

## Sun of Suns: Conclusion by Karl Schroeder

Illustration by George Krauter

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Old and new ways may not coexist comfortably, but they can't hide from each other indefinitely.

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### The story so far...

*Imagine sky with no earth: clouds dot the blue, receding to infinity in all directions. To one side a distant sun casts its light across hundreds of miles, sending shafts of shadow radiating from the clouds that surround it. Opposite it, the blue fades to black. There is no gravity here--rocks twirl and balls of water undulate in the chill air. Spinning in the middle distance is a wooden wheel two hundred feet in diameter, its inside surface paved with buildings. And inside one of these buildings, young Hayden Griffin is sulking.*

*Hayden is oblivious to the strange beauty that surrounds him. He's lived his whole life here in Virga and is unsurprised at a world where you have to make your own light, heat, and gravity. Virga is a fullerene balloon five thousand miles in diameter, filled with air, tumbling rocks, and water--about a Pluto's worth of volatiles. This artificial habitat orbits alone in the outskirts of the Vega star system; but Hayden knows nothing of that. He's spent his entire young life focused on the political struggles of his own nation, Aerie, in its fight against invading forces from the migratory country of Slipstream.*

*Hayden's mother is part of a secret project being undertaken here on the edge of darkness. She is part of a resistance group fighting for Aerie's independence. Since Slipstream destroyed Aerie's nuclear fusion sun ten years ago, Aerie has been utterly dependent on Slipstream for light and heat. An engineer, Hayden's mother has come here to the cold edge of Winter to build a new sun for Aerie.*

*An ominous note enters the ordinary day: it is the sound of approaching jet engines. Hayden runs outside in time to see a fleet of Slipstream warships approaching. The secret project has been discovered. Soon the air is full of snarling jets, each can-shaped engine surmounted by a saddle and gun-toting rider. Dogfights surround the town and the glittering, half-built sun floating a mile away. Determined to help his mother and the resistance, Hayden impulsively mounts one of the town's jets (which are called bikes) and dives into the conflict. He is too young to control the massive bike, however, and it crashes into an approaching warship.*

*As Hayden spins helplessly into the unlit airs of Winter, he sees the new Aerie sun explode, with his mother inside.*

*Time: eight years later. Place: the city of Rush, capital of Slipstream. Venera Fanning, wife of the admiral of Slipstream, enters the ladies' lounge of the admiralty, leaving her manservant outside. This is one of the meeting places for the spy network she runs. The men she meets show her some photographs that indicate a military buildup in the neighboring nation of Falcon Formation. Disturbed, Venera goes to warn her husband.*

*Her manservant is none other than Hayden Griffin. He has infiltrated the Fanning household with the intention of killing Admiral Fanning, whom he blames for his mother's death. Despite his determination, he keeps finding reasons to put off doing the deed.*

*That night, there is a sneak attack on Rush while Hayden is wandering the streets of the city. Another of Slipstream's neighbors, Mavery, is blamed--but Venera and her husband Chaison know that Mavery is conspiring with Falcon Formation. The trouble is, they can't convince the government, which has decided to send the Slipstream fleet into Mavery. With the fleet distracted, Falcon will mount an attack on Slipstream. If they are to save Slipstream, they will have to do something themselves--something audacious.*

*While husband and wife debate, Hayden sneaks up to their office, knife in hand. But at the crucial moment, he is unable to act. Venera sweeps out of the office and, spotting Hayden, orders him to get his things together. They are leaving tonight. Paralyzed by indecision and doubt, he dumbly nods before retreating in shame and frustration.*

*So it is that the next day, Hayden finds himself boarding a Slipstream cruiser behind Venera Fanning. As they leave Rush to great fanfare, he meets some of the other members of the expeditionary force. One is the ship's go-fer, the weasel-faced boy Martor. Another, the new armorer, is a beautiful young woman named Aubri Mahallan.*

*Seven ships, led by Admiral Fanning's, break off from the main group. Despairing and mystified, Hayden watches as the sunlit realms recede. He, the Fannings, and his new crewmates are headed at full speed away from Slipstream, away from Mavery, and away from Falcon Formation--and into the fathomless darkness and cold of Winter.*

*Venera has hired Hayden as a driver, so to keep busy he decides to shake down the bike she's supplied for him. With Martor in his sidecar, he eases out of the Rook's hangar and into the blackness of Winter. He doesn't want to think at this point; any action will do to keep himself from contemplating his situation.*

*He takes Martor on a ride through the clouds. We've seen glimpses of the skies of Virga, but now the heavens open up and though it's dark as night, a deep indigo glow leaks in from all sides, illuminating clouds, balls of undulating water, and occasional drifting rocks. Hayden takes the bike up to two hundred miles per hour and they easily outpace the seven ships of the expeditionary force.*

*It's lucky that Hayden does this, because as he's arrowing ahead of the expedition, he suddenly sees a reflection of his own headlight gleaming back at him. He stops the bike just in time to avoid running into a wall of dark water--but isn't quite fast enough on the horn to warn the rest of the ships. One of them, the Tormentor, plows right into the miles-wide ball of water that's drifted into their flight path.*

*As the airmen dig the Tormentor out of the quavering water, somebody spots lights shining in the depths of the teardrop ocean. Hayden lets slip that he knows what this place is: during his exile in Winter he'd heard of the town of Warea, which is situated in the hollowed-out heart of a giant ball of water. When Admiral Fanning learns that he's familiar with the place, he orders Hayden to join the small group going into the ocean to negotiate for supplies to repair Tormentor.*

*Hayden seizes the opportunity to send a message back to the resistance in Rush. As a result of this, he will have cause to wonder whether he is the cause of the catastrophe that follows.*

*Repairs complete, the ships continue on their way. Hayden and Martor get to know Aubri Mahallan, the ship's armorer, as she gets them to help her with some odd electrical devices she's building. It turns out that Mahallan is not from Virga, but is a visitor from the strange universe outside the giant balloon. She doesn't like to talk about her past, though--and as a man with*

*secrets himself, Hayden doesn't press. But he finds himself powerfully attracted to her.*

*A few nights into the voyage their conversation is interrupted by the onset of a strange phenomenon: a very faint gravity is being felt by the ships. Their engines labor as they pass near the skin of Virga itself. This is a region of giant icebergs that cling to the sub-zero skin like icicles. They have come as far from Candescence--the giant sun of suns that reigns over the core of Virga--as you can get. Beyond those icebergs lies vacuum and the strange civilization of Artificial Nature, Aubri's home.*

*Fanning has brought them here to visit something Aubri calls the "tourist station"--some sort of settlement of visitors from Artificial Nature. Poking his head out a porthole, Hayden can see its lights twinkling in the distance.*

*Suddenly rockets streak out of the darkness. The expedition is under attack. In the chaos that follows, the ships are separated as black-hulled pirate vessels loom out of the mist. Both the pirates and the Slipstreamers spew mines into the air in an attempt to limit mobility; but the pirates have the advantage of knowing where the icebergs lurk in the cloudbanks. Their ships soar out of the mists, fire off a salvo, and retreat before the Slipstreamers can line up on them. And they outnumber Admiral Fanning's ships.*

*Hayden sees that things are going badly. He tries to convince Aubri Mahallan to escape with him; on his bike they can make it to the tourist station easily. She rebuffs him, displaying surprising loyalty for her Slipstream employers. Hayden has no chance to run in any case, as Fanning sends him out to clear mines instead. With Martor's help he succeeds in blowing several icebergs away from Virga's skin and two pirate ships collide with one. But meanwhile the Rook is being boarded.*

*When Hayden tries to leave the struggling ship behind, Martor knocks him out and tries to fight off the pirates single-handedly. But it's too late. He, Admiral Fanning, Carrier, and Fanning's aide Travis end up locked together in a cage aboard the Rook. Venera, meanwhile, has shot the Rook's captain to keep him from firing the ship's scuttling charges. She too is captured and abused by Dentius, the pirate captain.*

*The prisoners talk to pass the time. Fanning lets slip that the expeditionary force has not come here to Winter to fight Falcon Formation--at least, not right away. No, it turns out that they came to the tourist station to retrieve a map--a map that may lead to a fabled hoard of pirate's treasure.*

*He has no time to explain further as the pirates come and open the cage. It is time, they say, for the executions.*

*The leader of the pirates, Dentius, was once a captain in the Aerie navy. He has a grudge against Slipstream and is determined to get his revenge. Killing the captive crew of the Rook will also provide him a much-needed distraction, to help cover the fact that he lost so many ships in the battle with Chaison Fanning's expeditionary force.*

*His chosen method of execution is barbaric but spectacular: he ties the Rook's crew--including Hayden, Chaison and the others--to the outside of the Rook, then has them doused with kerosene. He will set them on fire as the ship gets under way. Both Aubri and Venera try to talk him out of this course of action, but he won't be dissuaded.*

*Black shapes suddenly loom out of the darkness--but it's not the other pirate ships. The five remaining vessels of Fanning's expeditionary force quickly encircle the Rook, cutting off any escape.*

*Dentius laughs. He holds all the cards, he tells Venera confidently. If the other ships open fire on the Rook, they'll hit their own men, who are draped over the Rook's hull as a human shield. If the Slipstream ships don't agree to back off, he'll start slaughtering the prisoners.*

*But it's Venera's turn to smile. Before she let the pirates into the bridge of the Rook, she explains, she had turned the key in the lock of the scuttling control box. The self-destruct charges are now armed, and she'd thrown away the key. The charges were designed to be highly sensitive once armed: if just one rocket is fired from the surrounding ships, the Rook will blow up, taking prisoners and pirates with it.*

*"And if you hurt any of us now," she says as he furiously raises his sword, "you'll just be signaling our boys to fire."*

*A day later the Rook is docked at the alien "tourist station" mounted in the outer skin of the world. Chaison Fanning negotiated a disengagement from the pirates, who have escaped. While their crew recovers and restocks at the station, Chaison Fanning and Venera go to visit the station, taking Aubri Mahallan with them. They are here to recover an artifact given in trust to the aliens centuries ago--the map, in fact, that will lead them to the legendary treasure of Anetene. They recover the map without incident, and the expeditionary force embarks for the inner regions of Virga, an area known as the principalities of Candesce.*

*None of this matters to Hayden, who is just happy to be alive. He's also a bit uncomfortable because Martor has been bragging about their accomplishments during the battle, and Hayden's suddenly become something of a celebrity aboard the Rook.*

*While the other crew may have warmed to him, however, Venera's man Carrier is becoming openly hostile. He tells Hayden he doesn't trust him and will be watching him from now on. Hayden isn't afraid of Carrier, but he's beginning to realize that the man may be far more dangerous than he looks.*

*Hayden has other things to worry about anyway. Aubri has not been physically injured, and she insists on getting back to work building her strange devices--but she won't speak to him. When he confronts her about it, she tells him that it's because of the way he acted during the battle. She thinks he's a coward or, at least, not someone to be trusted.*

*The way to the treasure lies through the inner shell of nations that surround Candesce, the giant, self-maintaining artificial sun at the center of Virga. The expeditionary force is stopped at the dusky border of one such nation by powerful battle cruisers. Foreign warships are not accepted lightly into the ancient, decadent societies that bask in the undying light of the sun of suns. The ships are escorted--as "guests"--to the capital of the nation of Gehellen. The place seems strange and repellant to the people of the outer nations; there are few town wheels here. Most of the people appear to live in perpetual weightlessness and consequently have developed into impossibly delicate, spidery beings that scuttle along the ropes holding the thousands of buildings of the city together. Only the military, and the rich and powerful can afford gravity here.*

*While their petition to travel through the nation is considered, the captains and officers of the expeditionary force are invited to attend a ball hosted by the local Slipstream ambassador, Richard Reiss. Aubri begs off, claiming that she needs to visit the local library to research Anetene. As a foreigner from beyond Virga, hence something of a curiosity, she is allowed to wander as she pleases. Reluctantly, she employs Hayden to transport her in his sidecar.*

*At the library Aubri and Hayden learn that Anetene's treasure is hidden somewhere in a sargasso*

*called Leaf's Choir. Sargassos are forests that have hyper-oxygenated their interiors and subsequently caught fire. Leaf's Choir was one of the largest forests in Virga; all that is left now, after the holocaust several centuries ago, is a sphere of charred wood and ash fifty miles across.*

*That black ball is now tethered at the edge of Gehellen's territory; they are slowly mining it for its charcoal and other resources, but it's slow work. There is no breathable air inside the sphere. But Aubri's map says that deep inside it somewhere is the hidden treasure of the pirate king.*

*Since they have been forced together and are away from the Rook, Hayden and Aubri start talking again. He decides he can trust her, and tells her his story--the complete story this time, including why he came to work in the Fanning household. Aubri is appalled at his nihilism and tries to tell him that the world is a better place, that there's much to live for. But her own conviction seems weak, and at last she admits that she herself is in Virga against her will. She committed crimes against the systems of Artificial Nature, and in penance she has been sent into Virga on a mission whose details she is afraid--or ashamed--to reveal. This mission is separate from the one the Fannings are on, but is connected. She and they have one goal in common: to find a way into the protected, automated heart of Candescence.*

*As they are talking, Aubri realizes that someone is following them. It's one of the pirates who boarded the Rook, and when he realizes they've spotted him, he calls for the police. A chase ensues--pirates and constables after Aubri and Hayden, who nevertheless succeed in getting back to Hayden's bike. Realizing that the pirates--who know about Anetene--have made some sort of deal with the Gehellen government to share Anetene's treasure, they burst in on Admiral and Lady Fanning's cocktail party, just as the Gehellen secret service are closing in on the Slipstream officers.*

*The officers now find that they must fight their way back to their ships. Hayden takes up a sword along side Admiral Fanning and they make their way back to the Rook, and cast off. Pursued by Gehellen's navy as well as the remnants of the pirate fleet, they strike out at a dangerous velocity through the crowded air of Gehellen. Great piloting skill is needed to get them to the black claw-like fronds of Leaf's Choir but once there, they plunge into the dead air without hesitation. The six ships of the expeditionary force were refitted as Winter ships--each has an internal oxygen supply, which should last several days.*

*Using the map that Venera retrieved from the tourist station, they make their way through the nightmarish environment of the sargasso of Leaf's Choir. Nothing lives here except fungi and bacteria; the dead charred branches of the trees make an impenetrable veil over the light of Candescence. Here and there in the darkness they glimpse the ghostly outlines of former towns or farms, burned in place and now tombs for hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of people. It is dangerous to linger here; even someone who knew that the treasure trove lay within the sargasso could never find it unless they knew exactly where it was.*

*In the dark tension of the journey, Hayden and Aubri come together in her quarters. They make love; but though she obviously finds his presence healing, she will still not tell Hayden what her mission in Virga is. She only reveals that unless she fulfils her part of the bargain, she will be killed by the authorities that sent her here.*

*After two days inching through the black ruins, the lookout spots something gleaming in the Rook's headlight. Nestled among the autumnal leaves of the sargasso's unburnt heart is their goal: the treasure of Anetene.*

**And now the conclusion...**

The ancient ship hung in the center of a cave of leaves six hundred feet in diameter. In the dancing light of lanterns waved by the gang of red-suited sargasso specialists, Venera could see occasional flashes of the ropes that suspended the old corsair like a fly in a spider's web.

"They're taking too long," she grated. "What's the hold-up?"

Her husband rested his hand lightly on her shoulder and peered out the porthole. "They're testing for booby-traps, dear. On my orders."

