through the window. It washed over her and made an abstract design on the bed. From somewhere close by came the smell of cooking eggs and yeast strips.

She lay half awake for a moment, thinking she was back in her dormitory room at college. She wasn’t, of course. Her college quarters had not been one-quarter this spacious, nor had they possessed a window overlooking Oxford-in-the-Clouds. As she came slowly awake, her disorientation slipped quietly away and the memory of the previous day came flooding back. She remembered where she was and how she had come to be there. What was missing was *why* she suddenly found herself ensconced in this luxury apartment.

A figure came through the door at the edge of her peripheral vision. Kimber turned to see Halley Trevanon carrying a tray piled high with steaming plates of food and a teapot.

“Oh, good, you’re awake! Breakfast is ready.”

Kimber rolled over, sat up, and propped herself against a pair of pillows. She draped a sheet over herself, tucking it in under her arms, as Halley sat the tray across her lap. The food odors reminded her of how hungry she was.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Halley was clad in a robe and her hair was tied atop her head. She was far more relaxed than the previous evening when the two of them had been transferred from the military hospital to this apartment.

“I’ve already had breakfast. I’ve been up for hours.”

“What time is it?” Kimber asked, looking at the slanting sunlight coming in the window.

“Just after Second Dawn.”

“No wonder I feel so rested! I thought it was morning. Any sign of our hosts?”

“None,” Halley replied. “They must want us rested and fed before they bring in the red hot pincers.”

“Just so they hold off until after breakfast,” Kimber said around the edges of a piece of toast.

Halley sat on the edge of the bed and watched her eat. Neither woman spoke, but after days in isolation, neither wanted to be alone either.

It had been three days since Kimber had awakened alone in the Alliance military hospital. After the visit from Captain Berghoff, she had seen no one but the Marines who brought her meals and the nurse who changed her sheets. That had ended the previous evening when she had been roused by a commotion outside her door. Several angry voices had argued about something, and then subsided as someone had opened her door.

The people who filled the hospital corridor were neither medical personnel nor Marines. Their uniforms were those of the ruling council’s civilian security force. They were, she realized with a shock, Kelt Dalishaar’s men.

The officer in charge had ordered her out into the corridor, where she had been quickly surrounded by a squad of security officers. It had occurred to her that the formation bore a frightening resemblance to a movie firing squad.

She stood still while a guard fastened a webbed belt and wrist restraints to her. Kimber had taken the opportunity to look around. Several Marines were watching the procedure from just down the corridor. None of them looked happy.

Two files of men had formed around her and marched a few paces down the corridor to the next room. There they had halted and the guards had gone to collect Halley Trevanon. The two women had given each other quick smiles of reassurance as their eyes met. After Halley had been shackled, the squad formed up and marched them to a tube station. There had ensued another argument between the civil guards and the military. The argument had ended with the chief security officer waving a piece of writing plastic beneath the nose of a Major of Marines. They had then climbed into several tube cars and disappeared into the transport system.

Kimber had not been surprised when the cars surfaced inside the Government Tower tube station. She and Halley had then been taken to an apartment in the upper reaches of the tower. There they had been unshackled and left alone.

They had allowed themselves the luxury of a tearful reunion. Kimber had never realized how much a friendly face could mean to a person, even one as tear streaked as her own. She and Halley had then spent most of the night talking over what the future might hold. Sometime after Second Midnight, they had parted and gone to sleep in separate bedrooms.

“Finished?” Halley asked after Kimber had sipped a second cup of tea.

“Finished,” she confirmed. “I guess I’ll get up, take a shower, and see if I can’t make myself more presentable.

“Take your time.”

Kimber felt almost happy after washing her hair, combing it out, and putting on a bare minimum of makeup. She found a robe like Halley's and put it on. Let them do their damndest, she thought, as she opened the door from her bedroom. She found Halley just replacing the comm unit handset in its cradle.

"What's up?"

"That was Kelt Dalishaar's secretary. She asked if we would be able to meet with him in an hour."

"I wonder how he knew we were awake."

Halley glanced up at the ceiling. Her manner was of someone looking for listening and spy devices.

Kimber felt stupid for having asked such a silly question. "Well then, I suppose we'd best get dressed."

Halley nodded. "Something tells me that it's time for those hot pincers."

#

Dalishaar strode into the apartment like a long lost relative. Kimber had chosen to meet him in a black jumpsuit while Halley was in a red dress. Both outfits had come from the apartment's well-stocked closets.

"Good afternoon, Miss Trevanon. Hello, Kimber. It's good to see both of you again." Dalishaar bowed deeply and kissed each of their hands in turn.

"First Councilor," Kimber replied, nodding.

When Halley said nothing, Dalishaar glanced up with a quizzical look on his face. He still held her hand as he smiled. "*We have* met, have we not, Miss Trevanon? You were the one who stayed behind in my office and pirated my private computer files, I believe."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Come now. You are being disingenuous. You left me a note telling me what you had done. Sort of a last taunt. It worked, by the way. I was furious at you for wrecking my plan to gain dominance over the ruling council."

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

Dalishaar sighed and released her hand. "I can see that you will need convincing. May I be seated?"

"Please," Kimber said, gesturing at the sofa that dominated the suite's living room. Dalishaar sprawled across the sofa and waited for the two women to seat themselves in chairs before him. He seemed entirely at ease.

"First of all, you should thank me for getting you away from the Navy. With what you both know of their activities, you might not have lived very long in their custody."

"And we will do better as your prisoners?"

"Considerably better, Miss Crawford, if we come to an agreement."

"Are you saying the Navy didn't approve our transfers?" Halley asked.

Dalishaar laughed. "Approve, Miss Trevanon? They hated it! Admiral Samorset was furious when he

found out. Luckily, I chose a time when he and Blount were away organizing the defense. You should be safe here, at least, for now.”

“Why do you care about what happens to us?”

“That should be obvious. The Navy has possession of the energy screen data. The two of you were on Earth, so you know what it means to have a monopoly on such knowledge. It was my original plan to obtain that information secretly, and then present it as *afait accompli* to the ruling council. It would have been a considerable feather in my cap, as well as being a good thing for humanity.”

“I don’t think it would have been good for humanity at all,” Halley said.

“You’re wrong, Miss Trevanon, but I can certainly understand your reasons for thinking that way. After all, would an inhabitant of medieval Europe have seen the nation-states of later centuries as a desirable thing? I doubt it. The fact remains that the human race has always been the best off when it was the most united. It is a shame the sun had to flare and short circuit the whole unification process. By now we would all have been one big happy family instead of ten thousand warring fiefdoms.”

“You want to see the human race united, but only with yourself on the top of the heap,” Kimber muttered.

“Someone has to be on top,” Dalishaar replied reasonably. “Why not us? However, I digress. Let me explain why I came here. To do that, I will have to tell you something of Alliance politics.

“All of us are agreed on the desirability of unifying Saturn. What we do not agree on is the method. There are as many factions in the council as there are councilors, but mostly, we gravitate toward two major contending points of view. My faction believes unification is best sought through slow, careful persuasion.”

“Through subversion, you mean!”

Dalishaar held up his palms to the sky. “Isn’t that a form of persuasion? We work with groups in other cities who believe as we do. We assist them in achieving power over more reactionary elements, and then accept them lovingly into our association.

“Our model for unification is the way in which the solar system originally formed. That is, we believe in a slow accretion of the primordial gas and dust of humanity into a united, stellar whole! That is why we call ourselves ‘Accretionists.’

“There is another group in the ruling council that disagrees with us. They are impatient with the rate of progress and wish to speed things up. These are the Militarists. As the name implies, they are very strong in the Navy. They see overt conquest as the best way to a single, unified Saturn. It was the Militarists, for instance, Miss Trevanon, who engineered the forceful incorporation of New Philadelphia into the Alliance. You were present during that battle, I believe.”

Kimber noticed the sudden reddening of Halley’s features and quickly asked, “What has all of this to do with us?”

“Quite a lot. You see, it was also a Militarist scheme to raid Cloudfcroft. Not only did it cast my administration into a very bad light, it set up the conquest of the Glasgow Cluster. Both have served to strengthen the Militarists. Then, of course, there was the result of the raid entirely unforeseen by anyone.”

“What was that?”

“The Militarists’ possession of the energy screen data. I fear that if nothing is done, they will sweep me from power as soon as they have disposed of the fleet your father is gathering.”

“Where do we fit in all of this?”

“I want you to help me stop this insane war!”

#

There was a long silence in the apartment. Dalishaar gazed at each woman in turn, regarding them as he would two opponents on the council. Their hostility was something to be channeled, turned, and eventually used for his own purposes. It galled him to have to deal with the people who had so thoroughly ruined his plans. Still, politics did indeed make strange bedfellows.

“Are you so sure the Alliance will lose the coming battle?” Kimber asked.

“Not at all. I think the Navy has an excellent opportunity for victory.”

“Then why stop the war?”

“Because, Miss Crawford, *they* will win it; not *I*. If they overcome this threat to us, there will be no stopping them. Besides, there are no certainties in war. How many ships and lives will be lost even if we are successful?”

“Are you suggesting that you will surrender to my father?”

Dalishaar smiled. “Hardly. I am suggesting that the Militarists are the common enemy here. If I can break them in council, there will be no need to fight. Everything will return to normal. We of the Alliance will continue proselytizing, Titan can return to its commerce, the other cities of the NTB can go about their business. No one need die and no cities or ships need be destroyed.”

“What about us?”

“You will be set free with my personal guarantee that you will not be bothered again.”

“And you will go on gobbling up cities,” Halley concluded.

Dalishaar shrugged. “We cannot change our nature. We believe in our principles as much as you do, Miss Trevanon. However, with the energy screen in general use, it will no longer be possible to take a city by storm. Gentler methods will be required.”

“And you want us to help you?”

Dalishaar nodded.

“What about Dane?”

“Who?” the first councilor asked, genuinely puzzled for the first time.

“Halley’s fiancé,” Kimber said. “He was killed in the Battle of New Philadelphia.” She went on to explain the circumstances.

“I am truly sorry, Miss Trevanon. However, it was not I who killed him. It was the Militarists. I am giving you an opportunity to take revenge against them.”

“What does helping you entail?” Kimber asked.

“Miss Trevanon must testify to what she knows of the raid. She will have to do so under truth serum and before the full council. It would also help if she can obtain Captain Sands’s testimony in the same manner.”

Halley bit her lip and looked stubborn. Kimber was pensive. “You implied that you will make the energy screen data available to all.”

“I will,” Dalishaar responded. “That is, if we can get the secret away from the Navy. Otherwise, no one will have it.”

Kimber looked at Halley. “What do you think?”

“I think we would be fools to trust him.”

“It could stop the war.”

“Is that a good thing? Better to destroy them now and get it over with. Later they will be too powerful.”

“You saw some of the parks we passed through on our way here. There were children playing in them. Do they deserve to die just because their elders don’t have the sense to keep their hands off other people’s property?”