"And then we go over?"

"I go over. To find the box."

"We go. This expedition was my idea. The box was my discovery. You can't let me miss out on the final moment."

He sighed. "Have you ever worn a sargasso suit?"

"Have you?"

One of the little figures out there was waving its lantern in a strange pattern. The others were clustered around a dark opening in the side of the ship. The craft was smaller than the *Rook*, and unornamented; but the lines seemed archaic, even to Venera's untrained eye. "What's he doing?" She pointed.

"Signaling the all-clear. Apparently Anetene decided the sargasso was a big enough booby-trap all by itself." The little figures began disappearing one by one into the dark hatch. Little glints of light on the hull revealed portholes hidden in shadow around the curve of the ship.

"It'll be there," she said confidently. Either that, or she'd have to find a new home. Rush would no longer be a suitable dwelling once Falcon Formation took over.

Venera tried to pretend that this would be a mere matter of convenience. But she kept imagining herself returning to her father's court with her exiled husband. They would eat him alive, those back-biting courtiers, the kohl-painted ladies with their poisoned hairpins, the gimlet-eyed men with their ready poniards. Chaison would be used as sport by the jaded or the marginalized, and he would have no one to defend him.

It would surely be a personal humiliation for her, if he were killed.

"Well, if it's safe, let's go then," she said; but a commotion from the chart room distracted Chaison. Venera scowled at him as he turned away.

"It's Gridde!" Travis was waving frantically at the admiral. "He's collapsed."

Chaison dove for the doorway. "Was it bad air?"

"I don't think so. Exhaustion, more like."

Venera followed the whole bridge staff back to the map room. This was a tiresome interruption, but she had to be supportive of her husband. She affected a look of concern as she entered the room. The air in here was close, stinking, but then so was the rest of the ship by now. Gridde hung limply in midair, tendrils of white hair haloing his head.

"I got you there," he whispered as Chaison moved to hold him by the shoulders. The old man's face quirked into a half-smile, though his eyes were half-closed. "Rest now."

"Slipstream will survive, because of you," said Chaison.

Gridde's head rose and his eyes focused on the admiral. He managed a weak laugh. "Don't give me platitudes, boy. Just make sure those damn fools in the academy hear about this. I proved it." He began to gasp. "Old ways--better than--gel charts..."

"Get the surgeon!" cried Chaison, but it was too late. Gridde shook and sighed, and then went still.

Some of the bridge staff began to weep. Venera crossed her arms impatiently, but there was nothing she could do but wait. The brief agony of military grief would burn itself out in a few minutes and then everyone would get back to work.

They had come too far to let one more death stop them now.

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Her breath and the suit pumps roared in Venera's ears. Every few minutes a loud bell sounded and she had to reach down to wind the clockwork mechanism that ran the pumps. She could barely see out the brass helmet's little window. The unfamiliar oilcloth sack of the suit felt like prison walls against her skin, its chafing creating a subliminal anxiety that fed back with weightlessness and the dark to make her jaw throb.

She didn't care. Venera was in a state of rapture, gazing into the most wondrous place she had ever seen.

The others' bull's-eye lanterns sent visible shafts of blue light up and down, flicking from side to side--each darting motion lifting a cascade of sparkling reflections and refractions from the contents of Anetene's treasure trove.

Venera had seen clouds rub past one another and throw up a cyclone; at either end these looked like tubes full of turbulent snatches of vapor. The interior of the treasure ship was like that--except that here, it wasn't clouds that formed the spiral down which she gazed. It was jewelry, gold coin, faience, and ivory figurines by the thousand.

The nets that had once held the treasure to the walls had decayed over the centuries, and so every week or two a gem or coin would disengage from its neighbors and drift into the ship's central space. Once there, it would be caught up in the almost imperceptible rotation in which everything inside Virga participated--something to do with orbits and tides, that was all she knew of that. But the vortex had grown and remained stable for centuries, the drift of its objects slower than a minute hand but inexorable. The spiral pattern, so delicate, was now being erased by the blundering passage of treasure seekers.

For the moment, though, garnets, emeralds, and rubies made in the fires of Candescence trailed in lines and arcs through the air. Here and there gleamed dry-amber from sargassos on the other side of the world; chains of diamond like runnels of light flashed in her lantern's beam. The currency of two dozen nations sat fixed in air as though in solid glass (the stamped profiles of pilots and kings layered into shadow like a history lesson) among clouds of platinum and buttons of silver. Beneath the ragged netting the hull was still plated with paintings, skyscapes half covering formal portraits whose eyes awoke like a sleeping ghost's when her light touched them. One painting, only one, had broken free, and so it was that at the center of the cyclone stood a tall stern man in dark dress, his black eyes those of a contemptuous father gazing accusingly at the looters. Only the gilt frame surrounding him spoiled the illusion of reality. There was a fresh bullet hole in his chest, put there by the first man of Slipstream to enter the ship.

They'd be joking about that startled shot for weeks, she was sure.

Chaison had swum indifferently through the shining constellations and disappeared into the ship's bridge. Venera followed, not without plucking a few choice items from the air on the way.

Chaison's hand-light floated free in the air, slowly turning to illuminate the fixtures of the old-style, cramped bridge. Venera kept expecting to see skeletons, but there was no evidence of violence here; apparently Anetene had been compulsively neat. In the center of the room was a chart pedestal, and clipped to the top of this was an ivory box, its sides inlaid with fantastical scenes out of mythology: men and women under gravity, riding beasts she remembered were called horses. Chaison's hand hovered over the lid of the box.

"Oh, just open it!" Of course he couldn't hear her; even to herself, Venera's voice sounded muffled in the suit. She bounced over to grab the box just as Chaison reached down and flipped back the lid. Both of their lanterns lit the contents through the blue air.

The object was simple, a white cylinder a little longer than her hand with a single black band around its center, and a loop for grasping at one end. It was made of some translucent crystal that made it gather the light mistily. Chaison hesitated again, then grasped the handle and pulled it out.

He leaned his helmet against hers. "The key to Candesce," she heard, the distorted words barely audible through the metal. "Just as the old books described."

"Let's hope it works," she said.

"Candesce still works. Why shouldn't this?" He put it back in the case and closed it. Then he hung there in the air for a while, head down, as if praying.

Puzzled, Venera touched her helmet to his again. "What's wrong?"

Did she imagine the sigh or was it real? "I'm just trying to figure out what to do next," he said. "The Gehellens will be circling Leaf's Choir waiting for us to come out. How are we going to get to Candesce?"

"You're not one to live in the moment, are you?" she said. It was true she hadn't thought that far ahead, herself. Maybe she should have--for he was right, this was a problem.

A wide moat of empty air lay between the principalities of Candesce and the sun of suns itself. Venera knew they would have to cross two or three hundred miles of open space to reach the ancient sun. Candesce was so hot that no clouds could persist in this zone, and no living thing nor habitation within a hundred miles. As the battered ships of the expeditionary force crossed this span they would be easy targets for the Gehellen navy.

"If we send the others out as decoys again, and just take the *Rook*..."

His helmet grated against hers as he shook his head. "We'll be seen. Not even a bike could get to Candesce right now."

"We'll have to hide, then. Wait them out."

"But there's another problem," he said. "We're almost out of time."

"What?"



"That dreadnought ... Based on the progress your photos showed, it'll be ready to fly by now. And in a few days the Slipstream fleet is going to be thoroughly entangled in the fight with Mavery. If Falcon Formation intends to invade Slipstream, they will be amassing their forces as we speak."

Venera scowled at the little box. Their original plan had been to visit Candescence during its night cycle and let Aubri Mahallan work the magic she swore she could perform with the sun of suns. Then they would take the most direct possible course at full speed to Falcon Formation, and the secret shipyard there. Mahallan claimed that she could set a timer on the mechanisms of Candescence that would trigger the correct action after a predetermined number of days and hours.

"Someone's going to have to stay behind," she said. "Wait until after our ships have left and the Gehellens have given chase. Then go into the sun."

"That's what I'm thinking," he said. "Mahallan, of course. And someone to keep her in line. Your man Carrier is the natural choice there."

"Me," she said quickly.

"No, dear, I absolutely--"

"Why? You think I'm going to be safer on board the *Rook* when you go into battle against Falcon? Besides, love, this is our plan, yours and mine. Who are we to trust to see it through, if not one another? When you go up against that dreadnought, you need to focus on the task at hand and not worry about whether Mahallan's done her job, or whether Lyle Carrier really is loyal. You need someone you can trust."

"And I can trust you."

"Why Chaison, that almost sounded like a question." She laughed and punched him in the arm. "It's the best plan, admit it."

He admitted it and they turned to go. As Chaison pulled the ivory box away from its moorings, something small tumbled out. He didn't notice. Venera waved her lamp around until the thing flashed; there it was, twirling away towards a forward porthole. She reached out and snatched it out of the air, then held it up between two fingers.

It was a ring, a signet made for a man's hand. The stone was opaque blood red and the design was of a horse standing on its back legs. The horse had wings.

She slipped the ring over the bulky glove of her suit and followed her husband out of the bridge.

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Howls of childish delight echoed through the *Rook* as a spew of gold and jewelry flew from the wooden airlock door. Moments later a man in a red sargasso suit squeezed out waving his hands over his head. A muffled "unh, unh" sounded from inside his round brass helmet; but nobody was paying any attention to him. Crewmen and officers, the press-ganged and the volunteers, all abandoned civility and leaped on the ricocheting treasure. The man in the suit finally levered off his helmet and yelled, "This is just the dregs, boys! There's tons of it there! Tons!"

A light hand descended on Hayden's shoulder. "Hey," said Aubri in his ear. Hayden felt himself flushing, and his heart beat a bit faster.

"Admiral wants to see you," she continued. Peering past him, she said, "They look happy, don't they?"

He had to laugh at the absurd understatement. The men were weeping, fighting over trinkets, screaming, and bouncing off the walls.

Then her previous words penetrated his consciousness. "Fanning wants to see me?"

"Yes, he's in the chart room." She gave him a little push in the lower back and he began to glide through the center of the rioting crewmen.

He bounced off several people and ducked around the worst of the fighting--just in time, as the airlock opened again and another bag of gold was dumped into the air.

The forward section of the ship was relatively empty by the time Hayden reached the chart room. He knocked and Fanning's muffled voice said, "Come in."

The presence of numerous lanterns did nothing to brighten the can-shaped chamber. To Hayden's surprise, Fanning was alone, hovering with one foot in a strap near the map table. In the dim light he was a study in muted shades, his eyes and the folds of his uniform blended into shadow. He had his arms crossed and seemed to have acquired new lines of care around his eyes and mouth.

Part of Hayden's mind said, *Now's the perfect time, kill him!* He did his best to ignore the small voice. "What can I do for you, Admiral?" he said.

"I hear that you have gotten to know our armorer very well," said Fanning, his face deadpan.

How did he know? Was news of Hayden's tryst with Aubri all over the ship already? "Well enough," said Hayden cautiously. What did this mean?

"Maybe. Maybe well enough, for the task I've got in mind." Fanning waved him inside. "Shut the door, if you will." Hayden could still faintly hear the sounds of revelry through the walls after he did so; he glided over to a strap near the admiral's and stuck his foot through it. The two men faced one another over the glowing map table.

"I'm about to let my wife out of my sight for an extended period of time," said Fanning with a cryptic smile. "Months, probably. Do you know the details of our plan? Why we're here?"

"No more than anybody else, sir."

"Hmm." Fanning stared off into the darkness for a moment. "What this is all about, Mr. Griffin, is about defeating a numerically superior foe. When Venera first came to me and told me how she'd put together a collection of old clues and documents, and now believed that radar might be possible in Virga, I wasn't much interested. It's a technology that would have only marginal utility in a fair fight--in daylight, in clear air, I mean. But the evidence that Falcon Formation was about to invade changed everything. With no guidance from the Pilot, we were about to commit a strategic blunder and lose our nation."

"I can't much care about that, sir. I was born in Aerie." It was a halfhearted challenge, but he felt he had to make it.

To his surprise the admiral merely nodded at the revelation. "That explains some things about you, though by no means all. You're a good airman, Hayden, but I've been wondering if I could trust you. We fought side by side on the way out of Gehellen, but you know that proves little."

It was Hayden's turn to look away. "I considered you my enemy for many years," he said.

Fanning smiled. "Well, I probably still am your enemy, politically. But I don't feel like you're a personal

enemy of mine, Griffin. And that makes a world of difference in the current situation. Tell me: what do you suppose will happen to Aerie if Falcon Formation conquers Slipstream?"

"It'll be as if we never existed," he replied. Fanning caught his eye and Hayden shrugged. "I know that you're the only hope for my people right now."

"And what do you think of my wife?"

Surprised, Hayden said, "Well, I like her well enough, if that's what you mean."

Fanning sighed. "In order to carry out our plan, I have to leave her here while we make a run for the Gehellen border," he said. "She needs to sneak by the locals, get into the sun of suns and turn a switch that will make it possible for us to use those radar units that Aubri Mahallan has constructed. Actually, Venera's not the one who has to throw the switch; she doesn't have the technical expertise. Aubri Mahallan does."

*Into the sun of suns? And Aubri too?* Hayden's face must have betrayed his surprise, because Fanning smiled.

"You understand. I'm not at all comfortable leaving my wife here, Griffin, but it was always her plan and one of us has to supervise Mahallan. Am I right in assuming that you'd feel just as uncomfortable leaving Aubri behind?"

Hayden chewed his lip. He'd been caught totally off guard by the notion that the expedition would be headed for Candesce. Old emotions and new questions were starting to boil up in him. Focusing on the matter at hand, he said, "I'm not sure that Aubri's my woman. Or anybody's."

"But is that how you *feel*?"

"Look, what are you getting at?"

"I want you to fly them into Candesce, and then find a way back to Slipstream when you're done," said Fanning earnestly. "I don't have anybody else I can trust to do the job. In fact, logic tells me you're the very last person on this expedition that I should trust. But I think I'm right about you, so I'm asking you straight up: can I trust you to do it?"

"You're not going to damage Candesce, are you? That would be..."

"Insane. Suicidal. Genocidal." Fanning shook his head. "I don't think we *could* damage Candesce, even if we wanted to. No, our change will be small, temporary, and unnoticed by anyone in Virga. If you agree to go, you have a chance to guarantee that yourself."

Hayden couldn't believe what he was hearing. Fanning trusted him! Surely he didn't deserve that trust, not with all that he'd planned and tried to do. There was no way he should accept an offer such as this; he was bound to betray it, by honor and the momentum of his long-held purpose.

Yet, Aubri would be going. She might need his protection. It was with a sinking feeling of guilt that he said, "Yes, I'll do it."

"I'll take them in," he said, unsure of whether he believed himself, "and I won't interfere with your plans. As long as Candesce remains safe."

And then, to shame Hayden even further, Fanning smiled at him. "I know I can count on you to bring them home safely," he said.

Hayden smiled, and nodded, but did not believe it of himself.

\* \* \* \*

The air in the ship was stagnant and heavy by the time the *Rook* made its rendezvous with the other vessels. All six met under the empty gaze of Carlinth's windows. Huge nets full of treasure were towed to the partially repaired *Tormentor* and its sisters while in the *Rook's* chart room Admiral Fanning read reports of the skirmish with the Gehellens. The dangerous diversionary tactic had worked well and nobody had been killed, although two more ships had suffered hull breaches and their crews were only now able to take off the oxygen masks they had worn while they repaired them. They didn't care; there was jubilation over the treasure and cheers echoed through the sunless streets of Carlinth for the first time in centuries.

While Admiral Fanning shouted an inspirational speech through a bullhorn mounted into the hull of the *Rook*, Hayden camped out in the hangar. With the help of Martor, he was modifying one of the military bikes. Fanning's words came muffled through the walls; nearly everyone else on all the ships had their ears to their hulls and was listening intently.

"...*Falcon Formation will destroy ...*" Fanning was saying as Hayden held up an afterburner housing for Martor to see. "Designed for speed but built for reliability," said Hayden. "Typical military. These are tough bikes, but that extra armor and framing's gotta go."

"...*Only the most extraordinary measures can save...*"

Martor was wiring two extra saddles onto the bike. "But the armor's insulation, too, ain't it?" He tapped the outer shell of the cylinder. "I damn near burnt my foot off on your racer, and there was insulation on that."

"...*Up to us to do the job...*"

Hayden shrugged. "Saddle, footstraps and handlebars will be it. Touch the bike at any other point and it'll burn you. But it's the price we pay for decent speed with this baby."

"...*Not only rich, but heroes...*"

Hayden reached out to flip a gold chain that looped around Martor's neck. "What are you going to do now that you're rich?" In the absence of gravity, the trinkets hung off the boy every which way, making an absurd tangled cloud in front of his face that he wiped to the side every few moments.

"I dunno," he said. "I always been navy.... Buy a ship, I guess. Explore."

Hayden grinned. "Hunt pirates?" But Martor shook his head.

"I didn't like the fighting, come right down to it," he said seriously. "Some things are great to talk about, but awful to see or do." He looked away shyly, "But, you know ... talking about it was great fun. The lads loved my stories and they were easy to think up. I was thinking, maybe when we get back, I might try learning to read and write."

"You, a story teller?" Hayden nearly laughed, but he could see that the boy meant it. "That's a great idea," he said. "You'd be good at it. Uh, hand me that wrench, will you?"

"Hi." Hayden looked up as Aubri entered the hangar. She wore practical leather flying gear including an airman's cap with goggles. She swam over to the bike and stopped herself with one hand on it and one on Martor's shoulder. "How are you?" she asked the boy. Martor stammered something incoherent.

"You need to stay out of trouble while we're gone," she told him. "No fighting and no profiteering, you hear? We're going to check up on you when we get back."

"Yeah, well." Martor shrugged. "First we all gotta survive the week."

"Ten days," she corrected. "That's how long it'll take for you to get to Falcon Formation, assuming you escape the Gehellen dragnet. And assuming you don't run into anything, and assuming that the navigation team can find your sun and you don't end up wandering around and around in Winter til the end of time." She grinned at Martor's expression. "Don't worry. We've got it timed down to the minute."

"That's what worries me," muttered Hayden. This was the weakest part of the plan: Fanning would have to get back to Falcon Formation in time to attack the secret shipyard at an exactly predetermined moment. With all the vagaries of travel in Virga--navigation errors, collisions, breakdowns, fuel shortages, and piracy--it would be a miracle if they could do that in time. By contrast, Hayden's own part in the plan was simple.

*Just fly straight into the sun of suns.*

"And what are you gonna do after?" Martor asked suddenly. Hayden looked over; he'd been focused on his work and didn't know who the boy had asked. He opened his mouth and saw Aubri doing the same. They looked at each other. Both hesitated.

Martor saw this exchange. "Oh," he said, drawing the sound out with obvious relish. "That's something you haven't talked about, is it?" He squinted at Aubri. "Are you going back to your weird world? Or are you gonna settle down here?"

"I don't know," she said. Unsatisfied, Martor turned to Hayden.

"Are you gonna stay with the *Rook*? The boys'd love to have you. Or are you gonna settle down in Rush? Get married, have lots of kids."

Hayden shrugged. "Haven't thought that far ahead." He avoided Aubri's gaze, though she also seemed to be looking elsewhere.

Hayden *had* thought that far ahead--and further. He hadn't discussed his thoughts with Aubri; he wasn't sure she would understand or agree.

He buried his head inside the bike, and didn't come out until the other two had changed the subject.

\* \* \* \*

The night watch was well under way when Hayden came back to the hangar. The *Rook* and its sisters were creeping towards the outskirts of Leaf's Choir, much more cautiously than when they'd entered. The hatch gang had left the hangar, but the place resounded to the snores of the various *Unseen Hand* crew members who'd been billeted here. Hayden wove in and out of the men who hung like pupae from the walls, floor, and ceiling, until he came to his bike. Then he eased the folded cargo net and heavy coil of cable off his shoulder and parked it in midair next to him. Unfolding his tool kit, he selected a wrench; he dug in his pocket for a moment and brought out some brackets and bolts. Quietly, so as not to wake the men, he proceeded to bolt the brackets onto the back of the bike, over the afterburner.

Hayden had been taken aback by Admiral Fanning's request that he shepherd Venera and Aubri to Candesce--so taken aback that for almost an hour afterward, he hadn't realized what doing that could mean. When he did, it was in the midst of a conversation with the new boatswain; Hayden had lost his train of thought in mid-sentence, and just stared slack-jawed at the dark hull until the boatswain said,

"What's up? You having a stroke or something?"

He'd stammered some sort of reply and extricated himself from the conversation. Going to a porthole, he stared out at the blank nothingness of the sargasso, as an unfamiliar sense of lightness crept over him.

Words whispered in his mind; was he thinking them, or were they a memory of long ago? It might have been his father's voice saying, "*Candesce is the mother of all suns. If Aerie is to have a new sun, its core will come from there.*"

No one had ever told Hayden how Candesce gave up its treasures; but he had heard that collecting them was easy. "Like picking fruit," one of the Resistance engineers had said.

Now as he worked as quietly as he could, he reflected upon the irony that Fanning himself would probably approve of what he was doing. If he got caught, he could in fact appeal to the admiral. Carrier was the one more likely to object, but Hayden wasn't afraid of Carrier. No, he was doing this in secret and on his own time not because he was afraid of being caught but because this particular task was his alone. It was personal.

He plucked out the stuffing of the bike's saddle and replaced it with the coiled cargo net. Little tufts of stuffing started floating away and he jammed them in his pockets. Then he reached around the bike's exhaust vent and began coiling the thin cable inside the bike's housing. He wired it in tightly and leaned back with a satisfied smile to admire his work.

Miles and his cronies in the resistance had been right about one thing: it wasn't what you fought that mattered; the only thing that mattered was what you built. Hayden's own parents had known that, but he'd forgotten it for years after their deaths. Wasted years?--No, they had brought him here, now, to finish something that should have been done a long time ago.

He put away his tools, patted the bike, and headed for the ship's centrifuge to sleep under gravity for the last time in a long while.

## 16

Candesce blazed beneath Hayden's feet. Even here, hundreds of miles away, the heat from the sun of suns was almost intolerable. If he shielded his eyes and looked near the light, Hayden could just make out the bright tails of infalling lakes that were boiling away as they approached that point of incandescence. "They look like comets," Aubri had said when she first saw them.

Other things moved near Candesce. Ships from all the principalities hovered just outside its zone of heat, moving in after sunoff. Among the principalities of Candesce, it was common custom to consign the coffins of the dead to the sun of suns; Hayden imagined that they too must become comets at the last, never reaching their goal but evaporating back into the stuff of Virga to become places and people again. So must his mother have gone when Aerie's new sun exploded. His father would have become compost for some Slipstream farm.

Some of the ships hiding in Candesce's light would be funeral vessels. But some had another purpose.

"What are you doing?" Aubri looped an arm around his waist. "You'll burn your eyes out doing that. Come inside."

Hayden had been thinking about the ships that ventured close to Candesce during darkness. They were the harvesters--boats that scrounged the garbage cast out of the sun of suns. That garbage was Virga's chief source of sun components. His parents had used fusion-core pieces bought from the principalities to

build Aerie's secret sun.

For now, Hayden would not let his speculations run away with him. He let Aubri draw him inside the charcoal harvester's hut they had found on the outskirts of Leaf's Choir. It perched like an angular bug on the black branch of a tree whose roots lay miles away in darkness. Venera Fanning and Carrier had taken up residence in another harvester's hut some distance away; the bike was hidden there in a ball of sticks. Carrier would not trust Hayden to be its keeper.

He didn't care. It had been strange and wonderful this morning to wake to the first glow of Candescence coming through the one shuttered window of the hut, and find himself wrapped in Aubri's arms and in silence. He had slept with women before; he had never awoken the next morning to find one still with him. So he dwelt in this moment for a long time, breathing slowly and contentedly with her beside him.

The now-familiar hum of the *Rook's* engines was gone, and not even birdsong signaled dawn here. When Hayden pulled himself over to the window (sleeping Aubri coming along like she was tied to him) he looked out on an astonishing vista. It was as if he were a mite clinging to a giant's hair; for miles in every direction thin black trunks reached towards Candescence from a place of shadow and blackness. The giant's hairs twisted and intertwined as they strained towards the light; many still had branches though the harvesters were systematically stripping them. None had leaves, but life was not completely absent here. Wildflowers nestled in the crooked elbows of branches, and bright green bushes dotted many trunks. Aubri had discovered wild raspberries on this very tree, which might explain why the hut had been positioned here. It was too hot for fish, but a few birds cruised in the distance.

After an hour or two Hayden had started to wonder if there might be a beehive or wasps' nest hidden somewhere nearby, because he'd realized that it wasn't completely silent here. A deep basso thrum filled the air, faint but unwavering. He hadn't heard it last night.

When he mentioned it to Aubri she just shrugged and said, "It's Candescence. Up close it must be like a god singing."

He was in awe of Aubri's knowledge and said so. "You truly know how to control Candescence? You could make it your toy, like a bike?"

She shook her head. "Ride it like a rocket, more like. But Hayden, Candescence was designed before Virga existed. Those designs are still available to anyone willing to leave Virga to find them. I had them with me when I first came here."

That conversation had happened a few hours ago, and had trailed off into kissing and more personal intimations. But her words had stuck with Hayden, growing stranger and stranger the more he thought about them. Now, as they settled in the cooler shadow of the hut, he said, "Why would you have the plans for Candescence with you? Did you already know you were going to visit it?"

She frowned, just slightly, and looked around at the wicker walls. But when she met his gaze again she wore a carefree smile.

"I came here with every piece of information we'd ever collected on Virga," she said. She held up two fingers and pinched them close together. "All that data could be contained in something much smaller than a grain of sand, so why not carry all of it? Of course, when I got here, the memory store was disabled by Candescence's emissions. So I'll have to go on what little I remember when we get there. But I remember enough."

He nodded, still thinking about it. Suddenly Aubri grabbed his arm. "Look!"

Buzzing in the doorway was one of those odd little chrome insects that one saw sometimes. *Tankers*, Aubri had called them. Hayden reached out a hand. "Should I catch it?"

She shook her head. "I don't have my instruments with me, I couldn't study it now." The little tanker spun around and zipped off. A sudden cloud of similar bugs flicked past the window.

"You were right," Hayden said. "They're headed for Candesce."

"Carrying fuel," she said with a nod. "For the Farnsworth Fusors."

\* \* \* \*

They floated together inside the hut, exhausted after making love, and were silent together. He was acutely aware that much had gone unspoken between him and Aubri.

At last he turned and laid his hand, gently, on her breastbone. "Does it listen?" he asked her. He had no need to say what *it* was.

She shrugged. "I need to be careful. But ... it doesn't care. Not really. It's just a dumb mechanism."

He thought about that. Then he nodded to the window. "Was this your mission? To visit Candesce?"

She looked him in the eye and said, "No. In fact ... it's the opposite. If there's anywhere in Virga where I might find a way to free myself from this..." She tapped her throat. "Then it would be there."

Hayden shook his head in confusion. "You don't need to be careful about telling me that?"

"No. The assassin-bug only cares whether I tell people what my real mission is. It's not able to care about anything else."

"Not even its own life?"

"It's not alive. So, no." She quirked a smile. "Look at it this way: some things trigger it, some don't. That's all."

"So..." He mused. "You think we might find a way to kill it in Candesce?"

"It's why I pushed the Fannings to do this. A selfish reason, maybe." She shrugged, grinning. "But it worked."

He laughed. "Can I help?"

She kissed him. "Just keep guard. I'll do the rest."

"You can help me, too," he said seriously. Aubri cocked one eyebrow. "Both of us, really," he added.

"Aubri ... have you actually thought about what you'd do if you got free of that thing? Would you stay, or would you go?"

She hesitated. "Stay," she said finally. "I would stay."

Hayden sighed. He took a moment to compose his thoughts. "I have a reason for going into Candesce too," he told her. He felt his heart lifting as he described his plan to locate sun components in Candesce and return them to Aerie. "I want to finish my parents' work. Light a new sun on the edge of Winter, that the people of Aerie can gather around. Let them leave Slipstream and the rest of Meridian behind. Save my people."



It would have sounded like an arrogant, impossible dream to Hayden--had not his mother and father confidently pursued that same dream.

"I'll need an engineer," he said. "You could be invaluable."

"Oh." She looked away. "Is that all you want me for? My engineering skills?"

"No!" He laughed and pulled her to him. "More. I want much more. We could found a new nation together, Aubri. Is that something you could want?"

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder.

"More than anything," she murmured, "I would want that."

\* \* \* \*

They both woke with a start. It was the middle of the night, and absolutely black inside the hut. Somewhere, far in the distance, something had screamed.

"Did you hear that?" Hayden asked. He felt rather than saw Aubri's nod. They both listened in perfect stillness for a while; then she relaxed against him.

"Maybe Venera's cohabitation with Carrier is not so chaste as we'd been led to think," she said.

"Ugh," he said. "Don't say that. I--" He stopped, as a long, ululating sound crept through the night to enwrap the hut.

They were both at the window a second later, peering out into the gloom. "That wasn't any person," said Aubri needlessly. There was nothing to see outside the hut, however--nothing at all, an extravagant blackness Hayden couldn't remember encountering even in Winter. For a moment he wondered if the hut had somehow slid backward into the depths of Leaf's Choir. How would they know, before they suffocated?

The cry came again, and this time it was accompanied by the sound of branches shattering. The roar built--it seemed that entire trees were being thrown aside by something huge that approached through the darkness. The hut began to shake.

Then as quickly as it began, the roaring ended.

They stayed at the window for a long time, but nothing further happened. After an hour or so, a bobbing flashlight-beam meandered up the trunk of the tree, and Carrier and Venera appeared. Both looked grim.

"Any ideas?" Carrier asked without preamble. Hayden shook his head.

"Maybe we should stick together tonight," he said. Then, with sudden urgency: "Where's the bike?"

Carrier waved a length of twine Hayden hadn't seen he was holding. It stretched off into the blackness. "I towed it over," he said. "Thought it best." Hayden nodded.

They all crowded into the little hut and sat there looking at one another for a while. "This is ridiculous," Venera said after the uncomfortable interlude had stretched on for fifteen minutes. "We have to do something. Talk, at least."

"I agree," said Aubri.

There was another long silence.

"Let's tell stories," said Venera brightly.

They all stared at her in the feeble glow of the flashlight. "Ghost stories," amended Venera; then she laughed. "Oh, come *on*. Can you think of a better time to do it?"

Everyone laughed; and a minute later, Hayden found himself relating the story of the black pirate suns, and of the strange monsters reputed to live in Winter.