Halley hesitated. She *had* seen the children. There had been other people, too. Lovers strolling beneath trees anchored in planters and through flower choked paths. Old people who had sat on benches and admired the way The Arch glowed overhead.

The fight going on inside Halley was evident on her face. Kimber had never seen such a tortured look before. After long seconds that seemed an eternity, Halley’s features softened and the furrows between her eyebrows smoothed out. “Right. It is worth a try. What do you want from me?”

“I want you to tell me everything you know about the raid. We will do it under truth drugs later. I mostly want to know what it is I have to work with now.”

Halley began speaking. She told Dalishaar how Mikal Blount had approached Lars in a bar aboard Port Gregson. She then told of what she knew of the two men’s meeting, and how they had left Port Gregson to rendezvous with the airships near the Dardenelles Cyclone. She discussed the preparations they had made before hiding the ship in the cloud wall, and how they had launched themselves into the dark toward a distant Cloudcroft. She ended with a detailed account of the raid.

“Thank you, Miss Trevanon. That will help immensely. The Militarists overstepped the bounds considerably with this matter. With your testimony, I should be able to have several of them dropped over the side. I must now see about getting in touch with your father to arrange a truce...”

Dalishaar’s features went suddenly blank. He cocked his head as though listening to something that neither Kimber nor Halley could hear. It was obvious that he had an implanted comm unit, one that had just activated. He sat immobile for perhaps ten seconds before visibly shaking himself. His features had gone suddenly white.

“What is it?”

“The Navy reports that your father’s fleet is on the move. The airships have left the gathering point and are entering the flyway.”

“If you will give me a communications line, perhaps I can talk to my father.”

“Yes, that might work! We need to turn back that fleet while I call a session of the ruling council.”

“Call your session first!”

A whine crept into Dalishaar’s voice. “Don’t you see that is impossible? Too many council members serve with the fleet or are otherwise involved in the defense. They will never leave their posts while danger impends. Unless we can stop those ships, there will be no one to hear my charges against the Militarists!”

Chapter 33: Infiltration Team

Grand Admiral Jerzy Samorset scowled at the hapless Marine major who stood before him. It was a look to wilt even the most hardened combat veteran. The officer in question had not yet reached the knee shaking stage, but was beginning to perspire as he stood at attention.

“All right, Major. Tell me again how it happened.”

“Sir! A squad of civil security police arrived at 18:00 last evening and presented the Officer of the Watch with a writ ordering the transfer of prisoners 1795 and 1796 to the civil authorities. The O.W. immediately called me in the duty office to apprise me of the situation. I then attempted to raise either you or Admiral Blount on the command circuit. Unable to do so, I proceeded to the prison level. By the time I arrived, the civil police had removed the prisoners from their cells and had shackled them for transport. I challenged the officer in charge, who showed me his writ. It was in order and was signed by the first councilor himself. Since the paperwork was correct, and since I was unable to contact higher command, I had no choice but to yield the prisoners, sir.”

“You could have refused the order, Major.”

“But, sir, *it was signed by the first councilor* ! Surely you aren’t suggesting that I refuse a direct order from lawful authority.”

“You could have found a reason to avoid complying. They had just come from Earth and were in the prison hospital, for God’s sake! You could have told the civils they were in quarantine or something.”

“I ... I guess I didn’t think of that, Admiral.”

“You should have. Those were very valuable prisoners, Major. They had information vital to the prosecution of the coming battle. Their loss to the civil authorities might well hamper our efforts to repulse this damned coalition of gnats arrayed against us. Lucky for you that I need every able bodied man on the line or else I would transfer you to the city reactor guard force. You are dismissed, Major.”

“Yes, sir!” The major saluted and then quick marched out of Samorset’s office.

The admiral watched him go. A moment later, a second door opened and Mikal Blount strode in. His expression matched that of Samorset. Blount had been with his squadron on perimeter patrol when Samorset’s summons had reached him. The news that Kimber Crawford and Halley Trevanon were now in Kelt Dalishaar’s hands had not set well with him.

“The man’s a fool,” Blount said as he dropped into the guest chair in front of the grand admiral’s desk.

“He was doing his duty,” Samorset replied, “damn him for it! What do you suppose Dalishaar is up to?”

“You know as well as I why he wants those prisoners. He’s going to use them to bring charges against us.”

“Are you certain of that, Blount?”

“Care to take the chance?”

Samorset leaned back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose with a finger. He had broken it years earlier while serving as a midshipman aboard the old *Cloud Chaser* and had never had it fixed. Finally, he said, “No, we can’t afford the risk. Things have moved too far to be caught now. You’ll have to eliminate those two witnesses.”

“Yes, sir. I had already reached that conclusion.”

“Too bad you didn’t reach it while still on Earth. It would have saved us considerable trouble.”

“Yes, sir. I made a mistake bringing them back with me. All I can say is that it seemed a good idea at the time. Remember, Larson Sands is still the greatest threat to us by far.”

“We can always hope he will be killed in the coming battle.”

“Or else captured,” Blount replied. “I’d better arrange to see that he is dealt with quickly and quietly if he shows up among the prisoners.”

“You do that,” Samorset responded absentmindedly. “What news of the enemy fleet? I haven’t had an update in over an hour.”

“No change, Admiral. They have entered the flyway and are proceeding west in battle order. Numerous smaller ships have disappeared into the cloud walls, undoubtedly to set up an ambush at the place and time of their choosing. We are working on counter strategies.”

“And those Titanian freighters?”

“No change. They are still orbiting peacefully.”

“All right,” Samorset said. “Things are stable for the moment. That won’t last long. We need to clear up this problem of the witnesses before the battle starts. How will you go about it?”

Blount told him. The admiral listened quietly. When Blount finished, Samorset said, “A good plan, but it might be embellished a little.”

“How so, sir?”

“We’ve been intercepting infiltrators for weeks now -- a total of seven at the last count. How many more got through?”

“No way to know,” Blount replied. “We’ll learn the worth of our security when the enemy fleet draws to within attack range.”

Samorset nodded. The enemy infiltrators’ purpose would have been clear even if they had not captured and interrogated several. Their job was to disrupt the Alliance defense at the last minute. Samorset and Blount’s job was to see that any disruption was minimized.

“What if these enemy agents were to attempt to rescue the prisoners? If something went wrong, the two women could well be killed in the attempt.”

Blount smiled. “I understand, sir.”

“I don’t believe you do, Admiral.” Samorset explained what else he had in mind. Blount’s smile got larger with each word.

#

Larson Sands sat on a bench in the park that fronted Government Tower. He gazed up at the building that had been his target so many months previous. At the summit, invisible in the night sky, was the habitat barrier onto which his people had parachuted the night of the raid. Funny, but Government Tower looked taller from below than from above. It must be an optical illusion, he decided.

There were lights on all over the building. The Alliance government was working late tonight, as they had every night recently. Rather than hinder the rescue mission, the presence of so many government functionaries would actually help them. With normal schedules fractured, people would be used to seeing unfamiliar faces. To further aid in the confusion, they would strike at the beginning of the evening meal break; a time when a steady stream of people would be leaving the building for the dozens of small restaurants that surrounded Government Tower.

“Are you ready, Sands?” a voice asked from behind him. He turned to see Rugillio Caen striding up a flower bordered walkway. Like Sands, the infiltration team leader was dressed as a maintenance man. He carried an oversize toolbox on a shoulder strap.

“Ready,” Lars replied. He stood up, gathered his own tools, and joined Caen as the other walked past the bench without breaking stride. Caen was displaying an identity badge that proclaimed him a computer maintenance man. Sands reached into his own breast pocket and extracted a similar badge. “What about the others?”

“They will be coming in from the sublevels. We’ll meet on second level near the computer center.”

“Right.”

They walked openly up the long stairs that were part of Government Tower’s deck level facade. They entered the main lobby of the building and walked directly to the security checkpoint.

“Computer repair,” Caen said as he handed the guard his identity badge and work order. The boredom in his tone matched his bored look. Sands did his best to emulate him.

“What’s broken down now?” the guard on duty asked.

“If I knew that, they wouldn’t have had to call me back after normal shift. Something about some big wire not being able to access his daily log. Hell, as though anything they write up there is worth retrieving anyway!”

“You’d better watch that mouth of yours, old man. It can get you into trouble.”

“Enough trouble that they won’t call me at all hours of the night? There is a game between Persephone and Vacca this evening. I had hoped to see it. Fat chance of that now.”

“Yeah, the emergency has messed up everyone’s schedule,” the guard said without sympathy. He checked the work order against his computer screen, and then let Caen through. He barely checked

Sands's badge.

When they were well beyond the checkpoint, Sands asked, "How did you get that work order?"

"Off the city computer," Caen replied. "Not difficult when you know what you're about. They will probably send a bona fide maintenance man tomorrow. I wonder what sort of reception he'll get."

They met the other three members of their team at the rendezvous point. It was only the second time Sands had seen the other infiltrators. The first time had been the previous evening when they had gathered to plan the rescue.

Lars set down his toolbox and removed the false bottom to reveal three small rocket pistols and spare clips of ammunition. Caen did the same. When they were all armed, Caen gave his orders in staccato whispers. He finished by saying, "All right, this is where it gets dangerous. Watch yourselves."

The lower six floors and sublevels of Government Tower were open to the public. Everything above that was restricted, with security monitors and alarms covering every avenue of approach.

Caen possessed a city plan far more detailed than anyone could get from the Cloudcroft computer. In studying Government Tower, they had discovered a weak point. Data lines for security monitors were triply redundant and widely separated to prevent all from being cut at the same time. Floor space in Government Tower was at a premium, especially in the building's upper stories. The reason for this was the area taken up by the conduit through which heated hydrogen was pumped to the upper gasbag. Someone had been sloppy and had run all three security cables from the upper floors through a single wiring closet in the public access area of the building.

Caen's strategy was a simple one. He, Sands, and a team member named Dumas would take the lift to the twelfth floor. The two remaining members would set off an incendiary device in the critical wiring closet a few seconds later. Hopefully, the security monitors on the twelfth floor would go dark just as the lift doors opened.

It took less than a minute for them to plant their bomb and for the two who would remain below to get into a position to cover the lift entrance. Satisfied that his route of retreat was defended, Caen called for the lift. His work order gave him access to the ninth level. However, once inside the car, he inserted a different pass into the data reader. The lift accelerated upward.

A security officer sat behind a desk across from the lift door. He looked alert as the three ersatz repairmen stepped out of the lift and let the doors close behind them.

"This nine?" Caen asked in the same tone he had used on the officer in the lobby.

"No, you've gotten off on the wrong..." The officer blinked as he realized that it was impossible to reach this level without the proper access code. He lunged for an alarm switch and nearly made it. A quiet hissing noise exploded behind Sands's right ear. The guard's expression remained one of surprise as he bounced off the far wall and slumped to the floor. There was a spreading red stain just over his heart.

"Good shooting," Caen whispered as he leapt to the desk. He noticed with satisfaction that the monitors built into the surface of the desk were all blank. "Get him out of sight. Mind that you don't leave a trail of blood."