After his turn Venera spoke; and somehow Hayden wasn't surprised when it turned out that she knew lots of such stories, and relished telling them.

In one of Venera's stories, Candescence itself had gone roving one night; the sun had been hungry after shining for so many centuries, and it ate several of the neighboring principalities before being talked out of a further meal by a brash young farm boy. Venera tailored her description to the night's events: the unseen sun passing in majestic noise, a skyscape of sounds, no sign of what had caused its devastation after it returned to its station and lit again.

Aubri clapped her hands when the story ended. "You have hidden talents, Venera!"

The admiral's wife preened, examining her nails with ostentatious care. "I do, don't I?"

"I hope you don't mind my asking, but I've been wondering all along how you managed to convince Chaison to bring you on the expedition." Aubri looked genuinely puzzled. "During our planning sessions he seemed adamant about leaving you behind."

"Ah," said Venera with a smile, "but that was before I blackmailed him."

"Ah--what?" Aubri and Hayden both laughed nervously. Venera waved a hand dismissively.

"Back when he was a student, my Chaison wrote a few seditious pamphlets denouncing the Pilot. Nobody knows that, of course--no one who would talk about it." She eyed Carrier, whose face was as wooden as always. "I found about it from an old drinking companion of his, and I held it over his head to get him to take me along. That's all." She said this in a modest sort of way.

Hayden couldn't resist a grin. "Chaison Fanning ... denounced the Pilot?"

Carrier, however, was glaring at Venera. "You never told me about this," he said.

She shrugged. "Why should I?" Venera looked at him archly. "In any case, it's your turn, Lyle. Don't you have any ghost stories to share?"

Carrier stammered something, then looked down. After a moment, he met Venera's eye and said, "Ghost stories are for kids. Things that really happened are far more harrowing than any story."

Some line had been crossed, Hayden thought, but Venera didn't seem to have noticed. She pouted at Carrier and said, "For instance?"

"For *instance*," he grated, "take the story of a man who discovers that his son doesn't have the stomach for the things that need to be done to protect his people. The boy joins the resistance of a conquered foe, and tries to convince his father to do it too."

Venera arched an eyebrow. "What's so horrible about that?"

Carrier took a deep breath. "The father plays along with it. In the end the resistance comes to trust the boy, and of course he trusts his father--enough that one day he tells him the location of the new sun his

friends are building. And the father," he said with a grim smile. "He does what any *loyal* man would do. He tells the Pilot."

Belatedly, Venera was realizing how angry Carrier was. "Youthful zeal," she said. "They grow out of it."

"Only if they live," said Carrier. "Only if they live."

Aubri shifted, half reaching out to Carrier. "What happened to your son?" she asked quietly.

"He died when the Aerie bastards blew up their new sun," said Carrier; his voice carried no emotion, no inflection at all. "But you know what? If I had to do it all again, I would. Because a loyal citizen of Slipstream will do nothing against the Pilot; will do anything for his nation." Again, he was watching Venera as he said this.

The silence that followed was long and awkward. Aubri tried to salvage the mood by telling a humorous anecdote about her brief days in Rush, but her delivery was wooden and it fell flat.

The damage had been done; all they could do now was sit in silence and wait for dawn. This was just fine as far as Hayden was concerned; he didn't want to talk any more. He just sat in the corner, nursing his shock.

The man he had sworn to kill sat next to him. For the moment, nothing else mattered.

But then a curious thing happened. As the hours dragged on, Hayden's anger lessened. When Candescence finally ignited in a stuttering dawn Hayden even allowed himself to exchange a wondering glance with Carrier as they gazed out at a vast gash that had opened up in the miles-long trunks of the dead forest.

"It's like some monster was *grazing* on the trees," said Aubri.

"Capitol bug?" asked Carrier, but clearly he didn't believe it. Capitol bugs were big, the way clouds were big, but they were not strong. Whatever had done this could eat whole cities.

"Candescence, walking," said Venera smugly. They all laughed, and the tension of the night broke.

Later, he watched Carrier and Venera fly back to their hut. Hayden felt curiously light, as if some huge responsibility had been lifted from his shoulders. Lyle Carrier was just a man, after all, and a sad one at that.

What had drained his anger? He wondered about that for a while, seeing Aubri, and Candescence burning at the center of the sky, there was really no doubt. Somehow in the past weeks Hayden had learned to look past yesterday and today. It was the possibility of a future that had changed him.

Maybe he could fulfill his promise to Chaison Fanning after all.

\* \* \* \*

A swarm of bikes spiraled through Winter. Each flyer had a large magnesium lamp mounted in front of his saddle and great spears of light pierced the gloom as they searched for safe passage. Behind them, recklessly fast, came the expeditionary force itself. Dew beaded on the sleek hulls of the ships and tumbled away in their wakes. Their contrails could have been followed by anyone who cared to pursue them; but the Gehellen navy had given up at the border. The chase had been halfhearted anyway, since the Slipstream ships had gone many miles under cover of night before they were spotted.

Giant multi-limbed clouds reared out of the black, too big to circumnavigate. The bikers' flight leader leaned down to let off a sounding rocket and watched as its yellow eye receded into the mist. If it hit

anything it would explode in a shower of phosphorous. He watched the contours of the cloud intently, heedless of the icy air tumbling past his limbs. After a moment he waved an all-clear and underscored the rocket's contrail with his own.

\* \* \* \*

Some miles behind the bikes, Chaison Fanning climbed out a side hatch of the *Rook* and hooked his feet through a ring on the hull. He stared out across a hundred miles of cloud-dotted air at the hint of silver in the darkness that identified Mavery's sun. Faint flickers and flashes lit the sky far up and to one side of that silver area.

It could just be a lightning storm--but the colors were wrong. Some of those pinpricks were red, some vivid orange. The light came from the border between Mavery and Winter. It was too far away for Chaison to hear the explosions, of course--but the battle must be huge, and fierce. He should be there.

After a while Travis clambered through the hatch with a blanket fluttering in his good hand. "Begging your pardon, Admiral sir, but you'll freeze out here," he shouted as he tried to drape the blanket one-handed over Chaison's shoulders.

"Look at it," said Chaison. The tiny stars that signaled explosions had only been able to keep his attention for so long, despite what imagination and reason had told him must be happening there. His gaze had inevitably drifted forward and eventually he'd realized that framed by the cross-hatch lines of bike contrails was the collected light of nations. Half the sky was awash with luminescence in circles too broad to encompass with out-thrown arms. Their outer edges faded to dusk and black, their centers shone sky-blue and here and there a sun appeared for seconds at a time. There were a dozen such realms of light in the cluster of nations known as Meridian, but the farthest countries were hidden behind the nearer.

The pearlescent zone of sky next to Mavery was Slipstream--had been Aerie, once. Obscured behind the *Rook's* hull was multi-sunned Falcon Formation. Chaison had climbed around the hull several times to look at it.

"The men want to go," said Travis, nodding at the sparkling battle. "They know we have another destination, but they're not happy."

Chaison sighed. "I'm not happy either. The fleet will be cursing my name that I'm not there. All of us--we've probably been branded traitors by now. If we don't bring back the figureheads of Falcon's flagship, the Pilot will have me publicly flogged. At the very least."

He made sure his feet were anchored, then stood up into the *Rook's* headwind. "That's where we go," he yelled, pointing to the vast span of light that was Falcon Formation. "And chances are we'll never see the light of Slipstream again. So enjoy the view while you can, Travis!"

"Come inside, sir!"

He shook his head. "When I'm good and ready. Leave me alone."

Travis retreated, a concerned frown on his face.

Chaison Fanning stood alone on the hull of his ship, feeling alone. Venera wasn't with him, and he didn't know how he felt about that. Did he even miss her? She was a constant presence, but he didn't understand her; and love was probably not the right name for what passed between them.

He didn't think she understood him either; but she thought she did.

Maybe, if they both lived through this, there would be time to get to know one another properly. He

smiled, as the wind tore salty droplets from his eyes and cast them into the vortex of the *Rook's* contrail.

\* \* \* \*

Candesce was fading like an ember when the four travelers climbed into their saddles and Hayden lit the fanjet's burners. Back became down, and they shot away from the threadlike trees of Leaf's Choir, seemingly straight up toward the sun. Hayden turned for a last look at the harvester's hut, and smiled. Then he adjusted the goggles on his nose, and opened the throttle.

They weren't leaving a contrail, he'd noticed. That was probably due to the heat of the air near the sun of suns; whatever the reason, they would be less noticeable to the Gehellen cruisers that still patrolled the air here.

--Or so he was able to tell himself for the first ten minutes of the flight; then he saw Carrier's hand waving from the opposite side of the bike.

Hayden craned his neck around the metal cylinder and at first saw only the normal traffic of funeral ships and scroungers cautiously edging towards the sun. After a moment he saw what Carrier had spotted: eight sparks of light rising over the black furze of the sargasso. They were the color of the sun, their backdrop the mauve air of dusk.

Carrier leaned past Venera to shout, "Bigger than bikes!" But smaller than commercial vessels; Hayden nodded. These looked like catamarans--twin engine, with both pilot and gunner. They'd be fast, and they could reduce the bike and its riders to splinters in seconds if they got close enough.

Hayden tapped the throttle, feeling for the bike's response. Then he leaned in as close to the hot metal as he dared and kicked in the afterburner. The women on either side of him pressed their noses to the hull as well while the air began to thunder past and Candesce seemed to get perceptibly brighter.

For a few minutes, that is; then the sun of suns began to go out.

It didn't do so all at once. In fact, as Hayden squinted past the handlebars he began to make out structure to the radiance ahead. Candesce, he realized with a start, wasn't one sun but rather a cloud of them. He tried to count them, but they were guttering faster than he could keep up. Each one left a fading red spot and, in the eye, a lozenge of retinal overload.

But the heat remained. He could feel it first in the places where the wind didn't penetrate: in the hollow of this throat; along his calfs. As the minutes passed heat piled up against the bike as if they were pressing into a resilient surface made of exhaust and fire. They crossed fifty miles of air and were swaddled in it; a hundred miles and it was becoming hard to breathe. The commercial ships had fallen behind but the catamarans still followed, their gem-like highlights wavering in the rippling air.

Little flashes started to appear in the corner of Hayden's eye. He was alarmed--was he about to pass out?--and then saw the contrails that were sketching across the sky like meridian lines.

Venera waved frantically. When he caught her eye she held up her hand in a gun-shape. He nodded and began slaloming the bike from side to side, gently at first so as not to shake off his passengers--then more and more violently as bullets stitched the air to all sides.

After a minute the gunfire stopped. He glanced back to see their pursuers close, but keeping a decent distance.

Hayden smiled. There was nowhere for him to go--or so those men thought. They believed that if they hung on his tail long enough he would have to give up. After all, there was no place to hide here, and no

way to get inside Candescence.

They were in for a surprise.

\* \* \* \*

A long wing of shadow swept into Winter behind Sargasso 44. The gnarled black fist of burnt forest, its outlines softened by mist, wasn't much to look at after Leaf's Choir, but it was still a respectable three miles across. The *Rook* and its sisters crept up to the hidden shipyard from its unlit side, their running lights off. Two bikes jettied out of Chaison Fanning's modest flagship to reconnoiter and he waited, not on the bridge but in the hangar, for their return.

Propriety be damned. He glanced at the ticking wall clock, then at his men. Two hours until Falcon's suns dimmed into their night cycle. In two hours the plan would succeed or fail. And everybody knew it, but nobody would speak of it.

They'd installed the radar casting machines in the nose of each ship and tried them. Of course they didn't work--there was only a bright fuzz on the hand-blown cathode ray tubes bolted next to the *Rook's* pilot station. But as each sister ship turned its own radar on or off, the fuzz had brightened or dimmed. Some sort of invisible energy was in play here. Chaison had been cheered by that tiny hint of future success.

And the men ... He looked at them again. They'd been running drills for days now to perfect the art of firing blind according to orders from the bridge. The rocketeers looked confident.

He shook his head and laughed. "Lads, I don't mean to be insulting, but you look like pirates." Some were wounded, others had hasty repairs to their uniforms to cover sword--and bullet--holes. It was the jewelry, though, that set them apart from any other crew Chaison had worked with. As battle approached the men had been sneaking off to their lockers to collect their treasures, as if the talismanic weight of future wealth would keep them alive through the coming battle.

It was so far from regulation that he could validly have any one of them whipped for it. Necklaces might get in the eye, or tangle a hand at a crucial moment.

Nobody was going to be disciplined, and they all knew it. Perversely, knowing they knew it pleased Chaison. He felt an affection for this crew he hadn't known for any other he'd worked with.

The bikes' contrails hit the side of the sargasso and vanished. Forty-four was too small and old to have retained a toxic interior, especially with transport ships coming and going and all the industry happening inside it. Chaison had nonetheless insisted that the men on the bikes wear sargasso suits. It would be a fine irony if they were knocked out by fumes and sailed their bikes right into the shipyard.

"Now we wait," said Travis. Chaison shot him an amused look.

"We've been reduced to clichés, have we?" he said.

Travis stammered something but Chaison waved a hand in dismissal. "Don't mind me," he said. "I'm feeling free for the first time in weeks."

"Yes, sir." Then Travis pointed. "Sir? Look."

The bikes were returning already. Falcon's shipyard must lie closer to the sargasso's surface than he'd thought.

"All right." Chaison clapped his hands briskly. "Let's see where we stand."

\* \* \* \*

Hayden had seen clouds bigger than these rising spires, but nothing else--not even the icebergs at Virga's skin--could compare. On the outskirts of Candesce long arcing stanchions connected many glittering transparent spines, which soared into the surrounding air like the threads of the jellyfish that hid in Winter clouds. These spines were miles long but they were not anchored to a single solid mass. Candesce, he was surprised to see, was not a thing, but a *region*. Hundreds of objects of all shapes and sizes gleamed within the sphere of air sketched by the giant spires. Candesce was an engine open to the outside world.

So what was Venera's key intended to unlock? They glided in between the outreaching arms at a sedate pace. The enemy catamarans were hanging back, confident in being able to catch the bike and curious to see what Hayden would do. The moment was strangely peaceful, or would have been if not for the savage heat that radiated from those needles of crystal.

"Are they glass?" he wondered aloud. Beside him, Aubri shook her head.

"Diamond," she said. "Re-radiators."

As they passed the spires dim orange glows from the dormant suns revealed traceries of intricate detail further in: ribs and arching threads of cable, mirrored orbs the size of towns, and long meandering catwalk cages. With all the suns lit, internal reflection and refraction must double and redouble until it was impossible to separate real from mirage. Drowned in light, Candesce would disappear as a physical object. These spars and wires were like the crude ghost of something else that had no form. That something had left, for now--perhaps stalking the distant air to devour a principality or two. But it would return to its den come morning, and then this diamond and iron would give over to a greater reality, one made of light. Any person foolish enough to be here would disappear as well.

Venera and Carrier had raised their heads to stare as well. Hayden breathed in little sips; the heat was making him dizzy. "Where?" he asked Aubri with renewed urgency.

She scanned the unlikely bauble of the sun of suns. "There." Where she pointed, a dark rectangle lay silhouetted by one of the suns. It was nestled against the diamond point at the base of one of the spines. "That should--should be the visitors' center."

Hayden barked a laugh and instantly regretted it as the air seared his throat. "Another tourist station?" But Aubri shook her head.