While Dumas manhandled the body, Caen quickly searched the documents on the desk. He found what he was looking for in the right hand drawer. "They're in Suite 1207. That will be around the corner to your right."

They padded quietly to where the corridor turned. Dumas peeked around the corner, and then announced that there were two guards flanking a door halfway down the corridor. He stepped around the corner, raised his rocket pistol, and fired twice in quick succession.

Sands and Caen rushed to the door with the two fallen guards in front of it. It was unlocked. Sands palmed the control that would retract the door into its recess. Almost before it was open, he lunged forward. He was followed by both Caen and Dumas. All three landed on their stomachs with their guns extended before them.

Ten meters distant, Kimber and Halley were seated on a couch. They had been watching an entertainment program. At the sudden noise, both had wrenched their heads around. They stared at their rescuers with wide-eyed astonishment and mouths hanging open.

Sands rolled to his feet and rushed across the apartment. As quick as he was, Kimber managed to meet him halfway. He swept her into his arms as she threw her arms around his neck.

“What’s the matter, didn’t you think I would come?” he asked after she had rained anxious kisses all over his face. Glancing at a still surprised Halley over Kimber’s shoulder, he said, “Hello, copilot, ready to get out of here?”

“My God, Lars! You scared us half to death.”

“Look,” Caen snapped, “I’m in favor of reunions, but not just now. Let’s get moving. They’ll figure out what we’re up to any moment.”

“Come on,” Sands said, disentangling himself from Kimber. “We’ve got to get back down to the public areas before they get the security system working again.”

“But we can’t go!” Kimber sputtered.

“What do you mean?” he demanded.

“Dalishaar has offered to end the war and share the energy screen with us. He wants you and Halley to testify against Mikal Blount.”

“You’ve made a deal with Dalishaar? Impossible!”

“Why?”

“Because he can’t be trusted. Come on, we will get you to safety and then talk to the first councilor from a position of strength. If he catches us now, we’re as good as...”

Sands did not have a chance to finish his statement. At that moment, a giant hand wrenched the floor from beneath his feet. An instant later, the wall came apart in front of him, hurling him across the room in a shower of partition plastic. Then a sound like a million claps of Saturnian thunder engulfed him and tried to crush him in its grip.

Chapter 34: Missed Opportunities

Envon Crawford paced the catwalk above the flagship’s bridge. At one end of his circuit was a viewport that looked out into the Saturnian night. Each time Crawford reached that point, he paused to gaze at

another giant airship in the middle distance. In sunlight, the ship had looked like a long extinct whale, with its accompanying flock of lesser vessels a school of porpoises cavorting around it. At night, it was merely a ghostly figure illuminated by softly glowing archlight.

Strike Force Redemption's planners did not expect serious opposition for at least another twenty hours. Crawford had intended to take advantage of that estimate to catch up on his sleep. All thought of rest had been ended with the receipt of a flash message from Arvin Taggart. Almy Breck, the Alliance spy, had contacted Taggart on Titan, telling him that Kelt Dalishaar wanted to parlay. She had intimated that Crawford would be allowed to speak to Kimber if he accepted the communication.

"He's late!" Crawford muttered as he paced past where Admiral Vishnu was leaning on the catwalk railing and gazing at the big tactical display on the far bulkhead.

"As I told you two hours ago," the admiral said, "this message may merely have been a tactical ruse."

"To what purpose?"

"Maybe they want us to lose sleep over it. More than one battle has been lost because the commander was too tired to think clearly."

Crawford shook his head. "Then they would have kept us talking the whole night through. Not calling doesn't make any sense."

The two men lapsed into silence while Crawford stared morosely at the chronometer. He wondered what his daughter was doing now and instantly regretted it. The thought unleashed a series of mental images that, if allowed to continue, would reduce him to a useless rage within seconds.

He resumed his pacing. When another ten minutes passed with no signal, Vishnu informed Crawford that he was returning to his cabin to await news.

"I'll stay here."

"You're sure? They will relay the call if it comes through."

The factor shook his head.

"Suit yourself."

Crawford watched Vishnu out of sight, and then turned to the tactical display. Nothing had changed. Strike Force Redemption continued its steady westward advance as though it was the only fleet on Saturn.

#

Larson Sands lay where he had landed. The dust that swirled around him was so thick he could barely see. He lay on his back and coughed up bits of plastic while the mighty thunderclap reverberated in his ears. He lay stunned for a dozen seconds before climbing to his feet. His heartbeat pounded in his temples as he searched frantically for Kimber. He nearly missed her. All that showed was a single foot sticking out from beneath a pile of rubble. He scrambled to clear the debris and gave thanks that cloud cities were built as lightly as practical.

"Are you all right?"

Kimber coughed and sat up. She was white with dust. "I think so. What the hell happened?"

“An explosion.”

He helped Kimber to her feet before resuming his search. He found Caen and Halley crumpled together. They climbed to their feet without Lars’s assistance. The team leader was bleeding from a scalp wound, while Halley was ashen. Sands suspected his own complexion was a lot paler than normal. He cast about for Dumas, but found no sign. He asked Caen if he had seen the marksman.

“Blown out the window,” the team leader reported. “If I hadn’t collided with Miss Trevanon, I would have gone with him.”

“Any idea what happened?”

Caen looked upward. The ceiling above their heads was smashed as though by a giant’s fist. It sagged dangerously and a trickle of water was beginning to find its way through the cracks.

“I’d say someone just blew the top off Government Tower!”

“One of our teams?”

Caen shook his head. “It’s too early, and besides, I don’t think we planned anything like this.”

“Could it have been intramural?”

“You mean one Alliance faction against another? It’s one hell of a poor time to have a falling out.”

“Dalishaar!” Kimber exclaimed.

“What about him?”

“He must have been in his office when the blast hit!”

“Assassination attempt?”

“Why not? He was talking peace. Maybe the Navy found out and tried to kill him.”

“I would say they succeeded,” Sands replied as he looked upward. “The destruction on the upper floors must be damned near total.”

“Look!” Halley said. She had edged close to the gaping hole through which Dumas had plunged. The interior light reflected dully from a sheet of plastic where only empty air should have been. It was as though someone had draped the tower in a plastic tent. It took Halley a moment to realize what she was looking at. “They’ve torn open the habitat barrier!”

Even as she shouted, Sands felt his throat begin to constrict.

The giant gasbags that provide cloud cities with lift are devoid of oxygen. With Cloudcroft’s habitat barrier in tatters, there was no longer anything keeping the city’s breathing mixture from mixing with the heated hydrogen in the gasbag. Life giving oxygen was diffusing upward into the vast volume of hydrogen. All over Cloudcroft, alarms were warning the populace to either don breathing masks or seek the shelter of sealed compartments.

“We’ve got to find breathing gear, and fast!”

“Where?” Kimber asked.

“I saw an emergency locker in the hallway across from the lift,” Caen responded. “Come on, before we all pass out from anoxia.”

They left the apartment at a dead run. Lars had his gun out, scanning the hallways for opposition. No one appeared. They were all starting to pant as they reached the emergency locker with its ubiquitous red sign. Sands slammed his shoulder into the frangible cover and felt it shatter into a thousand pieces. He quickly passed out the breathers he found inside. They lost no time fitting the plastic cups over their noses and slipping the oxygen generators onto their belts. It was with considerable relief that Sands felt the burning in his sinuses that told him oxygen was flowing.

“That was close!” Kimber said, her voice muffled by the mask.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Caen ordered.

“Lift?”

He shook his head violently. “Stairs.”

Sands opened the doorway to the emergency stairs, tripping an alarm as he did so. They paid it no attention. After the tower had been rocked by explosion, there must be alarms going off everywhere. They took the steps four at a time, slowing only to operate the security gates on each landing. They saw no one until they reached the third floor landing. Sands nearly stumbled as he rounded a turn and came upon two corpses.

“What’s going on?” he asked Caen.

The team leader looked at the dead and shook his head. “These two weren’t overcome by hydrogen. They have been shot. They must have been killed as they opened that door.”

The door in question was the one Sands had planned to use to exit the stairwell.

“Trigger happy guards?”

“Or someone who wants to make sure no one comes out of here alive.”

“Want to try it?”

Caen shook his head. “Let’s try another level.”

“Right.”

Caen took the lead. At each level, he halted long enough to listen. Each time he reported the sound of gunfire. Someone was fighting a pitched battle around Government Tower. They continued to the bottom of the stairwell two levels below the main deck. Caen listened for sounds once more and heard nothing. He signaled for Sands to position himself opposite the doorway.

“Just like up above,” he whispered. “You dive through first and I’ll follow.”

“Right.”

Caen threw the door wide and Sands dived through. There were two men in civilian dress beyond. The rifles they carried were military issue. They were a moment late in bringing their weapons to bear. Sands shot one and Caen the other. Both fell without a sound.

Sands climbed to his feet and ran in a crouch to the next intersection of corridors. All was quiet. If there

was any fighting on this sublevel, it had moved elsewhere. He signaled the other three to join him.

They made their way two hundred meters in this cautious, leapfrog manner. They finally reached a door that led into a diorama/shopping area. The people inside seemed unsure of what was going on.

“What do you think?” Sands asked as he surveyed the crowd from concealment.

“We don’t have any choice,” Caen replied. “Any moment now someone is going to find those guards we shot.”

“Right.” Sands slipped his rocket pistol into a pocket. Caen did the same. Each took one of the women by the arm and walked openly into the shopping mall. People looked at the disheveled figures curiously, but made no move to stop them. When they reached a tube station, they forced their way past several waiting passengers and took the next available car. A moment later, they were deep inside the Cloudcroft support truss and moving toward the city’s periphery. Only when they had been on their way for a full minute did Sands allow himself the luxury of a deep sigh.

“Where are we going?” he asked Caen.

“To another safe house.”

“I wonder what all the shooting was about,” Kimber mused.

“I don’t know, but we’d best find out. It could be damned important to our mission.”

#

Mikal Blount marched briskly through the nearly empty landing bay toward the small winged craft that would take him out to where the fleet was assembled. Just forty-eight hours earlier, the bay had been bustling with ships and men making ready for battle. Now his personal gig was almost the only aircraft to be seen. It was a lonely sight, and one that brought home the fact that men were again preparing to do battle among the clouds.

“Everything in readiness, pilot?” he asked as he made his way to the gig’s cockpit.

“Ready, sir.”

“Then let’s see how fast you can have me aboard the flagship. I’m on Admiral Samorset’s business and have no time to dawdle.”

“Outer marker in ten minutes, sir.”

“Make it eight!”

The flagship of the Alliance fleet was *Cloud Dancer*, a great dirigible nearly a kilometer long that bristled with both offensive and defensive armament. A roving fortress with lasers as powerful as any city’s; the flagship also housed a combined force of prowlers and light destroyers. *Cloud Dancer*’s primary mission was not to fight, but rather to direct other ships in battle. Thus, the flagship’s real weapons were its computers, sensors, and communications gear. Only fleet headquarters was better equipped.

The elongated shape of the flagship came out of the haze in a gratifyingly short time as Mikal Blount raced eastward with the report he must deliver in person. He waited anxiously for his pilot to complete the approach. Finally, they were down in *Cloud Dancer*’s landing bay. Blount found a Marine guard and ordered him to guide him to Admiral Samorset

“Out with it, Blount,” the admiral demanded as soon as they were alone.

Blount stood at attention in front of his superior’s desk and said, “I am pleased to report success, sir.”

“Dalishaar is dead?”

“Yes, sir. We believe so.”

“*You don’t know?*”

Blount suppressed a shudder. He had expected just such an outburst and had practiced his answer. “We haven’t found his body yet, Admiral. That is hardly surprising. The missile was directed straight into his apartment. It took off the top two stories of Government Tower.”

“You’re saying he was vaporized?”

“There are a lot of bodies burned beyond recognition. He may be one of those. I have our pathologists working on the identification now. They’ll alert us as soon as they find him.”

“And the Titanian woman and her pirate friend?”

“There were a lot of people shot as they tried to flee the tower. More were overcome by hydrogen gas. The prisoners were not in their apartment, but may well be among either group. We’re checking through the dead and wounded.” Blount did not mention that they’d found all three guards on the twelfth floor of Government Tower shot dead, and that none of his ersatz raiders admitted doing the shooting.

The admiral looked unhappy. “That tower was supposed to be deserted so you wouldn’t have to kill too many of our own people. News accounts claim it was a massacre!”

“There were more than expected,” Blount confirmed. “But, damn it, we timed the attack for the evening meal to minimize casualties. If this had been a real attack, the infiltrators would have slaughtered everyone. We could hardly act differently.”

“I agree. That does not mean I have to like it. How long did you keep everyone bottled up inside?”

“It was fifteen minutes before we dispatched our ‘rescue force.’ I couldn’t wait any longer without raising suspicions.”

“And the current political situation?”

Blount made a show of checking his wrist chronometer. “As of one hour ago, we gained effective control of the government.”

“Like hell you did! All your people have done is occupy Government Tower. To control the city requires a hell of a lot more. If your occupation of Glasgow taught you nothing else, it should have taught you that!”

“What would you have me do, Admiral?”

“Everything, God damn it! Have you gotten control of the communications centers, the power stations, the police? Do your troops command every corridor intersection, every shopping mall? Have you an anti-mob strike force ready to sally? Have you arrested any Accretionist leaders yet?”

“No, sir.”

“Then, by damn, *you haven't gotten control of the government, Admiral Blount!*”

“With the fleet gone we don't have enough men, sir. Need I remind you that you have taken most of my Marines?”

“I'm well aware of your manpower situation. That does not change facts. We have a tiger by the tail here, Blount -- you do know what a tiger was, don't you? Well get on it and ride! This is one time we cannot afford half measures. If you give the Accretionists time, they will have the full council against us. Strip the headquarters security force if you have to, but get those troops out!”

“Perhaps I can take a detachment back with me.”

“No. You will have to hold Cloudcroft until I can beat back this collection of ragtags. Once we have them on the run, I'll dispatch every man I can spare.”

“I'll do my best, Admiral.”

Samorset glared at his subordinate through eyes that had seen too little sleep of late. “Your best will have to be perfect if you expect to live out the week.”

Blount snapped to attention, saluted, turned on his heel, and hurried out. Admiral Samorset watched him go. Not for the first time, he wondered whether it had been smart to place his fate so thoroughly in Blount's hands.

#

Kelt Dalishaar's appearance had changed considerably in the last few hours. When he had gone to visit Kimber Crawford, he'd been confident, charming, and even a bit dashing. The meeting had gone better than he had expected and he'd returned to his office to arrange the call to Kimber's father. He'd been in high spirits as he waited the appointed time to contact the enemy fleet.

His first indication that something was wrong had come when the security system failed throughout the upper floors of Government Tower. More concerned than alarmed, he had begun probing the cause. He had not worried until, in a manual sweep of the few security monitors still functioning, he had discovered the two security guards stationed outside the twelfth floor VIP suite lying in pools of their own blood.

Dalishaar's first thought had been one of self-preservation. Anyone who knew where Kimber Crawford and Halley Trevanon were housed probably knew *his* location, as well. The obvious thing to do then was to move ... and fast!

Dalishaar lost no time striding to the bolthole he'd last used the night of the raid. In a matter of seconds, he was hurtling down the escape chute. He reached the bottom just as a huge blast shook Government Tower. An instant later, a tongue of flame spat from the chute opening and washed over him.

That flame had lasted but an instant, but long enough to do damage. When he opened his eyes, he found his eyebrows turned to cinder and his carefully styled hair aflame. The heat on his scalp had been unbearable as he beat the fire out with his hands. Only afterward did he notice the stinging sensation all over his face. A look in the mirror had confirmed the beginning of blistering. He winced, but thanked God that he was alive.

Contrary to doctrine, the escape center was unmanned. The duty officer had probably gone out to investigate the failure of the security system. Dalishaar did not have any time to ponder the empty chair. Almost immediately, the atmosphere alarm began its doleful hooting. Dalishaar hurried to the compartment's emergency cabinet and donned a breather mask, irritating his injured skin further.

The chute from his bedroom was not the only emergency exit in Government Tower. The building had a maze of routes known only to the most senior government officials. He made his down a spiral staircase to a hidden tube station in one of the lower sublevels. As he climbed down through the city's deck, he heard the sound of fighting beyond the walls.

It had taken only a few minutes to call an empty tube car and reach the safe house on the outskirts of the city. There he smeared a strong smelling ointment on his wounds before sitting down in front of a work screen. His scrape with death had frightened him more than anything since the time he had nearly slipped over the city railing when he was twelve.

That the explosion had been an assassination attempt was obvious. Whoever they were, they would try again if they knew where to find him.

Chapter 35: The Battle Begins

The six airships of Strike Force Redemption moved westward in a loose crescent formation. Squadrons of smaller craft kept pace with them across a one hundred kilometer front. The region through which they moved was in turbulent transition between belt and zone, where thirty-kilometer high cumulonimbus clouds floated like icebergs in the clear air. The clouds made the massive airships look like toys threading their way through a child's rumpled bedding.

Envon Crawford sat in the glass walled conference room where Paolo Renzi had told the battle staff about energy screens. As a courtesy, Admiral Vishnu had ordered a command console set up for him. This gave Crawford access to the full panoply of fleet communications and sensors. Vishnu had also made sure he knew where to find his lifeboat station.

"We're picking up some interference at extreme range," an anonymous voice remarked over the main command circuit. Simultaneous with the report, a ripple of subdued excitement went through the control center below. Conditions on Saturn made long range sensing difficult at best and the Alliance Navy could be expected to further reduce sensor efficiency through electronic countermeasures. Even so, the onset of electronic interference told them that the enemy was on his way.

"Switch to tight beams. Plot the centers of all jammers and interdict!" another voice ordered.

A slight shudder went through the airship. Crawford did not need an outside viewport to know that they had just penetrated another of the towering cloud formations.

"Enemy vessel sighted," the first voice reported after a few minutes of silence. Simultaneous with the report, a red dot appeared amid the interference patterns at the far edge of the situation screen. The flagship's sensor specialists had burned through the interference long enough to get a lock on at least one enemy craft.

The dot was far to the northwest, moving down the center of the flyway. By keeping to the central belt, the Alliance Navy guarded against ambush from the cloud walls. Any attacker who wished to close to missile range must first cross three thousand kilometers of open sky. Strike Force Redemption, on the other hand, was hugging the southern cloud wall to make it more difficult for the Alliance to obtain a true picture of their strength. Admiral Vishnu had no plans to go out to meet the enemy. The Alliance fleet would have to come to them if they wished to save their home cities.

The single red dot became a small cluster, then a larger one, and then several clusters. Each group

represented a capital ship and its flock of support craft. The enemy ships changed course and headed directly for the strike force. Simultaneous with the course change, several red dots broke free of the main body and began to close the gap.

“They’ve burned through our interference,” an operator reported over the command circuit.

“Let’s hope they haven’t seen our squadrons hidden in the zone,” Admiral Vishnu responded.

“I only hope we can spot theirs,” a third voice chimed in.

“Send out the pickets!”

A tiny sprinkling of green dots separated from their own main body and raced forward. The Alliance craft were all single seat fighters sent to probe Strike Force Redemption’s defenses. Admiral Vishnu had responded in kind, sending a screening force of his own scouts forward.

The first clash came ten minutes later. The two opposing scout squadrons launched missiles at extreme range. A double row of deadly symbols closed, interpenetrated, and raced for their respective targets. As the missiles drew close to the two lines of ships, they began to disappear as each squadron’s defensive lasers began plucking its opponents’ weapons from the sky.

Soon the ships were within laser range. Beams reached out and slashed. Missiles were fired at point blank range. Ships fell from the sky. As suddenly as it had begun, the skirmish was over. The Alliance scouts rolled into high gee turns and headed back the way they had come. They had lost three of their number, compared to two Strike Force Redemption scouts destroyed.

“First round to us,” someone said over the command circuit.

“Cease that chatter!” came the instant command from Admiral Vishnu.

While the scouts battled, the two main fleets continued to close on one another. As the gulf of hydrogen/helium between them shrank, both sides worked furiously at penetrating their opponents’ wall of electronic noise. The object of this deadly contest was to see who would be first to classify the opposing ships by type and function. Strike Force Redemption was especially dependent on identifying the enemy flagship. Their entire strategy depended on it.

After an interminable wait, the chief sensor operator reported that *Cloud Dancer* had been positively identified.

“Commence Operation Scramble!”

#

Rugillio Caen and Larson Sands were encased in environmental suits as they hung suspended from the Cloudcroft support truss. Around them was a forest of ultralight, 100-meter-long beams. The repeating pattern of the truss was interrupted by two large boxlike structures, one of which was directly overhead. What little light penetrated the forest of beams did so from below.

Attached to the underside of the decking were several conduits of the type used to protect electrical and optical cables from damage. Inside one of the conduits was the main data link between Alliance Naval Headquarters and the communications station through which high-speed data was transmitted to the fleet. A small gray lump of explosive, a short run of yellow wire, and a blue box containing an electronic detonator distinguished that particular conduit.

“All right, the bomb’s set,” Rugillio Caen said as he dangled below the explosive and played his helmet light across his handiwork.

“Then let’s get away from here,” Sands responded.

Both men lowered themselves on climbing lines like spiders spinning a web. The climb down was considerably easier than the climb up had been. They halted two hundred meters below the explosive. Caen started swinging at the end of the long line. Eventually his arc was sufficiently long that he could grab one of the truss crossbeams at the end of it. He hoisted himself atop the girder and signaled for Sands to join him. Two minutes later, Lars was seated beside him on the cross member. The two of them released their climbing lines, letting them dangle free.

“What now?”

Caen fished an instrument from his pouch and opened it to reveal a small data screen. “We wait.”