"This one--" she gasped spasmodically, "is for education and maintenance. No remote control. No tourists."

"Nobody waiting for us, I hope."

She shook her head. Hayden fired up the bike and they shot through the glittering clouds of machine and cable. Now, though, he heard the sound of other engines. The Gehellen catamarans were closing in.

He guided them down the curve of the spire, alert for anything familiar. The rectangle ahead slowly resolved into a boxy structure about thirty meters on a side, made of some white substance. The crystal spike pierced its side, and next to that spot was a small square on the box. Hayden blinked in the wavering air; was it real? Yes, it was there: a door.

Sleek blue spindles eased into sight on either side of the bike: the catamarans. They were like streamlined rockets with outrider jet engines and a cockpit on either side. Both cockpits had heavy machine guns mounted next to them; two of these now swiveled to aim at Hayden's bike. One of the Gehellens gestured for him to turn around.

He waved *yes*, and kept going.

The square door was only yards away when one of the Gehellens fired a warning shot. The bullet *pinged* off the diamond wall. Hayden took his hands off the bike's handles and raised them surrender, while at the same time gripping the bike with his knees to steer it.

Another warning shot and this time Hayden looked down to see a puncture in the bike's cowling, inches from Aubri's face.

He reached to cut out the bike's engine and saw Carrier lean casually around the bike. There was a *bang!* loud in the sudden absence of engine noise and then Carrier was off the bike and spinning in mid-air and fired again.

Both machine gunners were dead, with identical holes in the center of their forehead. Carrier was yanking Venera off her saddle; he aimed her at the black outline of the door and pushed himself the other way into open air. Hayden yelled a warning and saw that Aubri was drifting off her own saddle, unconscious. Quickly he took one foot out of its stirrup and lunged for Carrier. They locked hands and he pulled the larger man back just as both catamarans rolled over--trailing spirals of blood--to expose their pilots, and the pilots' machine guns.

Venera had found an indentation in the wall and jammed in the white cylinder she'd been guarding. Both catamaran pilots opened up and bullets flew--sloppily as the recoil moved the gun platforms. A bullet hit Carrier's pistol and it shattered in his hand. He drew back, cursing.

Hayden grabbed Aubri's shirt with one hand and with the other, the bright edge of a suddenly opening door in the diamond wall. He hauled Aubri and the bike into dazzling light to the ear-shattering accompaniment of machine gun fire.

The sound cut off abruptly as the door shut and four humans and a bike tumbled onward into light.

"Nothing? Nothing at all?" Chaison felt sick. The two bike pilots weren't looking much better; the crew had formed a half dome around them, and were looking stricken as well.

"It's abandoned, sir. Shut down, except for one or two huts that look like security buildings. All the ships are gone--except the tugs, but..."

"They weren't just out of sight, hidden somewhere else in the sargasso?"

The two men looked at one another. They made identical shrugs. "Nowhere to put them, sir. We looked. Sir ... sir, they're gone."

Gone. A Falcon Formation dreadnaught and a fleet of new warships were on their way to Slipstream. Maybe they were there already. And Chaison Fanning had taken seven ships that might have helped defend his home, and frittered them away in a useless quest for an advantage that had now proven chimerical. He had lost.

"Sir? What do we do now?"

Chaison Fanning had no answer.

## 17

Cool air washed over Hayden's face. For a second he reveled in that, drawing in deep breaths and running his hands over his sweat-stained scalp. Then he turned to Aubri.



"She's not been shot." Carrier was already there, turning her over in midair like something he was inspecting at market. He was right, there was no blood.

Was it the assassin-bug she carried inside her? Had Aubri crossed some invisible line, or begun to say something that had triggered it? For a moment Hayden was sure that such a thing had happened, and that she was dead.

Then Carrier put his hand on her forehead. "Hot. Her pulse is a bit fast. She's not sweating; looks like she fainted from the heat."

Aubri coughed weakly and opened her eyes. "Oh, my head," she murmured. She looked around herself in confusion. "How did we get back to--oh." She pawed at the air, seeking something to hold onto. Hayden put out his hand and she took it, oriented herself upright with respect to the two men. "We're in Candesce."

"And we have a schedule to keep." Venera was waiting impatiently at a nearby doorway. The military bike hung in the air next to her, popping and pinging as it cooled. Hayden counted bullet holes as he pulled Aubri past it; there were at least twenty. A glance told him that the fuel tanks hadn't been punctured, but he wasn't sure about the burners or fan.

"Come on," said Venera. "Mahallan, are you awake enough to do your job?"

"Yes yes," said Aubri peevishly. But Carrier shook his head.

"She needs water and cold compresses," he said. "We don't want her making mistakes at a crucial moment."

Venera drew an ornate watch out of her silk tunic. "We have an hour," she said. "And I'm grudging you that."

They went to explore. It was easy for Hayden to tow Aubri, who seemed feverish and vague; if they'd been under gravity she might not have been able to walk.

"Familiar enough design," Venera said as they moved down a bright, white-walled corridor. The interior of what Aubri had called the visitors' center was divided into numerous chambers and corridors, but only in a loose sort of way by walls and floors that generally did not quite meet. Instead of the enclosed boxes one found under gravity, here were rectangles of pastel-colored material that were suspended in mid-air to suggest rooms and floors without limiting mobility. In many places you could slip over or under a "wall" into the next room, or glide through a gap in the floor into a room "below." Electric lights in many colors floated here and there, casting shadows that softened the edges of the space. This sort of plan was common in freefall houses and public institutions--but in those places you could always see the ropes or wires that kept the rectangles in place. Hayden could see no means of support for this place's walls.

The rooms were in turn subdivided by screens into different functional areas: eating and cooking alcoves, entertainment centers, even shadowed nooks for sleeping. It didn't take them long to find fresh cold water for Aubri. She splashed it over herself and began to look more alert.

"This place could house hundreds," said Carrier. "Are you sure no one ever comes here? It all looks a bit too well kept."

Aubri laughed. "After maintaining the suns of Candesce, taking care of this place must be light work."

"But light work for whom?"

"For what, you mean. Nothing we're likely to meet while we're here, Carrier. Nothing human."

He looked uneasy. "It's too empty in here. I don't like it."

Hayden searched the cupboards for something to help Aubri. To his surprise he found them well stocked, but the packages and boxes were lettered in an unfamiliar language.

Aubri was shrugging off any more help anyway. "I'm feeling better, Venera. Let's do what we came to do." She glided out of the kitchen alcove and slid through the loop of a large couch sling in the living area next door.

Venera frowned at Aubri. "Well then, what are you waiting for? Where's the ... bridge, command center, or what have you?"

Aubri gestured at a blank picture frame that took up much of the ceiling. "It's where ever you want it to be, Venera. Watch." She spoke several words in a language Hayden had never heard before, and the picture frame swirled with sudden inner light. Then it seemed to open like a door or window, and Hayden found himself staring into the gleaming interior of Candescence.

Lit by some magical un-light, Candescence's interior teemed with motion like the little creatures Hayden had seen once when he looked through a teacher's microscope. The suns themselves resembled diatoms, spiky and iridescent; though they were quiescent, all around them things like metal flowers were opening. Their petals fanned like the hands of mannered dancers, hundreds of feet wide, to reveal complex buds of machinery that must have hibernated in tungsten cocoons during the day's heat. Bright things poured out of them like seeds from a pod--or bikes from a hangar.

Other things were moving too--long spindly gantries delicately picked crystalline cylinders out of the air and stuck them together end to end. Hayden glimpsed more machinery inside the cylinders.

"What are they doing?" he asked.

"Repairing," said Aubri in a distracted tone. "Rebuilding. Don't look at anything too closely, you could break it."

Hayden sent her a worried glance; he noticed Carrier squinting at her as well. But she looked more alert and lucid than she had a few minutes ago. Hayden decided to let her strange comment go.

He did want to examine this display of unfurling non-life. Hayden was looking for something, and after a few minutes he spotted it. One of the salvage ships from the principalities was nosing cautiously into the zone of mechanical activity. It flew a flag he'd never seen before, but he ignored that and its strange lines, and watched where it was going.

"Well?" Venera was asking impatiently. "Where are the controls, Mahallan? Hadn't you better get started?"

"Shush, Venera," said Aubri. "I've already started."

Hayden had heard that all the suns in Virga made use of discarded components of Candescence. He wasn't sure what he was expecting to see, but was still surprised when the principality ship swung in close to one of the big translucent cylinders as it was being hoisted near a sun. Some complex exchange had just taken place between the cylinder and one of the flowers; a door had opened in the crystal and swarms of metal insects swirled between it and the "flower." Now another hatch opened in the tessellated side of the sun, and another exchange began.

As it did, the hangar doors of the principality ship flew open and men in sargasso suits--star shapes at this distance--flung themselves into the stream of packages. They wrestled something away from its insectile courier; he could have sworn he'd seen the arcs and bands of that device before, in the half-constructed heart of his parents' new sun.

But wouldn't the metal bugs object? It seemed suicidal folly to try to steal from them. He waited for the swarm to turn and attack the men. After a long moment it began to happen: the remaining drones let go of their cargoes and turned towards the humans, who seemed oblivious to the threat.

Get away, get away, he willed them, even as the steel insects opened their claws and flung themselves at the men.

"Hayden, whatever you're doing, stop it," said Aubri. She was waving her hand in front of his eyes.

"Huh? I'm not doing--look at the ship, there!" He pointed.

Aubri turned and looked toward the principality ship. "Oh. You didn't, did you?" She sounded disappointed. "Let's stop that."

At the last second, the metal insects veered away from the men. "Hayden, stop it," said Aubri. "Look away, Hayden." She grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

"What are you--"

"Hayden, we're looking into a wish-mirror. Don't you know what that is?" Aubri saw the blank looks on three faces and sighed. "No, you don't. Sorry. Listen, the wish-mirrors are the control system for Candesce. Whatever you look at in the mirror, that thing will do what you imagine it doing--insofar as it's capable of it and only inside Candesce. Hayden, you disrupted the movement of those cargo handlers by worrying whether they would stop what they were doing."

Venera laughed. "You made the bugs attack those men! You're meaner than I thought."

"Hey, I didn't mean to--"

"Wish-mirrors are sensitive," said Aubri. "Maybe it would be better if none of you looked into it for a while. I have to figure out which component of Candesce to switch off. It could take me a few minutes."

The three natives of Virga left the couch and returned to the food-preparation area. "How are we going to know if she's done the job or not?" whispered Carrier. Venera rolled her eyes.

"It's pretty late for you to worry about that. Chaison and I talked about it months ago. Mahallan's not the only person who knows something of old technologies; we had a professor at the university build *this*." She reached into her tunic and brought out a simple metal tube. It had a switch on its side and a single glass eye, like a bull's-eye lantern. "When I throw this switch, nothing happens. If Mahallan does her job, I'm told that a light will go on inside the tube when you switch it." She flipped the switch. Nothing happened.

"Does she know about this thing?" asked Carrier. Venera snorted derisively.

"No. Why would I tell her?" Idly, she turned the switch again. This time, the glass eye immediately glowed red. Venera yelped in surprise and let go of the rod, which tumbled slowly in the air between them. "Well," she said. "Well, well, well."

Hayden watched as the two of them hovered over the tube, talking excitedly. Venera's little indicator

didn't impress him; he was thinking about his experience with the wish-mirror. The glass panels were scattered throughout this building; he tried to remember the words Aubri had used to light hers.

"Listen," he said, "the bike is full of bullet holes. If something's broken we need to know now, while there's still time to fix it. I'm not sure this place is going to still be safe for us once the suns start coming back on." Mother and Father had talked a lot of about radiation; he remembered that. Even if it remained cool in here throughout the day, it might be lethally radioactive while the suns were operating.

Carrier was nodding. "Go check it out, then."

Hayden took one more look at Aubri. She was perched in mid-air, staring at the glowing images on the screen. Her face was masklike, expressionless.

Heart pounding, Hayden slipped under a wall and away from the plots of Slipstream.

\* \* \* \*

"When you're out of ideas, just give another order." Chaison Fanning recalled the cynical advice of one of his Academy teachers as the helmsman moved to execute his latest command. The expeditionary force was sweeping the air around Sargasso 44 using sophisticated spiral search patterns. He had all the bikes out hunting for contrails. It was all he knew to do. Meanwhile he retained a mask of professional calm, as though he'd expected this and had a plan. He had no plan. There was nothing left but to run for home.

"Bike brigade sixteen reports no sightings, sir," reported the semaphore team. Chaison nodded. There was nothing but grey mist outside the forward portholes. The clouds on the edge of Winter were to have been his greatest advantage if he'd succeeded in luring the Falcon Formation ships out of their den. Ironically, that dense pack of wraith-like mists was now obscuring any chance he had of finding where the enemy had gone.

The light outside the portholes was fading: night was coming to Falcon. The Formation synchronized its day and night cycle with Candescence, so the sun of suns must be going out now too. If Aubri Mahallan had done her job, in a few minutes the subtle distortions of space-time ringing out from Candescence would cease. This night, technologies long banned in Virga would become possible here again. Radar might now work.

The radar man Mahallan had trained was looking at him expectantly. Chaison gave a half smile. Why not? "Begin radar sweep," he said, chin on his fist. It was nice to know that his voice was still calm, despite his desperate disappointment.

Even now the newly minted Falcon dreadnaught might be bearing down on Rush. There was nothing in Slipstream that could stop it. The Pilot richly deserved to be deposed--Chaison knew he would get no argument from his men on that score--but Falcon Formation would eat everything if it conquered Slipstream. They had done it before: art would be repainted according to the arbitrary standards of the bureaucracy, literature rewritten to match the ideology of the Collective. Architecture would be chipped away and eventually, even the language itself distorted to match Falcon's vision of a perfect world.

A horrible sick feeling filled Chaison. He wondered if the citizens of Aerie had felt that way when the Pilot had uttered his ultimatum to them.

A younger Chaison Fanning would never have considered such a thing.

"It's working!" He shot the radar man an annoyed look. "Sorry sir. I mean, we have a signal. The screen is clear! Look."

Despite himself Chaison was intrigued. Aubri Mahallan had made toy versions of the system that showed how things were supposed to look. Now as he unstrapped himself and glided over he saw little glowing smudges on the two green circles of the display, very similar to the ones Mahallan had displayed. She had drilled the bridge staff in the meanings of the various shapes, and so Chaison had no difficulty in recognizing the other ships of the expeditionary force as spindle-shaped lozenges of lighter green. The two screens showed the results from rotating beams that were at right angles to one another. Comparing them, you could roughly guess at the position of objects in three-dimensional space.

The bridge staff was all staring over his shoulder. Chaison ignored them. "What's that?" he asked, pointing at a broad smudge well behind the centerpoint that represented the *Rook*.

"I believe that's the sargasso, sir."

"Hmm." He stared at the display for a few seconds. "All right then," he said, "if these shapes are us," he pointed, "and that shape is the sargasso," he pointed again, "then what, exactly, is *that*?"

Right at the edge of the displays, a collection of tiny dots scintillated. One by one they were leaving the screen, which suggested they were moving very quickly.

Chaison and the radar man looked at one another. Then the admiral jumped back to his seat. "All hands! Prepare for maximum acceleration! Recall all bikes! Semaphore team, order all ships to activate their radar! Tell them, if you want to have a place to spend that treasure you're wearing, then follow us now!"