“Word better come through fast. I’m beginning to overheat.”

Sands had forgotten how hot it was inside a city gasbag. Beads of sweat were forming on his brow, and then breaking loose to run down into his eyes. He had tried shaking his head to rid himself of them, but the helmet constricted his freedom of motion.

The instrument Caen watched was a satellite communications receiver. What Caen waited for was confirmation that Operation Scramble had begun. The signal was not long in coming. Five minutes after gaining their precarious perch, the receiver beeped and a short code sentence flowed across the screen.

“That’s it,” Caen said as he closed the receiver and returned it to his pouch. He extracted a small detonator and nonchalantly pressed the control stud. Overhead, a sharp crack and a flash of light told them that their objective had been achieved. A quick check with binoculars confirmed the severing of the data link.

“Come on, let’s get out of here before we fry.”

The team leader led the way to the hatch they had used for access to the city support truss. Sands waited for Caen to cycle through, then followed. They were met inside by Kimber and Halley, who immediately began to help them off with their helmets.

“How was it?” Kimber asked.

“Hot,” Sands replied.

“Did you get the cable?”

He nodded. “They’ll have to rely on lower bandwidth comm circuits for the next few hours. That should slow them up some.”

Sands had no illusions about the significance of what they had just done. The loss of the data cable would prevent the Alliance from linking their tactical computers in Cloudcroft directly to those aboard their fleet flagship. Its loss would be an inconvenience rather than a disaster. Even so, battles are usually won by an accumulation of small victories.

“Let’s get away from here,” Caen said. “They’ll throw a cordon around this entire area as soon as they realize it was sabotage.”

“They may already have done so,” Halley reported.

“Nonsense! They can’t have localized the break this quickly.”

“While you two were outside, a Marine patrol swept the corridor.”

“Did they see you?”

“No. We heard them coming and doused our lights.”

“How many does that make?” Sands asked.

“Six in the last hour.”

He whistled. It had been nearly a day since the battle around Government Tower. The four of them had reached the rendezvous point where they were to have met the two remaining members of the infiltration team without incident. Neither had showed up. After an hour’s wait, Caen ordered them all to the factory compartment where he’d first met Lars. There they had laid low until the “begin preparations” code came through on the satellite channel.

Short handed as he was, Caen had agreed to allow Kimber and Halley help destroy the data link. They four of them had masqueraded as two couples returning home after a long trip. Inside the luggage they dragged behind them had been environment suits, climbing lines, explosives, weapons, and ammunition. En route, they had encountered a number of Fleet Marine patrols. After the fifth such encounter, Caen had remarked on the number of men the Alliance seemed able to spare for security duty with a major battle looming.

Something about the comment had struck a responsive chord in Sands. Now Halley’s report that the patrols had reached the very bowels of the city triggered a wild thought -- one so preposterous that he had to think it over before voicing it.

“How many men do you think they have on security duty?” he asked Caen.

“I don’t know,” the team leader replied as he paused from stripping off his environment suit. “A couple of thousand, I would guess.”

“As you yourself noted, that’s a hell of a lot of troops with the fleet gone!”

“What are you getting at?”

Sands explained his idea. Caen listened without comment while Kimber’s eyes filled with horror.

“You can’t be serious,” she said.

He shrugged. “We were sent here to disrupt things. Can you think of anything that will disrupt them more? What do you think, Caen?”

The team leader gave out with a hollow laugh. “I’ll say one thing for you, Sands. You’ve got balls! What you’re suggesting is crazier than that stunt you pulled in raiding this place the first time.”

“But will it work?”

Caen shrugged. “Whether it works or not, we’ll certainly throw them into a panic. I suppose that makes it worth a try. Now then, where can we find appropriate costumes on such short notice...?”

#

Grand Admiral Jerzy Samorset sat before his console and gazed at a tactical display remarkably similar to the one Envon Crawford was watching six hundred kilometers to the east. The screen showed two masses of ships divided into several groups. One mass hugged the southern edge of the flyway, hiding in the scattered cloud formations. The other was moving diagonally toward them, steadily closing the gap. In the no-man's-land between were the scattered survivors of the scout action just completed.

"Send in the Third Squadron," Samorset ordered. "Have them attack the cluster between the two large cloud formations.

Unlike his enemies, Samorset had not yet identified the opposing flagship. It could be any of the six large craft on his screen. He suspected, however, that the enemy command ship was at the center of the largest cluster. That was the deployment he would have favored had he been commanding Strike Force Redemption.

Samorset shifted his gaze fractionally to look at the deployment of his own forces. The Alliance fleet was in two groups. The larger of these was aimed directly at the enemy concentration and advancing across a sixty-kilometer front. These were the lead squadrons. It was their job to break the coalition of ships arrayed against them.

Behind the lead squadrons, still largely isolated in the center of the flyway, were *Cloud Dancer* and her covey of supporting craft. Samorset was holding his reserve forces around the flagship to handle a breakout anywhere along the line.

"Admiral, Cloudcroft reports that the Titanian freighters have begun to break orbit."

"Acknowledge and tell them they will have to deal with the threat themselves."

"Aye aye, sir."

Thirty thousand kilometers west of the Alliance, the formation of spacecraft that had so worried the battle staff were beginning to let down. Samorset had detailed two full squadrons to take up blocking positions west of the cluster to handle the threat. Whatever weapons the freighters carried, they could not be too formidable. Besides, the Titanians were victims of their own velocity. They would have to shed 23 kilometers per second of orbital velocity before they could join the fray. That would take several hours, by which time the battle would be over.

"We have a breakout from the south wall!" Samorset's operations chief reported to him.

The admiral glanced once more at his screen. A single squadron of enemy craft had emerged from where they had been hiding in the southern cloud wall. He wondered briefly whether he should order his own hidden squadrons to engage, then quickly decided against it. That would be playing his hole card too soon. Instead, he ordered one of the reserve squadrons to reinforce the flank. Moments later, one of *Cloud Dancer*'s coterie split off and headed south at high speed.

"We have another breakout," one of his combat technicians reported. "This time from the north wall."

"Say again!"

"The north wall, Admiral."

"What the hell are they doing over there?"

“Unknown. Maybe they expected us to stay on that side of the flyway to make our approach.”

“That doesn’t make sense...” Samorset muttered before breaking off the comment. It bothered him whenever an enemy’s tactics seemed to be foolish. Still, if those in command of the task force wished to weaken themselves by placing their forces on both sides of a 6000-kilometer wide flyway, they could hardly object to his taking advantage of their mistake. He ordered another of his reserve squadrons to move north to meet the new threat.

“Admiral, we’ve lost our high speed data link with headquarters.”

A chill went through Samorset. “Other communications?”

“We still have voice contact and other non-computer communications.”

He let out a deep sigh of relief. For a moment, he had wondered if the enemy had destroyed the capital. If it were merely their link to the headquarters tactical computer, then it was probably the work of enemy infiltration teams. He had no doubt the break would be found and repaired quickly. In the meantime, the flagship computers ought to be capable of handling the battle without assistance.

“Tell headquarters that we are going to autonomous computing.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Samorset turned his attention to the business at hand. The Third Squadron had just entered firing range and the screen filled with missile icons. As in the battle between the scouts, most were destroyed nearly as quickly as they were launched. Most, but not all. Two Alliance ships and three enemy ones disappeared in warhead detonations. Then the Third Squadron was inside the enemy ranks and the battle became a brawl. Nearly identical warcraft twisted and turned through the sky, spitting death at one another. The Third was taking casualties, but also doing damage in return. Samorset gave the order for his main battle line to close and engage.

Then it was out of his hands. Only the skill and luck of individual pilots counted any longer. For ten minutes, men and ships died in the maelstrom. At first, the enemy seemed to be holding their own against the horde of Alliance aircraft. Then slowly, they began to give way. Enemy ships began to break off combat and retire toward their airships. The gradual disengagement soon became a general rout.

“That’s it. We’ve got them on the run,” Samorset said to no one in particular. He glanced at the chronometer and discovered it had been half an hour since the scouts had made first contact. “Commit half the remaining reserves and the hidden squadrons. I want them engaged before the enemy has time to rally.”

While the orders went out, Samorset’s eyes flicked to the long-range screen where the blocking force he’d sent north was engaged. They needed no help from him. They were pursuing the survivors back toward the cloud wall.

Seeing his ships successful everywhere, he ordered the flagship to close with the main battle. A moment later, *Cloud Dancer* shook with the power of her engines as the giant airship accelerated forward.

“Unidentified contacts, high up and closing!”

“Where?”

“West!” came the frightened reply.

Samorset glanced at his screen. At first, he saw nothing. He switched to extreme long range, and there they were. At the far edge of his screen were twelve blips with impossibly high altitude readings. They were fifty kilometers up and diving nearly straight down.

“Where the hell did they come from?” someone demanded over the command circuit.

“Cut the chatter!” Samorset ordered. He knew the precise origin of this new threat. These were the Titanian space freighters they had been warned about. Somehow, they had managed to shed nearly all of their velocity in less than half-an-hour. He pondered the problem and decided that they must have decelerated outside the atmosphere, probably running their tanks dry in an attempt to kill all of their orbital speed. It was an expensive, but quick way to enter Saturn’s atmosphere.

“Get someone back here to cover us,” he ordered his operations officer.

“I’m recalling the Seventh through Tenth Squadrons now. They’ll be here in ten minutes.”

“Tell them to hurry. We won’t have long, not the way those freighters are diving.”

The dozen blips began to multiply. Samorset felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. The freighter captains had opened their cargo bays in high-speed flight, probably tearing them off in the process. They were spilling their cargo to atmosphere. Samorset did not need a visual sighting to know that each freighter had disgorged four single seat fighters. Nor did he doubt that they were loaded down with long-range missiles.

As each fighter cleared its carrier ship, it lined up on *Cloud Dancer*. Suddenly there was no doubt as to their target. They were coming after him!

Chapter 36: Headquarters

Once again, Larson Sands dangled from the Cloudcroft support truss like a spider spinning its web. He and Caen were several kilometers from where they had severed the data cable. The equipment in this part of the truss was more massive, with an air of permanence that rivaled even the energy screen laboratory on Earth. Portions of Cloudcroft’s massive drive engines were visible through the thicket of girders, and a black cube bulked large beneath them. The scale was such that Sands was reminded of a phrase he had once read. It was as though the two of them were rummaging in “God’s toy box.”

Except for its size, the cube was outwardly no different from the hundreds of other “below deck” habitats that made up the bulk of the city. One had to look carefully to see the long, swaying access tubes that isolated it and the outward facing weapons that guarded it. Unseen were the personnel locks and alarm systems that made any attempt at forced entry suicidal. The giant black cube was a self-contained city in its own right. It was Alliance Naval Headquarters.

That the Militarists were attempting to take control had been obvious since the attack on Government Tower. Nor was *acoup d’ etat* surprising. What *was* surprising was the number of Marine patrols in the city. They were everywhere! Such an effort would have strained the Navy’s resources in peacetime. With the fleet arrayed for battle, Sands had wondered how many remained inside the massive base at the Alliance Navy’s heart.

That had been the source of the sudden inspiration that had so horrified Kimber. In normal times, the idea of two enemy agents infiltrating the *sanctum sanctorum* would have been unthinkable. However, these

were not normal times. That had been the thought that intrigued Lars. If they could slip inside, what havoc might they wreak before they were caught? It had been the sheer audacity of the idea that had won over Rugillio Caen.

Like Sands, Caen was suspended from the support truss far above Navy H.Q. A thin, nearly invisible line ran from his gauntlet to a small cloth bag, the exterior of which had been liberally smeared with adhesive. Inside the bag was a timed explosive charge. Caen carefully maneuvered the bag until it brushed up against the wall of the headquarters enclosure. The bag adhered instantly. Caen tugged gently on the line to break it at the point of attachment. He then touched a control on his belt to wind the line back into its storage reel.

“That does it,” he said. “See any movement?”

“None.”

“Good, then we probably haven’t triggered any alarms.” They had set six of the small bombs against the roof and walls of Naval Headquarters. “Come on, let’s get into position before those timers count down to zero.”

The plan was for all six bombs to explode simultaneously at widely spaced points around the headquarters perimeter. They hoped the explosions would produce enough confusion to allow them to slip through one of the facility’s maintenance hatches unnoticed. Caen’s special city map showed a hatch that led directly into the heart of one of the two computer complexes in headquarters. Once inside, they would plant more explosives. This would be no bee sting attack like their destruction of the data link. They would damage the Alliance’s ability to make war for months to come.

The two saboteurs worked their way along a support truss girder until they were a hundred meters above headquarters. They looped climbing lines around the girder, and then suspended themselves once more in space. Sands checked his helmet chronometer display. They had another minute before their bombs were to go off. His mouth had that familiar dryness as he waited for the action to begin.

Caen, too, was watching the clock. When the timer reached T minus 20 seconds, he gave the order to begin the descent. Both men dropped with reckless abandon. They were nearly in free fall, with only occasional touches to their line brakes to slow themselves. They reached the headquarters enclosure with five seconds to spare. They were now shielded by the bulk of the massive structure. Somewhere inside, Sands knew, alarms were already going off, telling the occupants that there were intruders beyond their walls.

They jerked to a halt in front of the round hatch that was their objective. A moment later, the entire structure shivered from the impact of multiple explosions. Caen lowered himself to the landing stage in front of the hatch and went to work to disable the lock. He had the hatch open in less than five seconds.

Sands lowered himself to the stage, unclipped, and surged forward, rocket pistol at the ready. Caen followed, pausing only to close the hatch. They found themselves at the end of a short passageway. They moved quickly to the equipment-loading hatch at the opposite end.

Beyond the hatch was a compartment bathed in red light into which thousands of optical cables converged on a single squat cylinder. Sands recognized the cylinder as a particularly capable computer manufactured aboard the Kyoto-Nagoya Cloud City. Here then was one of the Alliance Navy’s main tactical computers.

Lieutenant Martin Solari of the Corwin Confederation screamed with joy as he dove on the whale shape below. The scream was both a release and a way to clear his ears as the rising atmospheric pressure threatened to puncture his eardrums. Solari felt the joy of battle surging through him. The exhilaration of the moment drove all remembrance of the weeks of boredom aboard the Titanian freighter *Omnia* from his brain.

Like most of his fellow pilots in the Twelfth Corwin Attack Squadron, Solari had been vocal in his opposition to having his ship placed aboard a Titanian ore carrier and then hauled into orbit. The idea of delivering strike aircraft with spacecraft had seemed harebrained. Even now, Solari was surprised that he had survived the separation maneuver. He'd always considered himself a hardened warrior, yet he'd come damned close to wetting himself when the cargo bay doors exploded outward and his ship had been thrown free into a supersonic maelstrom.

Then he had been too busy to be frightened. He spent several seconds getting his single seat fighter under control in the thin hydrogen/helium atmosphere. His controls felt unusually mushy as he put distance between himself and his mother ship. Then he deployed speed brakes to keep from pulling his wings off. Once his speed stabilized, he settled into a high angle dive toward the cluster of tiny airships so far below. If it had not been for his electronic targeting display, he might have lost them in the haze and clutter of the flyway.

Solari had been fully briefed on the mission. He knew he was attacking the Northern Alliance flagship from its most vulnerable quarter. *Cloud Dancer* had been designed to engage enemies at long range and within forty vertical degrees of the ship's horizon line. Thus, there were relatively few anti-aircraft lasers studing the upper works of the great dirigible.

"High Dive Leader, to High Dive Squadron. Five seconds to defense range. Engage attack programs now!" came the command in Solari's earphones.

With the normal trepidation that comes from placing one's life in the hands of an inanimate machine, Lieutenant Solari reached out to engage his combat computer. His fighter began to jink erratically up and down, right and left, banging his helmet into the canopy with each movement. At the same time, a nozzle began pumping a silvery fluid out through nozzles in the fighter's pointed nose.

Suddenly he was flying through cloud, one of his own making. A glance at his screen showed dozens of long silver trails descending around him. The silver cloud consisted of billions of reflecting particles to scatter any laser beam that might impinge on the mass. With luck, it would defocus the beam sufficiently for his ship's reflecting armor to handle the resulting energy concentration, at least for a few seconds.

The cloud brightened for a brief instant as his ship jerked violently to the right. Some laser gunner had tried to destroy him at maximum range, and had been defeated ... for now. Solari reached down and triggered the program that would begin releasing his first echelon of missiles. These would dive on the enemy craft, jinking erratically as his ship was doing. Although primarily intended for defense suppression, each missile carried an explosive warhead that made it a priority target for the laser gunners. Solari had launched well beyond the normal range of such missiles, but his diving attack made normal weapons ranges nearly irrelevant.

Solari glanced at his forward display. *Cloud Dancer* and her attendant airships were growing precipitously. He could see the swarms of defending prowlers and destroyers climbing frantically to intercept the attack. He smiled, knowing their task to be hopeless. None of the flagship's accompanying squadrons would be in position before he and his mates pounced.

A sudden flash to starboard told him the defenders were far from helpless. One of his squadron had just

perished in a blinding beam of light. Either his deflection cloud had not worked, or else the laser beam had been able to hold too long.

Then Solari was in range, falling behind his two dozen missiles that were being systematically wiped out by defensive fire. He smiled as he triggered the remainder of his missiles. Two dozen more deadly arrows tipped with high explosive raced for the target.

He grinned wildly as he watched them overwhelm the defense. Three survived long enough to penetrate the gas bag of the giant ship and explode within, puncturing the vital envelope that kept *Cloud Dancer* aloft. After that he pulled back on his control and sank into his acceleration couch as the fighter screamed out of its dive. He headed off in a random direction, caring less about his course than the fact that it carried him out of the zone of maximum danger.

He had just achieved level flight and had begun to breathe again when a lance of light flashed across his tail planes. His fighter bucked once, and then began to tumble uncontrollably. He had no time to react. A millisecond later, his craft was a shapeless mass of torn metal about to begin its long dive to the hydrogen sea.

#

Sands hurriedly stripped off his environment suit while Caen stood guard with his rocket pistol. The computer chamber, normally quiet as a mausoleum, was alive with various alarms. He recognized the signals for breached integrity, battle stations, and intruder alert. There were several other beeps, buzzes, and horns he could not identify. He hoped none of them was telling Alliance security to respond to a break in at the computer center.

Sands stood guard while Caen also stripped off his environment suit. They had set four explosive charges inside the computer. They would now try for its mate on the opposite side of the complex.

“Ready?” Caen asked as he smoothed out the rumpled uniform he had worn beneath the environment suit.

“Ready,” Sands affirmed. They were masquerading as a commander and his aide. Both wore sidearms, as required by regulations, and had badges that would pass visual inspection, but that were useless if read by computer.

“Let’s go, Lieutenant.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Sands said as he stepped forward to open the door. They paused long enough to squirt a vial of acid into the lock. With luck, anyone who wanted inside would attribute the damaged lock to an inconvenient mechanical breakdown. Otherwise, they might find the abandoned environment suits stashed in the passageway leading to the outside hatch.

As Sands followed Caen, he had to give the agent credit. His manner was one of someone who had the perfect right to be where he was. Sands only hoped his own terror would not give them away.

They marched nearly two hundred meters before they encountered anyone. That was a harried enlisted man with a tool kit hurrying to some emergency job. He threw Caen a sloppy salute, which the agent returned nonchalantly. The encounter lasted less than a second.

“My God, the place is deserted!” Sands whispered as they continued down the wide, brightly illuminated corridor. They could see into various work areas through wide windows as they passed. Most of the consoles were manned, but nowhere did they see the usual corridor and door guards.

“You said it would be,” Caen responded confidently.

Sands gulped and was about to say that he had not really believed it. He was interrupted by a general announcement from the overhead.

“Attention. There is an attack underway on *Cloud Dancer*. Our communications break has been repaired. Be ready to transfer control to Cloudcroft,” a professionally calm voice announced.

Caen gave Sands a meaningful look, then marched straight to the lift that was their goal. A few seconds later, they were being whisked skyward in the company of two enlisted women. Neither paid them any attention. They got off at the level where Caen’s map said the second computer center was located. It took another two tension filled minutes to reach their destination.

At the computer center, they encountered their first guard.

“May I help you, sir?” the Marine asked politely, his words muffled by his breather mask. His obsequiousness was somewhat marred by the fact that he had his hand on the butt of his holstered weapon. Behind him was a computer ID reader into which they would be asked to insert their identity cards.

“Certainly, Sergeant...”

Once again the overhead speakers came alive, interrupting whatever it was Caen had been about to say. “*Cloud Dancer* has been hit. All personnel, prepare to switch control to Cloudcroft. Activate!”

The guard glanced toward the overhead speaker for just an instant. That was all the opening Caen needed. He reached out and drove three stiffened fingers into the guard’s larynx beneath his mask, then stepped close and chopped at his neck. The man dropped to the floor.

“Come on, drag him around the corner!”

The two of them hurried to conceal the guard, then rushed through the deserted computer center to a door identical to the one they had disabled with acid. Once again, it was a matter of seconds before Caen had the door open.

Beyond lay another squat computer with thousands of optical cables feeding into it. Caen planted their last three explosive charges while Sands stood guard with drawn pistol. Caen had just signaled that he was done when an alarm sounded.

“Attention, All Hands. Security breach. Intruders are loose somewhere in Section Alpha Nine. Get them!”

“Come on,” Caen said, “Time to go. We’ve got thirty seconds on those timers and this place will be swarming long before that!”

Sands barely heard him. He was transfixed, staring upward at the place from which the orders had issued. The voice had been angry, perhaps a bit fatigued, and one that Sands recognized.

It had been the voice of Micah Bolin!