\* \* \* \*

After checking out the bike and spending an hour or so repairing it, Hayden drifted back into the corridors of the station. He dithered over whether to check in on her--but she had insisted that only she could find a way to excise the dark thing coiled in her throat. He didn't want to interrupt her in that crucial task. No, he had his own responsibility, and he had best fulfill it.

He found a small room far from the place where Aubri was working. It was dark here, but there was a wish-mirror on the wall. He strapped himself opposite and tried to remember the words Aubri had spoken to activate hers.

It took several tries, but soon the rectangle began to glow. "Huh." Hayden couldn't believe he was actually here, *in* Candesce, doing something no one had ever told him was even possible. Controlling the sun of suns itself.

The twisting ballet of Candesce's night machines revealed itself to him and he scanned the air for the things he sought. It seemed like many years since he had played in the half-built sun while his mother ordered construction crews about. Not that long a time, in adult terms. He remembered the day the precious inner components had arrived, shipped at horrendous expense and in secret from the principalities of Candesce. The crates with their exotic stamps and lettering were more interesting to Hayden than their contents, but he remembered those as well. Now, he examined the interior of Candesce looking for similar mechanisms.

From what he'd seen earlier, Hayden had surmised that the crystalline cylinders were factories of a sort, manufacturing new pieces for the suns. Now as he examined them--the display zooming in to fine focus if he wished it to, zooming out again just as easily--he began to understand the logic of the sun of suns. Those tiny glittering clouds spiraling into the cylinders, they were the bugs Aubri had called tankers, only here they swarmed by the million. They were bringing in supplies. Inside the cylinders and unfolded metal flowers, the metal foremen and laborers of Candesce forged new wicks for the sun, and when they were done they handed them off to other machines that installed them.

All that Hayden had to do was locate the pieces he wanted and then imagine them being brought here. *Park them outside the door*, he commanded. With mounting excitement he watched as his orders were obeyed.

No wonder no one was allowed in here! You could destroy Candesce on a whim from this place; and if Candesce went, so would go all of Virga.

The thought was disturbing. Hayden's excitement soured as he watched the slow parade of machines sidle through the air towards the visitor's center. This was too easy--there was too much power to be had here. It made him wonder what Venera Fanning would do once this episode was over. Or what the Pilot of Slipstream would do if he demanded and received the Candesce key from the Fannings.

After assuring himself that the machines were doing as he'd asked, Hayden left the little room. He flipped over and under walls, around floors, hurrying back to the entrance and his bike.

Double-check the bike to make sure it was flight-worthy. Tie the sun components he'd found into the cargo net and tie it to the back of the bike. And then ... rehearse what he was going to say to the others when they saw what he'd acquired.

They would need convincing--particularly Carrier. His plan was to get to the man through his mistress, Venera. If he could convince her that these components were his just payment for his part in this adventure, then maybe she could restrain Carrier.

He flipped around a corner and spotted the entrance.

It was open.

Hayden slowed down and cautiously drew his sword. Had the Gehellens somehow managed to force the door? That didn't seem likely; why now, after so many centuries? Or maybe--the thought gave him a chill--maybe now that it was unlocked, anyone could get in here. He hadn't thought of that. Were the Gehellen airmen inside?

Hayden could see the first of the packages he'd ordered bobbing in the darkness outside. Despite his worry, the sight made him smile. He looked around the room. There was the bike, seemingly untouched. There was no one else in sight. He moved carefully toward the door.

Carrier swung in from outside to brace himself on the two sides of the entrance. Night was at his back. "So there you are," he said. "I wondered what exactly you were going to try. Of course, I had no doubt that you'd try something."

"This doesn't concern you," said Hayden.

"A new sun for Aerie does concern me."

Carrier drew his sword.

\* \* \* \*

The *Rook* roared through blackness with exhilarating recklessness. Chaison imagined statutes and naval regulations fluttering in the ship's wake, centuries of rules about how fast to travel in cloud all broken in an instant. He pushed the *Rook* to one hundred miles an hour, then two hundred, and watched the dots of the Falcon Formation navy grow into circles, then distinct ship-shapes.

The bridge crew was white faced. Travis perched next to Chaison, his lips drawn thin while his fingers gripped the edge of the chair. Logic said they would run into something at this speed--but of everyone in

the bridge, it was the radarman who was now the calmest. "Bear two degrees to port, five south," he would say, or "Six degrees starboard right now." The pilot, flying blind, obeyed with frantic sweeps of the wheels.

"Getting secondary signals," said the radarman abruptly. "Just like she said."

"All right." Chaison smiled grimly. "You know what to do."

Falcon's fleet was creeping slowly through an ocean of cloud; nobody could tell how far the mist extended. He didn't need the cloud, of course, it was night anyway. But if they could strand the target vessels of the Falcon fleet in opaque fog they would still be vulnerable when daylight returned--if the battle still raged at that point.

Meanwhile, he had to deny the enemy all their other assets. "Line up on those bikes," he said. "Ware our other ships, they'll be doing the same. We're going to scrape the sentries off Falcon's fleet like old scabs."

The engines whined as they accelerated one more notch. There was a sudden dark flicker outside the portholes and then *bang!* The ship twitched to the impact, but ran on.

Chaison winced. They were running over the Falcon Formation's sentry bikes. As when the *Tormentor's* bikes had flown ahead of to watch for obstacles--unsuccessfully, in that case--the Falcon fleet was feeling its way by sending them ahead and to the sides. Lacking radar, the bikes were its only means of safe travel through darkness and cloud.

Another crash against the hull, and another. On the radar Chaison could see the shapes of *Rook's* sister ships overtaking the dots of Falcon bikes, which simply vanished as they passed.

Ahead was the huge but indistinct blob that must be the new dreadnaught--a weapon of terror no one from Slipstream had ever seen except in blurry photos. Ironically, they were unlikely to see it now. If all went well the men of Slipstream would never make visual contact with the enemy they were destroying.

The *Rook* swept out and around in a great circle. Chaison was reassured to see no clear air ahead as they came around for another pass. "Prepare to deploy mines," he said. Then, "Brake, brake!" He heard the flutter-chop of the braking sails being thrust out of the hull and then he was nose-down, Travis clinging to the back of the chair as the *Rook* groaned and began to decelerate. "Engines off!"

In sudden silence save for the rush of wind and the whuffing breath of the braking sails, the *Rook* slid past the invisible dreadnaught and directly into its path.

"Deploy mines! Out-out-out-now-now-now!"

There was the sound of wind in open hangar doors, and a distant rattle like some monster clearing its throat.

Then thunder.

## 18

A ribbon of Hayden's blood twisted in the center of the room, as if blindly trying to find him. Carrier had connected with a slash to his cheek.

"Wait!" Hayden backed away. The man's first lunge had taken him by surprise, but he had his own sword out now. Yes, it would be satisfying to counter-attack Carrier, who had killed his family; so much more satisfying to change his mind.

"You still have a chance to save yourself," said Hayden as Carrier braced himself for another leap.

"Save myself?" Carrier laughed. "I'm the better swordsman by far!"

"That's not what I mean. I'm talking about your son."

Carrier's face went ashen white. "Wh--"

"You betrayed him! Betrayed him and had him killed. And it eats away at you. Your life has been barren since that moment, hasn't it? Anyone can see it in the way you walk, hear it in the tone of your voice. I just didn't know *why*, until the other night."

"My life's not your concern," grated Carrier. "Look to your own."

"You don't believe there's any way you could make up for what you did to him. I'm saying there is. Can you even imagine such a thing anymore? There *is*."

Carrier visibly fought to control himself. "No."

"How would you son feel if he knew that, in the end, you took back your choice?--That you let his project succeed?"

Now Carrier was silent, his eyes wide.

"Slipstream will leave Aerie in a few years. Why not leave a viable nation behind? That was all he wanted. Let me bring back the pieces of a new sun for my people; it won't be ready in time to be a threat to you. Why not? Your son's spirit will be reborn in that light. You'll have him back in that way. It's not too late."

Carrier lowered his sword, his face eloquently puzzled at a possibility he'd never even considered. Then, gradually, Hayden saw his features harden again, as if in the end his guilt were all he was really comfortable with.

"It won't work!" he shouted, and then he leaped again.

\* \* \* \*

Four Slipstream cruisers glided silently through the dark. Horns and gunshots sounded in discontinuous bedlam, but in the impenetrable night it was impossible to put direction or distance to any of the sounds.

The courses of the cruisers began to diverge; observers on one ship watched the other silhouettes flicker and fade into the clouds. Now odd objects began twirling past, momentarily flame-lit: men, their limbs akimbo; smoldering flinders; the crumpled rings of military bikes. They shot by the ships with frightening speed, yet it was not they that moved, but the ships.

An order went out: *Brake!* The cruiser strained and shook as the shuttlecock vanes of the braking sails tumbled into the air stream.

Next came the hardest thing. It was drilled into the minds and reflexes of naval gunnery teams never to fire a rocket blindly. Once loosed, ordnance just kept on going and in any military engagement in populated air, shots that missed the enemy would eventually hit another friendly ship--or civilians.

For weeks Admiral Fanning had tried to undo this training. Now the rocket teams waited tensely for the order, uneasily watching each other, the walls, the rocket racks--anything but the depthless black outside the square firing ports. When the order came it was a shock, however expected it had been. "Ten



degrees by forty-three!" barked the officer at the speaking tube. The team cranked the racks around and up. "Fire!"

Sere lines of orange light leapt into the mist--five, ten, fifteen in less than a second. Backwashing fumes billowed over the team. Used to this, nobody coughed or moved. Mist swallowed the contrails.

The cruiser's engines whined into life; it was already turning by the time chattering bangs indicated a hit. By the time the enemy triangulated on the incoming rockets' contrails and fired back, the *Rook* would be gone.

Chaison Fanning looked up from the radar screens. Travis was staring at the glowing green circles, shaking his head minutely and muttering. Chaison caught his eye and smiled.

"Look at them all," said the officer. Travis had circles under his eyes; evidently his injured arm was giving him trouble but he hadn't complained, probably hadn't even noticed.

*Look at them all.* The navy of Falcon Formation spread away into indeterminacy in all directions, knots, clusters, and clouds of ships of all sizes and designations. The *Rook* was weaving recklessly through them at two hundred miles an hour, a falcon among pigeons. The enemy would see the glow of the cruiser's engines for seconds at a time as it lunged out of nothing and before they could train their weapons on it, it would be gone again.

"Admiral, sir!" He glanced back to see the boy Martor saluting him from the doorway. "Sir, we've had to restrain Slew."

"What? The head carpenter? What's he done?"

"Running around telling us to stop. Said it weren't natural to fight a battle this way." The old Martor would have smirked while he reported something like this; this new version, his side still taped up where Chaison had removed a bullet, looked very serious as he held his salute.

"Very good. Keep him out of our way until after the battle." He turned back to the radar.

"These vessels," said Chaison, indicating some boxy shapes on the edge of the screen. "They're troop carriers, aren't they?"

Travis nodded. "They've got the profile. No reason to send those on maneuvers. And they move like they're full."

The fleet had been driving in the direction of Slipstream. Venera's spies had been right, it was an invasion force. Of course, Chaison had known the spies' reports were accurate--or he would never have undertaken this mad escapade. Somehow, though, seeing the ships and their heading made him furious with Falcon Formation for the first time. As though he hadn't really known at all.

"More mines, sir. We can avoid the cloud this time, but they're going to disperse soon. It'll be harder to find a way around them next time."

"Hmmp." The dreadnaught had not stopped when it realized *Rook* had mined the air ahead of it. To Chaison's astonishment and dismay, the huge vessel had simply plowed through the cloud, enduring a staccato barrage of explosions without apparent effect. It was not to be stopped that way; and if it kept going, sooner or later it would reach clear air, and Slipstream's advantage would diminish.

So Chaison was targeting its engines. He'd emptied barrage after barrage of rockets into them but so far the dreadnaught hadn't slowed significantly. Having realized what was happening--if not how it was being

done--Falcon was now mining the air around their ships. The mines were tuned to ignore impacts at less than fifty miles an hour, so the fleet continued to grind forward and maneuvering became harder and harder for Slipstream.

"I want to stop the dreadnaught," said Chaison, "but I want those troop carriers taken out as well. Without them there's no occupying force." He gave the order to the semaphore team, who had reluctantly given up their flags and were cheerlessly using an electromagnetic signaling technique called "radio telegraph" that was based on Mahallan's radar. It let the Slipstream ships communicate instantly, with no interference from clouds.

Travis glanced up at Chaison. "Bit of a surprise about Slew, isn't it?"

Both men smiled--and Chaison was about to say something witty when the green light of a thousand tumbling flares burst through the portholes. The *Rook* had entered clear air.

\* \* \* \*

Hayden dove to the side careless of where he might end up. Free of doubt now, Venera's spymaster was relentless, economical in his movements, and expressionless as he pursued Hayden around the room.

It didn't help that this place was so bare of ornament. The antechamber where the bike had been left had only a few hand-straps on the walls, ceiling, and floor, as well as some cabinets and shelves that didn't make good purchase. The key to a gravity-free sword fight was never to let yourself become stranded in mid-air--and in this place, that was not so easy. As they circled one another Hayden tried to ensure that he had one hand or foot on a strap or piece of furniture at all times. With blank wall at your back, all you could do was jump straight out, and the enemy would know in advance where you were going. And when you dove at your enemy, you made your whole body a missile but you also could not stop until you'd made contact with something; your opponent would attempt to ensure that the something was his sword blade.

Carrier seemed unhurried. There was no indication that adrenaline powered him; it was more like he was going through a set of mechanical motions, cut, parry, dodge, cut. He would keep doing it until Hayden was dead.

Hayden made for the door but Carrier anticipated him. They came together in the center of the room, thrusting with their sword-arms while reaching to try to catch sleeve or foot with the other hand. For frantic seconds they tumbled and then a thrust by Carrier took Hayden through the left bicep. He shouted at the jolt of pain.

Carrier gave a grunt of satisfaction. Hayden tried to pull back but Carrier fluidly moved with him, keeping the blade embedded in flesh as Hayden cursed.

Not so gracefully, Carrier flailed at a wall-strap with his other hand. He caught it--barely--and swung his sword, with Hayden attached, outward. Hayden knew he was seconds away from being placed motionless in mid-air, out of reach of the walls, at which point Carrier could bounce around and cut him to pieces at his leisure.

Desperately Hayden let go of his own sword, grabbed the blade of Carrier's, and *pushed*. The metal slid out of his skin, dotting the air with blood, and then Carrier yanked it out of his grasp, slicing Hayden's fingers open to the bone. Hayden writhed out of the way of the backhanded cut that followed. He tried to snatch his own sword out of the air but it had drifted too far away. He saw then that he really was stranded, two meters from the nearest hand-hold.

Carrier sneered and stood up from the wall-strap, which he'd hooked with his foot. Hayden twisted

around again and managed to kick the older man in the face. As Carrier cursed and spat blood, Hayden very slowly drifted across the room.

Carrier dove past him again with a vicious slash. Hayden did as Katcheran had drilled him to do: he rolled into a ball in the air and presented his feet to the blade. The sword chopped right through the tough leather but a cut foot wasn't going to kill him. And the pressure of the blow put him closer to the bike.

His sword twinkled as it turned on the far side of the room. Carrier perched at the inner door now, and was carefully lining up his next jump. This time he would thrust rather than cut, Hayden knew; there would be no evading the blow.

He stretched out, reaching for the bike. Carrier laughed. "Even if you can reach that what are you going to do?" he asked. "Throw it at me? Bounce somewhere? I'll never let you get your sword, you know."