Chapter 37: Victory and Vengeance

Envon Crawford watched the progress of the surprise attack on the enemy flagship and grinned. Everyone had thought him crazy when he had suggested that his ore carriers could be useful for more than hauling metal down into Saturn's gravity well. Most of the battle staff had been opposed to the idea. He had persisted, arguing that war on Saturn had been the province of aircraft for so long that everyone had forgotten the hard lesson of the first space war.

The attack had been arranged to look like a diversionary strike against the Alliance home cities. Indeed, that was the story that had been spread throughout Strike Force Redemption. Word had obviously reached the Alliance. The moment the freighters' engines came alive, two full squadrons of Alliance warcraft had taken up blocking positions to the west of the cluster.

Crawford would like to have seen the face of the Alliance commander when the freighters' engines had not shut down on schedule. Instead, they had drained their reaction tanks in powered deceleration until they were well below orbital velocity. They had then literally fallen into Saturn's atmosphere. Rather than skipping off into space to dissipate heat, the freighters had blazed straight in, diving at the maximum velocity they could tolerate. Instead of heading for the Alliance cities, they had looped far to the north and south, passing the Alliance cluster well outside sensor range. They had then jogged back toward the North Temperate Belt and made straight for the Alliance flagship. After that, it had been a contest between diving fighters and outgunned defenders. The fighters had saturated the defense with their missiles, striking home half-a-dozen times.

As soon as it became clear that the flagship was mortally stricken, the fighters had divided their attention among the surviving airships. Two more were badly damaged before the defending squadrons drove off the attackers. Crawford remembered one scene in particular. It had been taken from the aft camera of a fleeing Corwin fighter. It showed the bow of the Alliance flagship rapidly deflating as the ship began a slow slide toward the depths.

Crawford had then turned his attention to the battle that raged close to his own ship. Even with the loss of their flagship, the Alliance squadrons continued to press their attack. They fought bravely, and with abandon, like men enraged by the sudden silence in their earphones. Yet, modern war relies too much on computers and long range sensing for mere valor to prevail. No individual can be aware of much more than the action on his own narrow front. To be successful, a fleet commander has to know everything that is happening. The Alliance had lost that capability while their opponents retained it.

"Why hasn't Cloudcroft taken over?" Admiral Vishnu asked his chief controller.

"Don't know, sir," came the terse reply. "They should have come on line the moment the flagship was hit."

"Something wrong with their computers?"

"Let's hope so." The reply was spoken as a prayer.

The tide of battle suddenly changed. The attacking Alliance ships began to falter. Those squadrons that had been pulled back to aid *Cloud Dancer* now seemed irresolute. Some ships turned to rejoin the battle, while others raced after their beleaguered mobile bases. The latter were too late. The flagship had begun to break apart as entire sections were jettisoned to float as free balloons.

Increasingly, Alliance ships began to disengage. First one, then two, then six, would turn for the safety of open sky. Then, in the space of a dozen heartbeats, the Alliance went into general retreat while strike force squadrons chased after them.

Crawford swallowed hard as he watched the dissolution of the once mighty Alliance fleet. His gamble

had paid off. The battle between ships and fleets was nearly ended. The conquest of the Alliance cities was about to begin.

#

Rugillio Caen grabbed Sands roughly and dragged him along. They were in the corridor outside the computer center before Lars could shake the dark thoughts that had threatened to consume him. He returned to reality just as a party of Marines appeared around a corner.

Caen snapped off two shots and the two of them ran into an empty cross-corridor. They had not gone more than a dozen strides when a distant *crump!* Told them their bombs had exploded. Caen led Lars through a maze of corridors and dimly lit service passages. They came to a ladder that extended several decks in both directions. They used it to drop down three decks.

“All right, we’ll do it just like before,” Caen said with breath raspy beneath his oxygen mask. “We’re on assignment and have every right to be here. Just walk. Smooth and not too fast. If anyone challenges us, I’ll do the talking.”

“Where are we going?”

“Bottom level. We’ll go out another maintenance hatch then lose ourselves in the city until our friends can get here.”

“You go without me. I’ve got something else I have to do.”

“What, for God’s sake?”

“That last voice, the one who ordered the search. That was Micah Bolin!”

“There isn’t much you can do about him now.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’m going to kill him.”

Caen scowled. “Look, we’ve been lucky so far. However, a good agent knows when it is time to climb into a hole and pull it in after. This is that time. If we’re victorious, he’s as good as dead.”

There was a lot of truth in what Caen said. After all, what difference did it make when he exacted his revenge? Better to be alive to see Bolin dropped over the side than to die in an unsuccessful attempt to kill him.

It was all very logical. The problem was that he did not agree with the logic. If he did not kill Bolin himself, the ghosts of Dane, Ross Crandall, and all those dead scientists on Earth would haunt him forever.

“I’m sorry, Rugillio. This is something I have to do. You escape without me”

The team leader’s scowl deepened as he mouthed a single, profane syllable. “Let’s go, hero. If you’re looking for this guy, he’s probably in the Combat Information Center.”

#

Where before they had trod the corridors in near isolation, they now found pandemonium. Various ratings were running from one duty station to another in an attempt to regain control. Most were unaware that the primary and backup tactical computers had been destroyed as they traced cables and checked junction boxes.

Once again, Caen and Sands were commander and aide. They strode purposefully toward the center from which senior officers directed distant battles. Twice it was necessary to push through knots of anxious junior officers and enlisted men. They passed near one of the entry portals. A steady stream of Marines in battle dress was pouring back into headquarters from the city.

“They’re calling back their security forces,” Caen remarked upon seeing them. “We’ve got perhaps another minute before they start restoring order. Let’s make that minute count.”

They turned a corner and came face to face with two guards. Rifles came up to cover them as Caen strode brazenly forward with Sands in lock step beside him.

“Your business, Commander,” the taller of the two guards barked out. There was none of the usual deference an enlisted man shows an officer.

“Saving your dumb ass!” Caen snapped back. “Both the tactical computers have been blown by goddamned saboteurs. We have been ordered to assist in city defense. Every second you keep that goddamned rifle in my face is another second I won’t have to figure out how to save the situation.”

Sands could see the guard’s resolve waver for just a moment. Caen calmly lifted his arm to point at first one, then the other. Magically, there was a rocket gun in it. He fired twice at point blank range.

“Here,” he said, tossing the first guard’s identification to Sands. “Use that to get through the personnel lock. I’ll be right behind you.”

Sands inserted the identity tag into the lock and was cycled through. Inside he found himself in a plush compartment filled with row upon row of combat consoles. At each, an officer worked frantically to salvage a failing situation. Above Sands’s head was a wall size tactical display on which various symbols crawled slowly across the screen. He was too close to make any sense out of the jumble. Not wanting to show an undue interest, he let his eyes scan the compartment itself.

Cloudcroft’s Combat Information Center was typical of the breed, although larger than most. The lighting was subdued, while heavy soundproofing and plush carpeting kept the noise level down. The light from tactical screens reflected from sweaty faces.

At the back of the cavern was an enclosed balcony where the senior officers watched the progress of the battle. Each of these sat at his own console, giving orders to various specialists on the main floor. Above this balcony was a single window. He could make out the silhouette of a figure behind the darkened transparency. Lars wondered if it were his imagination, or was that figure bald?

“Let’s go,” Caen whispered as he strolled up behind Sands, acting as though nothing had happened.

“What about...?” Sands did not complete the sentence, but indicated the place where they had left the two guards outside.

“Don’t worry. I have jammed the personnel lock. No one is getting in or out for a while. Now, let’s move before we draw attention to ourselves.”

“Yes, sir.”

The compartment sloped up toward the back, much like an auditorium or theater. It seemed to Sands that every eye was on him as he climbed the long aisle. Yet, everyone they passed was too preoccupied with events on their monitors to notice the two intruders. They reached the rear of the compartment and inserted their bogus identity cards into a wall-mounted reader.

“Yes?” a voice demanded from the speaker.

“Extra guards ordered to secure Center,” Caen said. “We’ve got intruders loose in headquarters.”

“Right,” the voice responded.

The lift doors opened and the two of them got inside. Caen used one of his multipurpose tools to break into the control panel. He overrode the command that would have stopped the lift at the first balcony.

“All right, get ready,” he said as he touched two wires together to open the door.

Sands had his gun out, but found no opposition. Beyond was a plush anteroom leading to a closed and armor plated door. A quick examination of the walls showed that they too were armored.

“What now?” Sands asked.

“Try the door.”

Sands made a sour face, but did as he was told. To his surprise, the door slid silently into its recess. Sands gripped his pistol tightly and stepped through.

The single occupant of the compartment did not glance up immediately. He was too busy taking in the situation on the tactical display. Sands was able to advance three paces before the familiar face turned toward him. There was irritation in Bolin’s eyes and a snarl on his lips. The snarl died as recognized the features behind the breathing mask.

“Sands!”

“Hello, Bolin.”

“How did you get in here?”

“You were careless. You should have locked your door.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m going to kill you.”

Bolin lunged from his high back chair, throwing himself forward. Sands pulled the trigger twice. The impact of the small rockets threw Bolin back into the chair, and then tipped it over onto its back. Bolin lay there with his feet up in the air and a surprised look on his face while twin pools of red spread slowly across the front of his tunic. The bald admiral looked up at Lars and opened his mouth. Whatever he had been about to say died with him.

Sands stood over his nemesis for long seconds, wondering why he did not feel the joy he had imagined would accompany this moment. All he felt was numb.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Too late,” Caen replied, pointing at the main floor of the Combat Information Center.

Sands gazed through the thick plastic window. All over the giant room, men and women were standing at their stations, pointing upwards toward him. Already there was a rush for the lifts at both ends of the main floor.

Caen strode to the control board, studied it for a second, and then threw a switch. There was an audible click from the doors and a sudden popping sound in their ears.

“What did you just do?”

“I’ve sealed us in. It looks like our fleet has been victorious. Now if they can just get here before these people dig us out, everything will be fine. Care to bet on who will win the race?”

“No bet.”

“I didn’t think so. Come on, let’s see if we can’t get a scream for help out to the strike force before they think of cutting off our power.”

Chapter 38: Decision and Destiny

Larson Sands and Kimber Crawford strolled through the park and watched as workmen on scaffolds repaired the damage done to Government Tower during the Militarists’ coup. If one looked closely, it was possible to see where the habitat barrier had been temporarily patched. In another few weeks, a new section would be installed and its edges molecularly joined to the undamaged original.

As they walked arm in arm, they noted the other strollers among the potted trees and foam filled flowerbeds. Many were strike force officials attending the peace talks that had slipped outside for a breath of “fresh air.” There were a number of couples in the park where the men were in strike force uniforms and the women were obviously locals. Lars had to smile at that. It had only been two weeks since the surrender and already the wounds were beginning to heal. He suspected that it had always been thus.

After the rout of the Alliance Navy in the eastern flyway, Admiral Vishnu had issued a surrender ultimatum on all channels. With Admirals Samorset and Blount dead and with no hope of defending their home cities, the senior surviving Alliance commander had bowed to the inevitable. He had ordered all cities and surviving warcraft to immediately cease their resistance.