Hayden's taut fingers brushed the curving metal of the bike. And Carrier jumped.

\* \* \* \*

"Full about!" Chaison dove for the portholes, missed his grip, and banged his chin on the wall. He pressed his face up against the glass, staring out at vast sensual curves of green-lit cloud. He still had the advantage here, because the dozens of flares drifting out of the cloudbanks lit only a small volume; and the plan had counted on the fact that there were many smaller clouds dotting the edge of Winter. His ships could dive through them with impunity. But while the six battered, obsolete Slipstream vessels still had an advantage of speed and maneuverability here, it wouldn't be enough. Falcon simply had too many ships.

The *Rook* pivoted in mid-course, air tearing at its hull, and Chaison strained to catch a glimpse of what was behind her. Lurid tumbles of cloud; arms and arches of vapor. And emerging from it only one other ship, so far.

"All batteries, target that ship! Don't give it a chance to sound!"

Too late. Even as the first rockets lurched towards the distant cruiser, a faint echo of its clear-air signal came to Chaison's ears. He cursed. "Take it out!" The noise of battle would prevent most of the other vessels from hearing that lone horn--but if only one picked it up, it would repeat it, and so would every other one that heard. Soon the clouds would be ringing with the signal that open air had been found.

He went back to the radar display. The shadow of Falcon Formation's giant ship still lay some miles inside the cloud, and it was slowing. "All ships: put everything into stopping the dreadnaught. Release parachute nets ahead of it, mine the air--*anything!*"

--Hammering sound of bullets hitting the hull. Sudden flame of a missile veering past. He heard the *Rook's* own machine gunners opening up at something. "Put us back in the cloud deck," Chaison commanded as he regained his chair.

The ship took a hit before they managed to escape into the mist. There was chaos over the speaking tube for about a minute, then an all-clear. Chaison frowned at the indiscipline, but most of his attention was on the radar.

They had arrived at this battle late. Daybreak was little more than an hour away. By the time Falcon's suns were glowing full, Venera would have had Mahallan switch Candescence's defensive systems back on.

During this long night of dark maneuvering, Slipstream had thrown the Falcon Formation fleet into disarray, had wiped out its bikes and smaller vessels, and scored crippling blows on a number of

mid-sized ships. The troop carriers appeared damaged as well. But that was all--and it was nothing.

If they didn't score a decisive blow to Falcon's invasion plans in the next minutes, the whole mission would have been for nothing.

"Sir!" It was the radar man. "We--I think we've lost a ship."

Chaison looked where he was pointing. One of the fast-moving dots on the screens had broken in two pieces. As he watched the pieces subdivided and disintegrated. The dots dissolved into smudges on the screens.

"Any idea who that was?" Chaison asked into the sudden silence. He scowled at the display. *The damn fools flirted with a mine cloud.*

There was silence in the bridge; the men glanced at one another. "Back to the dreadnaught," Chaison commanded. "I want the cutters packed with explosives--warheads, bullets, everything we've got. Rockets haven't had much effect on it, so we're going to ram something bigger down its throat."

*And if those don't work, we'll make the Rook itself into a missile.*

\* \* \* \*

Carrier jumped.

Hayden grabbed the seam of the bike's saddle and pulled as hard as he could.

The cargo net he'd stuffed under the saddle flowered into the air and he spun as best he could, throwing it at Carrier. The spymaster shouted and tried to evade it but he was in mid-leap now and there was nothing he could do. Tangled, swearing furiously, he bounced off the bike and back into the air.

Hayden planted both feet on the metal and pushed. The dive took him across the length of the room and he plucked his sword out of the air before spinning and kicking off from the far wall. Carrier was struggling to free his sword from the net; his awkward parry went bad and suddenly he was staring down at Hayden's sword, which stuck out of his chest.

"Wh--" He tried to reach up; failed, and looked in Hayden's eyes. Carrier was trying to speak.

"Don't talk to me," said Hayden. "The one you need to explain yourself isn't here. You'll see him soon enough." He let go of the sword, turned, and jumped back to the bike. Reaching around the exhaust vent, he caught a loop of the thin cable he'd stashed there before they had left the *Rook*. He pulled out the loop and began to unreel it.

When he was sure Lyle Carrier was dead he unwove the net from around him, and attached the cord to it. Then he moved to the door and looked for the first of the packages he'd ordered Candesce to provide.

\* \* \* \*

Aubri Mahallan was acting very nervous, and it was driving Venera crazy. After the tenth time that the woman bounced a circuit around the room, Venera said, "Is there something you need to do?"

Mahallan shook her head, becoming very still. "No. Nothing."

"Then settle down. It's not your husband who's in the middle of a battle right now. Your man's just down the hall."

"He's not my man," said Aubri quickly.

Venera raised an eyebrow. "Oh? He thinks he is."

Now Mahallan looked uncomfortable; as far as Venera was concerned, that was a definite improvement.

"You don't think the waiting gets to me?" continued Venera. She crossed her arms, glancing once at the indicator device she had stashed in her bag by one wall. It still glowed steadily. As long as it was on, Chaison retained his advantage; so in a sense, its light was her lifeline to him. But she would have to shut it down soon, when dawn came.

"I'm not you," said Aubri, scowling. "I've done a great deal for your little project, Venera. Have you ever asked yourself what I'm going to get out of all this?"

She shrugged. "You never asked for anything, did you? Which is odd, except that you're an exile for whom everywhere is the same ... But why not take Hayden Griffin? He's a fine catch for someone from the servant classes. Is that your problem with him? That he's not one of your own kind?"

"You wouldn't understand," said Mahallan.

Venera laughed. "On more than one occasion I've been told that my problem is that I do understand people, I just don't feel for them. Which is probably true. But you're right, I don't get it. We've completed our project, you're free and as rich as you want to be. In just a few minutes you can switch the sun's defenses back on, and then all you have to do is take your money and your man and go enjoy yourself. What could be simpler?"

Mahallan looked startled. "Is it time already?"

Venera checked her pocket watch. "Getting there."

"Okay." Aubri smiled; it seemed a bit forced to Venera. Mahallan glided over to the wish mirror. "I'll get ready to shut it down, then," she said brightly.

"All right." Venera watched her, keeping her face neutral. As the strange outsider woman gazed into the mirror, Venera let herself drift over to her bag. She made sure that she could see the glow of her indicator, and Mahallan, without turning her head.

Just in case, she loosened the scabbard of her sword.

\* \* \* \*

The dreadnaught was tangled in parachutes and trailed debris in a long smoking beard of rope and timber. Its engines were tangled knots of metal belching black smoke into the air. Its rudders were useless flags.

There were no significant holes in its hull.

The mist ahead of it was brightening as it approached open, flare-lit air. Just a few hundred yards and it would be free of the nightmarish disadvantage of the clouds. Its enemy would no longer be invisible. One shot from the rifled ten-inch guns mounted along its sides and the smaller ships would be matchwood. All it needed was the sight-lines.

As the *Tormentor* slid into position to unloose a salvo, the dreadnaught got its chance. The Slipstream ship had been relying on the veils of mist to let it do what it had done ten times already: stand off, hidden, and pummel the larger vessel before moving to another firing position. This time, though, the intervening

clouds proved to be just a thin curtain and when it parted suddenly, the *Tormentor* was unluckily right in the way of a searchlight. The dreadnaught's gunners had been waiting for this.

The first shell convulsed the cruiser with an internal explosion. The next broke it in half. Six more followed, pulverizing the twisting remains before the shockwave from the first blast had died out. The *Tormentor* and all its men were simply erased from the sky.

Rockets continued to rain on the dreadnaught from other directions--but the gun crews were emboldened now and began firing wildly. If some of their own ships were close by, well, too bad; any sane Falcon Formation craft would be headed for that brightening in the clouds by now. Only the enemy would lurk in the darkness, and so into that darkness they fired.

A lucky shell clipped the *Unseen Hand's* stern and blew its engines off. Its crew bailed out, flapping away with foot-wings, but the *Hand's* captain was old, mean-tempered Hieronymous Flosk. He drew a pistol and aimed it at the bridge door. "Any man who tries to leave, dies!" he bellowed. "We're going in! Man your posts, you cowards! Make your lives count for something!"

The *Hand* still had steering and was doing over a hundred miles an hour. When it lunged out of the cloudbank the dreadnaught's gunners had only a few seconds to fire and the one shell that hit bounced off the cruiser's streamlined hull. Then the *Unseen Hand* slammed into the side of the great ship and exploded.

In a zone of half mist, where towering banks of cloud interspersed with pockets of clarity, the dreadnaught shuddered and sighed to a stop.

\* \* \* \*

"Sir." The radarman sounded puzzled. Chaison looked up from trying to catch the flailing straps of his seat belt. The whole ship was rattling now as their airspeed peeled away planks behind the open wound of the hangar doors. They had to reduce their velocity, but a few bikes and cutters were still pursuing.

The radar man held up his chronometer. "Sir, it's daybreak in Falcon. The radar shouldn't be working anymore, but it's holding steady."

Chaison stared at him. What did this mean? Was Venera giving him a gift of extra time? Or had something gone wrong in Candescence?

He might have radar for as long as he needed it ... or it might cut out at any second. It no longer mattered: daylight was here.

The clouds were an abyss of pearl dotted with instants of black--men, burnt-out flares and wreckage only half-glimpsed as the *Rook* shot by them. And coalescing out of the writhing whiteness were the iron contours of the dreadnaught. The great ship seemed determined to keep a pall of night around itself; it had drawn a cloak of smoke and debris around its hull. With each broadside it let loose, the smoke thickened.

"I bet they never thought of this," Travis said, shaking his head. "Rockets take their exhaust with them when they go. But guns ... They're blinding themselves with smoke."

"It's a gift," said Chaison. "Let's take it while it's offered." He moved to the speaking tube. "Are the cutters loaded and ready? Good. Wait until I give the order and then let them fly."

The *Rook* spiraled around the motionless dreadnaught just ahead of cannonades of deadly fire. Chaison stared through the portholes, looking for any vulnerable spot through the wavering lines of tracer rounds

that subdivided the air. Enemy bikes shot past, snarling like hornets, and the *Rook* bucked to some sort of impact.

"Enemy closing from all directions, sir," said the radar man. "It looks like they've got another of ours boxed in too ... I think it's the *Arrest*. I can't see the *Severance*, but they're still broadcasting."

"Bring us closer," Chaison told the pilot. He'd seen what he was looking for--a triangular dent, yards wide, in the hull of the dreadnaught. The surrounding metal was scored and burnt; something bigger than a rocket had impacted there. He reached for the speaking tube--

--And everything spun and hit at him, walls furniture the men rebounding with the shock of a tremendous explosion. Half deafened, Chaison shook himself and grabbed for a handhold, abstractly noticing that the bridge doors were twisted, half ajar. *Slew's not going to fix this one*, he thought.

He struggled back to the commander's chair. The pilot was unconscious and Travis was shoving him aside to reach the controls. Chaison grabbed the speaking tube and shouted "Report, report!"

A thin voice on the other end said, "They're dead."

"Who's dead?"

"The ... everybody that was in the hangar, sir."

"Is this Martor? What about the cutters?"

"One's intact, sir." There was a pause. "I'll take it out, sir."

Chaison turned away for a moment, unable to speak. "Son," he said, "just aim it and jump clear. Make sure you've got a pair of wings and just get out of here. That's an order."

"Yes, sir."

Travis had the ship under control and was banking tightly to avoid a fusillade of shells from the dreadnaught. "Sir, here comes the rest of Falcon," he said tightly. Chaison glanced at the portholes and saw a white sky crowded with ships. Just then a large shape obscured the view: the explosives-laden cutter had soared ahead of the *Rook* and was curving down towards the iron monstrosity.

Chaison couldn't look away. Tracer rounds and the shocked air of shell fire outlined the cutter; he saw pieces of its armor shattering and flying away. Then it was suddenly not there, and Chaison blinked away after-images of a flash that must have been visible for miles.

The roar overtook the *Rook*, shaking the hull and starring another porthole. Chaison simply stared at the absence and coiling serpents of smoke. He felt a crush of grief and for a few moments was paralyzed, unable to think.

But everything rested on his decision. He shook off his feelings and turned to Travis.

"Prepare to scuttle the ship," he said.

## 19

Hayden tied the last of the sun components into the cargo net. His hands were shaking. As he fumbled with the cords, he noticed his shadow, hunched and vague, wavering against the grey wall of the visitor's station. He looked over in time to see the metal flowers of Candescence's strange garden closing. Silhouetting one of them was an orange glow that hadn't been there a minute ago.

"Oh no." He finished the knot hastily and climbed back along the cargo net's cables to the open entrance to the station. The bike was tethered there; it too had a shadow--no, two shadows. He looked down and saw that a second sun was opening its glowing eye.

He'd thrown Carrier's body into the open air. His story was going to be that the Gehellens had come back and there'd been a fight at the entrance. The attackers had been driven off but Carrier was killed. He had rehearsed his story over and over during the past hour, while he struggled against the pain of his wounds to fill the nets with sun parts. As he'd done so he'd found himself crying.

He no longer wondered at such tears. As he rehearsed the lie about the Gehellens, Hayden found himself wondering whether he was reluctant to tell the truth to Venera, or Aubri, or himself. Either way, he felt no satisfaction at Carrier's death. The only thing he was proud of was his attempt to talk the man out of attacking him.

So in his head he began to rehearse a second story. This one would not be told until he was an old man, if he got things right. It began and ended with, "Carrier was the last man I killed, or ever wanted to kill."

Once inside the station he climbed quickly from strap to strap, heading for the inner chambers. "We have to go!" he called as he went. "Come on, the suns are waking up!"

Nobody answered. What were Venera and Aubri up to? From his own experience with the wish-mirror, he'd seen that once you set something in motion here, you could pretty much ignore it and go on about your business. Aubri shouldn't have had to nurse Candescence after shutting down its defenses against Artificial Nature.

"Aubri! Venera! Where are you? We have to leave, now!"

He heard a thump from somewhere ahead. Hayden ducked under and over walls, passing through several rooms that seemed familiar. Then, as he was gliding across a half-lit room filled with hammocks and rest nooks, he heard a woman's voice growl a single word:

"Bitch!"

More thumps and a gasp from the other side of this wall. Hayden perched there for a moment, blinking, then swung down to climb into the next room. He stopped, straddling the wall.

Aubri Mahallan and Venera Fanning clung to straps on opposite walls. Both women had swords in their hands, and those swords were pointed at one another. Venera's face was twisted into a rictus of fury, muscles jumping in her famous jaw.

"Turn it on!" Venera screamed. "Turn it back on!"

Aubri silently shook her head.

Hayden somersaulted into the room. "What's going on?" He made to join Aubri, but she dove out of his way.

"Stay back," she murmured.

"Stay...? What's going on?" By now, he was too tired and in too much pain to catch her.

Venera pointed to where her special indicator lamp tumbled in mid-air, its light glowing steadily. "She won't turn it back on. Candescence's defenses! She was willing to turn them off all right, but she won't bring them back. She's opened the gates to her friends from beyond Virga."



"Aubri?" He stared at her, but she wouldn't return his gaze.

He should have figured this out. He realized now that she had given him enough clues over the past week--but he'd been so consumed with the idea of finding components for a new Aerie sun that he hadn't thought through the things Aubri had told him. She had told him that she had not been sent to Virga to enter Candescence; but in the same breath she had told him that the assassin-thing coiled inside her was listening for any hint that she might reveal her true mission. Her denial should have tipped him off; but he hadn't been smart enough to see it.