The surrender had come none too soon for Sands and Rugillio Caen. Even as official word flashed through Cloudcroft, Alliance Marines had prepared to blast open the armored box containing the two infiltrators and the body of Mikal Blount. Some had resisted the order, wanting to take their frustrations out on the two enemies at hand. Wiser heads had prevailed after a few tense minutes. And so it was that Larson Sands found himself accepting the formal surrender of the government of the Northern Alliance.

The first few days following the surrender had been devoted to disarming the Alliance military. The process had been complicated by the fact that not all the ships that had gone out to meet Strike Force Redemption were accounted for. Fully ten percent were missing, even when known casualties were considered. The discrepancy caused a brief alarm aboard the coalition home cities. As the days dragged on, it became obvious that most of the missing craft had either sought refuge in neutral cities, or else had turned privateer.

The occupation force had discovered Kelt Dalishaar on the third day. He had shown up at an aid station suffering from untreated flash burns on face and hands. Even Kimber had not recognized him. When Sands saw him later, the ex-first councilor had been a frightened man.

“Are you here to pass sentence?” Dalishaar demanded in a voice that quivered despite his attempts to

remain calm.

“Sentence?”

“They say you people are going to liquidate all of the old ruling council.”

“No one has been liquidated. So long as you abide by the surrender agreement, no one will be.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I came to ask about the energy screen data. We’re having trouble locating it.”

“How should I know where it is?” Dalishaar asked peevishly. “Samorset and Blount took possession of the record tiles on Earth. I never saw them.”

“Any idea where they kept them?”

“Samorset probably put them in his personal safe.”

“Where would we find that?”

“In his office down in Naval Headquarters. His battle staff can lead you to it.”

“Thanks. Remain cooperative and you’ll come out of this all right.”

With the help of the grand admiral’s intelligence officer, they were able to track down the record tiles the following day. Sands had duplicates made and distributed to each of the coalition partners. A set was also given to Paolo Renzi, who spent the next two diurnal cycles cataloging the data. When the scientist finished, he announced that, while far from complete, the records were sufficiently detailed that he would be able to duplicate the ancients’ results within a few years.

Kelt Dalishaar was released from custody and given the duty of representing the Alliance in peace negotiations. Like many others, Sands wondered what there was to negotiate with the strike force in full control of each of the Alliance cities. He soon discovered how wrong he had been. At times during the peace conference, it seemed as though the Alliance had won the battle of the eastern flyway after all.

If there was one thing the coalition partners agreed on, it was the need to break up the Alliance. It was quickly agreed that no more than three Alliance cities would henceforth be allowed to join the same cluster. Furthermore, all ex-Alliance cities would be subject to military inspection for a period of twenty years. Those who wished to become free flyers could do so. Other cities possessing special skills would be invited to join various coalition partners.

It was over this last policy that the Corwins and Moskvans had their first disagreement. Both wanted one of the cities specializing in light manufacture to join their clusters. The dispute was finally settled when it was decided that no annexations would take place unless all partners agreed.

Despite its obvious defects, the peace talks had progressed well enough that ships began to return to their home cities ten days after the surrender. Some of the outlying Alliance cities had begun preparations for leaving the cluster. Even the daily arguments were becoming routine.

Sands found this a hopeful sign. Despite fifty thousand years of trying, no one had ever been able to cure human beings of orneriness. Perhaps that was just as well. After all, hadn’t the race abandoned one planet to establish itself on a world manifestly unsuited to its needs? If people were less feisty, could they have accomplished such a feat? Would they have even tried? If politics and war were the natural result of

humanity's desire to dominate the universe, then maybe they were not too high a price to pay.

"Hello!" Kimber said as she squeezed his hand to get his attention.

"Huh?"

"You look like you're a million kilometers away."

"Oh, sorry. Just thinking about the way things turned out."

"And how did they turn out?"

He smiled at her. "Pretty well, actually. No one is trying to kill us, and I have you. What more could I ask?"

She laughed. "You certainly know what I want to hear. Don't change after we're married."

He stopped, took her into his arms, and kissed her lightly. They embraced for a long time while smiling passersby walked around them. They remained that way until a shout from across the grassy quadrangle made them release each other. Both turned to find Paolo Renzi hurrying in their direction.

"Hello, Professor," Kimber said.

"I've been looking for you two."

"You've found us. What's up?"

"They're scheduling a vote in a few minutes. Your father sent me after you. We're going to need everyone to defeat this motion the Corwins are pushing."

"Which motion is that?" Sands asked. After several marathon sessions, the distinctions were becoming blurred.

"The Corwins are asking that the Alliance cities be banned from competing with coalition members in prime industries."

"Sounds good to me. Keep them humble, then maybe they'll forget this nonsense about a single government with themselves on top."

"You don't know what you're saying," Renzi replied. "All a trade ban would do is create resentment that will fester until it explodes into some new crisis. Read your history. No, if we are to have a lasting peace, we must be magnanimous in victory. As for unifying Saturn, that's something we should all be striving for!"

Sands frowned. "You mean you think they were right in trying to take over the whole belt?"

"No, of course not. Their goal was sound, but their methods were profoundly flawed. No one is ever going to unify a place as big as Saturn by conquest. If it is ever done, it will be by persuasion; with independent cloud cities joining the central government because of the benefits they will derive from it."

Sands was speechless. It was as though the Pope in New Rome had just remarked that Satan was not such a bad fellow after all.

"Are you serious?"

“Totally,” Renzi replied. “If you think about it, you’ll see that I’m right. Take energy screens as one example. In a few years we will be able to build them large enough to shield our cities from attack and will be well on our way to knowing how to construct planet-size screens. However, knowing how to do it will not get it done. For that we will need resources vastly greater than currently possessed by any single city or cluster of cities. If we are to return Earth to a habitable condition, we will need cooperation on an unprecedented scale. For that we must be united. So, I ask you, why not begin the process here and now?”

“How do you propose to do that?” Kimber asked.

“I’m talking to your father about sponsoring an institute for the study of energy screens. With Titan leading such an effort, the various cloud cities will more likely support the research with funds and people. They will also be less quick to worry that their rivals are gaining too many of the benefits. The institute will be just a beginning, of course. We will use it to set up cooperative efforts of all kinds, including a commission to see that every city has access to the data we publish. Once they get used to cooperating, maybe we can establish an international arbitration service and do away with this trial-by-combat ethic we’ve developed.”

“It sounds like you’ve been doing a lot of thinking these past two weeks,” Kimber said.

“I have.”

“What does Factor Crawford say about this grand plan?” Sands asked.

“He said the idea had merit.”

“My father said *that* ?”

“Yes. He was quite enthusiastic, in fact.”

“Who else have you talked to?”

“The Laird of Glasgow has expressed an interest.”

Sands nodded. Hugh Fitzroy had arrived at the peace conference two days earlier with the three surviving members of *SparrowHawk*’s crew. Fitzroy would likely agree to any plan that guaranteed he would be provided with energy screen technology.

Renzi glanced at his chronometer and clucked. “Shame on you two young people. You have gotten me up on my soapbox and made all of us late. I’ll go ahead and tell the factor you will be along presently.”

Sands watched the scientist hurry off and wondered if there had ever been a more unlikely candidate for changing the world. He took Kimber by the arm and the two of them walked slowly after Renzi in silence. Finally, he asked, “What do you think?”

Kimber shrugged. “The man makes a lot of sense.”

“But damn it, we just risked our necks to keep things the way they are!”

“Just because the Northern Alliance was wrong, doesn’t mean that we’re right, you know,” Kimber replied.

“Can’t you just see Saturn ruled by some overgrown bureaucracy? They would levy taxes; tell you who you could sell to and at what price, make everything illegal that was not compulsory! Do you want to live

like that?"

"If it means getting Earth back?" she mused. "I think maybe I do."

As they walked under a sky of royal blue, beneath a sun a hundred times weaker than that of Earth, he had to admit to being confused. What was Saturn except a lifeboat in which they had kept the species *Homo sapiens* afloat until it could reclaim its native world? What were cloud cities but a bridge between the moment when the sun flared and that when humanity could do something about it? Was his personal dislike for big government merely a reflection of the fact that there would be no need for privateers on a united Saturn?

Sands glanced at Kimber and knew that this last consideration no longer applied. Sometime in the last two weeks, he had come to a decision. Never again would he risk his life in battle just because someone paid him to do it. A man with a wife had to be more mature than that. Having lost his profession, he needed a new goal in life. Perhaps remaking the world was not such a bad thing to dedicate one's life to. It might even be fun!

"What are you smiling about?" Kimber asked

"Was I smiling?"

"Well, it was more of a silly grin."

"I think I just made a decision."

"Oh? Care to share it with me?"

"I'll tell you later. In the meantime, let's get inside. We have a motion to defeat. We're going to need all the help we can get if we're ever to reclaim Earth."

She locked arms with him and smiled happily "I couldn't agree more!"

With that, they strode arm in arm toward Government Tower and their future together. Of one thing Sands was certain. It would not be dull!

#

The End

Author's Biography

Michael McCollum was born in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1946, and is a graduate of Arizona State University, where he majored in aerospace propulsion and minored in nuclear engineering. He is currently employed at AlliedSignal Aerospace Company, Tempe, Arizona, where he is a senior engineering manager in the Pneumatic Controls Product Line. In his career, Mr. McCollum has worked on the precursor to the Space Shuttle Main Engine, a nuclear valve to replace the one that failed at Three Mile Island, several guided missiles, Space Station Freedom, and virtually every aircraft in production today. He is currently involved in an effort to create a joint venture company with a major Russian aerospace engine manufacturer and has traveled extensively to Russia in the last several years.

In addition to his engineering, Mr. McCollum is a successful professional writer in the field of science

fiction. He is the author of a dozen pieces of short fiction and has appeared in magazines such as Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact, Amazing, and Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. His novels (all originally published by Ballantine-Del Rey) include *A Greater Infinity*, *Procyon's Promise*, *Antares Dawn*, *Antares Passage*, *The Clouds of Saturn*, and *The Sails of Tau Ceti*. His novel, *Thunderstrike!*, was optioned by a Hollywood production company for a possible movie. Several of these books have subsequently been translated into Japanese and German.

Mr. McCollum is the proprietor of Sci Fi - Arizona, one of the first author-owned-and-operated virtual bookstores on the INTERNET. He has completed the first book in a series titled *The Gibraltar Stars Trilogy*. *Gibraltar Earth* was the first original novel published on Sci Fi -Arizona. Mr. McCollum is now working on *Antares Victory*.

Mr. McCollum is married to a lovely lady named Catherine, and has three children: Robert, Michael, and Elizabeth. Robert is a newly minted engineer, and Michael is studying to be a police officer. Elizabeth is a student at Northern Arizona University, where she is majoring in communications.

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When the supergiant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

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After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

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the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

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When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta ... \

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti - US\$4.50

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it ...

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It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news

presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

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