"I'm sorry," she said in a low, shaking voice. "If I turn it back on, I'll die."

"You were sent to bring Artificial Nature to Virga," he said. "That's what you couldn't tell me." She nodded.

Hayden's thoughts were racing. Should he try to stop this? Or should he side with Aubri? "What happens now?" he asked her. "When you let them in ... What are you letting in?"

Now she looked at him, her expressive features crumpled into sadness. "A trillion ghosts will come first," she said. "The disembodied AIs and post-humans will flood into Virga, make it their playground. They're hungry for resources. They'll transform everything they touch--and everybody. When that transformation happens, your reality will fade away. The walls of Virga will disappear. The suns, the darkness, the towns and ships ... They'll be erased by virtual realms. Glorious beauty, places like Heaven brought into being around every man, woman and child. Whatever you imagine will come to pass. Everything and anything, except Virga itself. Everything you knew will be gone, replaced by fantasies made real."

Venera shuddered. "We won't survive it," she said.

Aubri shook her head. "Not as you are now," she said. "Whatever your hopes and dreams were, they're obsolete now. You'll need new ones. New reasons to live." He mouth twisted in grief. "And that's the one thing the system can't make for you."

"No!" Venera launched herself across the room. Before Hayden could reach them the two women were twisting in the air, Venera slashing madly at Aubri who tried to parry. Hayden cried out as he saw Venera's sword slide into the muscle under Aubri's left shoulder.

Hayden's lover, the *Rook's* armorer, tumbled backwards streaming blood.

He screamed and jumped, too late, as Venera cursed and kicked off from Aubri's limp body. Venera reached a corner and ducked around the offset panels with one wide-eyed look back at Hayden.

He wrapped his arms around Aubri and turned so his own back took their impact on the far wall. She was jerking in his grasp, twists of blood reaching out of her with each breath.

"I'm--sorry," she gasped. "I was too afraid."

"Hush," he said, smoothing back her hair. "It's not your fault. It's theirs for making you and then condemning you for being who you are."

She closed her eyes and whimpered. "Hush," he said again, holding her close.

"No." She pushed against him. "No! Let me go. Get me to the, the wish-mirror." She pointed at a glassy rectangle on the ceiling.

"Stay still."

"No. Let--" She writhed in his arms, turning to glare at him.

"Let me beat them."

\* \* \* \*

The bridge was full of drifting grit and the stench of smoke. Deafening explosions rattled the beams; all the portholes had shattered. Chaison clung to the arms of his chair and glared out into gleaming sunlight as the *Rook* came apart around him.

"Ready, sir!" Travis was holding onto a pipe with his toes, one-armed as he was with his hand in a sling; his free hand was poised over the scuttling console.

Chaison felt infinitely weary. It wasn't as though it mattered whether Falcon Formation got its hands on the radar sets. There wasn't anything they could do with them. Assuming, of course, that Aubri Mahallan did her job. The idea that she might not seemed distantly worrying, but he couldn't bring himself to focus on abstractions. Instead, he frowned past the jagged glass rimming the porthole, at the obstinately solid silhouette of the dreadnaught that was even now turning to aim its biggest guns at the *Rook*.

*All I wanted*, he thought with an ironic smile, *was to get rid of that thing*.

As the dreadnaught turned it exposed the dented portion of hull where something had collided with it. Sunlight angled around the dark hull and Chaison saw that the ship's armor had split at the bottom of that dent; there was a three-sided hole there.

"Wait a second, Travis," he said. Chaison frowned, then reached for the speaking tube.

"Rocket batteries one and two, are you there?" he shouted.

"Y-yes, sir. What do you want us to do, sir?"

"Don't bail out," he said. "You'll be shot to pieces in open air. I have a plan. Load the racks and get ready."

"Sir!"

He turned to Travis, who was watching him with a raised eyebrow. The radar man and the semaphore team were also staring. "Get to the helm," he told Travis. "We've still got power. We're going to ram her."

"Ah. I see." Travis looked faintly disappointed. Chaison had to laugh.

"No, you don't see," he said. "We're going to ram her *there*." He pointed. Travis began to smile.

The *Rook* ducked out of the path of the big guns, angling up and shooting straight at the line of Falcon Formation battleships that was bearing down on her. They were momentarily safe since the ships would not want to miss *Rook* and hit the dreadnaught.

The *Rook* groaned as Travis spun them around and lined up on the dreadnaught. "They're going to get at least one good shot at us, sir," he said.

Chaison shrugged. "Have you got a better idea?"

Travis didn't answer, but merely pushed the control levers forward. Chaison heard the distant engines whine towards full power.

"If you do want to bail out," he said to the semaphore team and the radar man, "now would be the time

to do it."

Nobody moved.

"All right then."

Holed, dripping splinters and chunks of armor, the *Rook* accelerated for the last time. The air it crossed was layered with smoke and debris, the bodies of men, and unexploded ordnance. Chaison watched it all pass in disgust. *How pointless*. He wasn't sure whether it was Falcon's invasion that he meant, or his own attempt to stop it.

"Brace for impact!" He strapped himself in and spun the chair around. It was designed to handle collisions like this; the *Rook*, like her sister ships, had a substantial ram on her prow. She never intended to ram something as big as a town, though. This whole gambit might just provide a good laugh to the Falconers, if *Rook* simply splatted against the dreadnaught's skin like a bug on a porthole.

He closed his eyes, and thought of the home he would never see again.

The impact, when it came, was surprisingly gentle. A vast grinding sound filled Chaison's ears and the ship shuddered and bucked. Then it eased to a stop. In the swaying light of the gas lamp, he met Travis's eyes and grinned.

"Let's see where we are." The portholes were blocked by wreckage. Both men jumped over to the bridge doors and Travis flung them open. Chaison gasped at what he saw.

The *Rook* was holed in dozens of places. Its interior was a shambles, with dead men and parts of men, tangled coils of rope, broken bulkheads and spars thrusting every which way. Way down past where the hangar had been, streams of sunlight made bluish shafts across the space. Nearer, the holes in the hull revealed only darkness.

"We're jammed inside it," Travis said wonderingly. "More than half way."

Chaison nodded. "That's what I had in mind." He clambered through the wreckage, heading for the rocketeers who huddled next to their bent racks. "Ready to fire, men?" They stared at him.

Chaison laughed recklessly. "Come on!" he shouted. "This is the stuff of legends! We're going to rake this bastard of a ship with a barrage that'll tear it to pieces--and we're going to do it *from the inside!* "

Still they hesitated--and then a loud voice burst out, "*What are you waiting for?* "

It was Slew, smoke stained and trailing a broken chain from his wrist as he flew up from the aft. Beside him, helping him maneuver past the wreckage, was Ambassador Reiss. Both men had swords in their hands; both looked grimly determined.

"You heard the admiral!" yelled Slew. The men looked at each other, then leaped to their posts. Already Chaison could hear gunshots, and just behind Slew soldiers in Falcon Formation uniforms began pushing their way through gaps in the hull. *The irate crew*. Well, they were too late.

"Reiss, Slew, behind you. You men--fire!"

The port and starboard racks unleashed their rockets and the *Rook's* hull tried to collapse as everything outside blew up. Some of the rockets must have found their way down long passageways, exploding hundreds of yards away. Some didn't get ten feet. But the dreadnaught had never been designed to withstand this kind of attack. As the rocketeers cleared their tubes and made to load another round, the

*Rook* was hammered by new explosions, much bigger than those they had caused. Now the hull really was collapsing, Travis grabbing at a stanchion, Reiss and Slew's faces lit with surprise and all of them disappearing into bright sunlight as the ship sheared in two and the sky filled with gouts of smoke and flying darkness.

Somehow, Chaison had caught a rope and found himself dangling over the infinite airs of Virga, watching while the aft half of the dreadnaught fell away and wrenched itself to pieces with explosion after explosion. Mesmerized, he didn't look away from the sight until he felt the rope being tugged from the other end. He glanced up.

The shattered half hull of the *Rook* still stuck out of the fore half of the dreadnaught, right at the spot where the great ship had been torn in two. Smoke billowed out of the forward section but it hadn't exploded. Three Falcon airmen were hauling in the rope Chaison held, murder in their eyes. Of the rest of his crew, there was no sign.

"Gentlemen," Chaison said as he held out his hand, "meet the man who beat you."

\* \* \* \*

Venera watched Hayden Griffin weep. A fluttering sense of disquiet plucked at her; she fought against it fiercely.

Aubri Mahallan moved feebly in the young man's arms, gesturing at the wish-mirror in front of which they floated. Venera clutched her sword in sweating hands and wondered why Lyle had not shown up yet.

The indicator light for Candescence's defenses still spun lazily in the air. Without fanfare, it suddenly went out. Venera frowned at it. Had its little battery died, or ... She looked at Aubri Mahallan.

The woman's limbs drifted free now, and her head slowly tilted forward. Griffin gave one last wracking sob and then spun to look at the wish-mirror. It was a rectangle of white light now, all details washed away by the awakening suns.

Griffin turned again, and now he looked straight at Venera. Despite herself, she flinched from his glare. But all he said was, "We have to go."

The words made no sense at all; Venera could barely believe she'd heard them. "I killed your woman," she said. "If I come near you, you'll kill me."

"No," he said.

She sneered. "Oh? Where's Lyle?" Griffin looked away, and Venera's heart sank. "He's not coming, is he? You boys finally settled your little dispute, whatever it was?"

He gathered Mahallan's body in his arms again, and kicked off towards an open corner. "What choice did I have?" she called out after him. "You know what she tried to do!"

"Shut up," he said without looking back. "Just shut up."

Venera was furious and, yes, scared; but she wasn't going to back down. Not to this servant. "So strand me, or shoot me," she cried. "I did what I had to do."

Now, just before disappearing around the corner, he did look back. He looked sad, and puzzled. "Venera, I'm not going to kill you," he said. "There's room on the bike. Come with me."

"That would mean trusting you," she said.

"Yes."

Venera laughed, and hunkered down a little more in the shadows. "I've never done that in my life," she said. "I'm not about to start now."

"Suit yourself," he said with broken weariness. Then he was gone.

Venera remained where she was for long seconds. Outside, Candescence was rousing itself to full power. She couldn't feel the rain of invisible particles that Mahallan had said would flood this place during the day, but she imagined them like virulent poison seeping through the walls. Even if the heat didn't kill her...

But trust a man whose lover she had just killed? The idea was insane. Trust Griffin? Trust *anyone*? There were fools who did it and survived somehow. She could not be so lucky, she knew.

Venera fingered her jaw angrily. She would die here, miserable, abandoned.

When the bullet hit her and she lay moaning on the stone she had waited--waited for someone to come to her, to discover her in pain. She had waited for the cries of distress, the solicitations of her rescuers. Nobody came. There was no rescue for Venera Fanning. So in the end she had crawled, herself, unassisted, through the corridors and into the Admiralty. At the last second she had fainted, before knowing whether the ones who found her had cared enough to hold her as Griffin had held Mahallan, whether they wiped her drying tears and murmured that she would be all right. When Chaison tried, much later, it was too late.

Venera spat a curse, and uncoiled from her defensive knot. As quietly as she could, she crept after Hayden Griffin through the dimming rooms of the station.

\* \* \* \*

Heat and intolerable light met Hayden at the entrance. The bike's handlebars were almost too hot to touch and he had to squint and grope for a loop of cable to wrap around Aubri.

He didn't have enough to tie her to the saddle, so he looked around for another solution. Put her in the cargo nets? Maybe--if he could get to them. The heat scored his face whenever he turned towards the suns; the very air was attacking his mouth and lungs. He wasn't sure he could jump over to the nets and get back before the heat took him.

*You've lost her already.* Like he'd lost everyone else in his life. He should be used to this by now.

Heartsick, he gave her body the slightest of shoves, and she slipped through his fingers--waist, shoulders, finally one trailing hand smoothing his before the moment of separation. Aubri Mahallan vanished into light.

Hayden turned and climbed onto the bike.

He spun up the fan and the burner started immediately. As the jet's whine escalated he clung to familiar routines, listening to it, judging the health of the machine. He jiggled it with his knees, estimating how much fuel was left. Hayden knew his machines, and this one still had some life in it. A few refuelings and it would get him back to Rush, he was sure of it.

And then ... He fingered the pockets of his jacket, which were full of jewels and coins from the treasure of Anetene. He probably had enough to hire the artisans he'd need. The core components of Aerie's new sun were already in his possession. He might not even need the help of the Resistance to get it built.

Unsmiling, he opened the throttle and began to move away from the visitor's station. There was a lurch as

the cable tautened and the nets fell in line behind the bike. That cargo would slow him down, of course. He might meet the Gehellens on the way out. He couldn't bring himself to care much.

But he had to care. What if they got into the visitors' center? Better close the door. He glanced back, and saw that the entrance to the visitors' station was already shut. Crouched beside it in a hurricane of radiance was Venera Fanning.

The cargo net was passing her, just a few yards away. Her eyes met his; there was no appeal in her gaze, just defiance. Hayden nodded once, then deliberately turned back to his piloting. After a moment he felt a slight jerk translate up the cable and through the bike as Venera caught and clung to the passing net.

He opened the throttle and the bike accelerated, but slowly, too slowly as the inferno of dawn welled out from the heart of Candescence. He imagined he could hear the familiar low hiss of the sun of suns, even over the scream of the bike. In minutes it became impossible to see; then he could no longer breathe except in shallow gasps; and then he started to tear at his clothing as it burned him wherever it touched. All the while, the air rushed past faster and faster. Before he completely lost his senses he stopped himself from throwing away his jacket and shirt. The light burned his bare skin as much as their touch had.

Gradually the agony abated. Candescence was reaching out to ignite hundreds of miles of air, but he was escaping it, barely.

Squinting ahead, he could see many long fingers of shadow reaching past him. Catamarans or bikes? He turned his head, trying to make out what they were.

Everywhere, the sky was full of shrouded human bodies, all gliding silently in toward Candescence. Joining Aubri. The faint specks of a hundred funeral ships receded into the distance, returning to their ports after unloading their cargoes.

When he was finally able to regain his flapping shirt and jacket, and look around himself, Hayden found that he had no idea where he was. Originally they had planned to navigate by keeping Leaf's Choir in view. They would head for one of Gehellen's neighbors, and from there return to Slipstream. Hayden could be going in the opposite direction now, for all he knew.

It didn't matter. He would find his way, eventually. He couldn't imagine spending the days and nights without Aubri beside him; it seemed impossible that he had done so before. But he had to try. He had responsibilities now.

A few minutes later he felt another vibration through the cable. He looked back, shielding his eyes with one hand.

Venera Fanning made a black cross against the sun of suns as she launched herself into the air. They were doing a good sixty or seventy miles an hour at that moment; she swept her arms ahead of her in a diving posture and arrowed away, clothes fluttering.

With luck and a good tail wind, she would make it to the principalities of Candescence. Though he wished achingly that it could be Aubri silhouetted in exuberance against that fearsome light, he hoped Venera would survive and find her way home.

Hayden turned back to his own task. He was done with fighting, done with brooding over the past. His nation and his life had been in shambles for too many years; it was time to rebuild.

He had too much to do to waste his time with resentment.

He settled into the bike's saddle, and opened the throttle wide.

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