



0382 | \$ 5.95 | The Backwards Mask (novel, part three of three) Original

The Backwards Mask

Paul Brunette



Copyright 2010 © Far Future Enterprises

All Rights Reserved.

THE BACKWARDS MASK

a *Traveller* novel by Paul Brunette

(based on situations and settings from the RPG *Traveller* created by Marc Miller, which is not owned by myself.

Author's note: This story is an unusual fanfiction because it's actually based on my own work, two published *Traveller* novels (*The Death of Wisdom* and *To Dream of Chaos*) that were published by Game Designer's Workshop (GDW) before it went out of business in 1996. This manuscript is the draft of a third novel that was intended to be the third leg of a trilogy including the other two novels, and I present it here partly for the sake of completeness (in the very remote chance that anyone cares to know how the trilogy might have ended), and partly as an homage to the *Traveller* RPG which I myself often played when I was younger. (As an aside, the character named 'Bender' who appears in this story wasn't named after the famous robot from the *Futurama* TV series; I finished the original draft of this manuscript back in 1997 and the TV series didn't premier until 1999, so I've left my Bender in the story with the original name I gave him.)

The specific version of *Traveller* which this novel is based on is called *Traveller: the New Era* (which became defunct along with GDW when that company collapsed, although newer versions of *Traveller* have been created by other companies since that time). The premise of *the New Era* - set more than 3000 years in our future - was that intergalactic civilization had been all-but annihilated in the aftermath of a catastrophic civil war in the human-dominated Third Imperium, which led to the release of an insidious machine intelligence called the Virus, which took possession of machines throughout known space and used them to destroy almost all civilization, human and otherwise. For many decades, anarchy ruled the systems that had once been the Third Imperium, but eventually - about 70 years after The Collapse - a handful of human worlds called the Reformation Coalition (aided by the mysterious alien race called the Hivers) had finally recovered sufficiently to attempt to explore the so-called Wilds and make the first tentative steps toward the restoration of galactic civilization. This story is set in that time, focusing on the crew of the Reformation Coalition starship *Hornet* - a relatively humble freighter modified with heavy weapons and sensors to somewhat enhance its chance of survival on missions into the dangerous Wilds. Led by Coeur D' Esprit - a former Scout pilot in the Third Imperium who survived through the Collapse in cryogenic suspension - the *Hornet* is returning to the Reformation Coalition after several difficult but successful missions into the deep Wilds, but Coeur and her crew will soon discover that they have at least one more perilous mission ahead of them before they can hope to return to their home port on the planet Aubaine.)

PROLOGUE

Among strangers, the most common question I am asked, after "what was it like to live in the Last Imperium," is, "what was it like to lose your starship Hornet?"

The answer, of course, is that it hurt, a lot. Hornet wasn't much to look at--she was small, slow and poorly armed--but she had a life beyond her material condition, the kind of durability that endears itself to spacers like myself. To tell the story of her end, though, I must back up a few months to a time before the end, when Hornet was bound for almost certain retirement in the Reformation Coalition.

The year was 1202, and Hornet was finally returning home after a successful mission to Mexit. There, pressed from earlier retirement, Hornet had delivered a squad of Marines, a tank and a grav APC, helping overthrow one tyrannical government and support its democratic successor. Leaving the planet, though, I was not very happy; along the way, I'd taken a friend into custody, the pirate Vega Zorn, and now I was taking her back to the Coalition for trial and almost certain execution.

As if this wasn't bad enough, though, I also had another friend--Dr. Orit "Physic" Takegawa--looking forward to Vega's execution, and two representatives of the Oriflammen aristocracy--Liu An-Wing and Bela Masaryk--applying pressure to unload the prisoner on their planet, where she would likely be given asylum.

"You know," I said to Vega, sitting on her bunk in the loft, "I hate to admit it, but you are becoming a real pain in the ass."

Vega, however, only smiled, pausing in the typing of a manuscript on her personal computer. A lean and muscular woman, with blonde hair, blue eyes and a cutlass scar across her forehead and left eye socket, Vega filled out a black Arses body sleeve as well as anyone I've ever seen--and looked quite out of place sitting behind a desk in the brig--but her attitude suggested resignation to her fate.

"Well, look on the bright side," she said. "Once we get to Ra I'll be a dead pain in the ass."

"That isn't very funny."

"No, it isn't. At least I'll have this manuscript, though, to tell my side of things."

"What is that you're working on?" I asked.

"My autobiography," Zorn explained. "I figure I'll probably be railroaded on Ra, so I figured I'd better get my story down now, while I still can."

"You got me in there?"

"Oh, yeah. I was going to ask you, though, if I had this biographical data correct..."

Zorn then opened up another file on the computer.

"Here it is," she said, "Coeur A. D' Esprit; sex female; Arses lieutenant; born Phoenix, Terra; age 108."

"Well, I hope you explain," I said, "I'm not actually 108 years old. I did spend 76 years in low suspension."

"Oh yes. I think I described you as a beautiful young brunette with flashing brown eyes."

"How flattering."

"Well, yes. I figured I'd better butter you up, so you'd take care of the manuscript for me."

I frowned.

"Don't you think that's more an attorney's job?" I asked.

"Probably. I don't have an attorney, though, and I doubt the police state on Ra will let me hire one."

"If it bothers you, though, you don't have to."

"No, that's okay. I'm just thinking, if Physic finds out, she'll give me hell all the way back to Aubaine."

Vega shrugged.

"Well," she said, "it is important to stand by your friends."

This, I suppose, was irony. It was an impossible situation, though, for me to resolve. Physic had every right to hate Vega--after Physic had tried in vain to save the 400 Hivers Vega slaughtered on Ra--but Vega had also risked her life several times for the crew of my ship, and that sort of conduct cannot be disregarded.

It pained me, then, that Vega had reneged on a deal we had on Mexit. In exchange for having her pirates help my Marines, I had agreed to give Vega limited freedom on the way to Ra, restricted only from entry into the ship's bridge, engine room and turrets. Later, though, after we entered jump space, Vega declined the offer, citing the fact that showing mercy to her would be bad for me.

"Speaking of standing by your friends," I said, "it's still not too late for you to change your mind about our deal."

"Oh, forget about it," Vega said. "We'll be at Ra soon enough."

"Eight weeks," I said. "Eight jumps--that's a long time to be cooped up in this brig."

Again, Vega shrugged.

"Well, I know you mean well," she said, "but I'm already dead. Why risk your own career over me."

"It's not that big a risk," I countered. "You were a decorated officer of the Dawn League, and you deserve to be treated with respect."

"Besides, it wouldn't be that much trouble. All we'd have to do is have Physic implant the homing tracker, and that would be that."

"That's okay," Vega said. "I'll live."

"Well, all right," I said, "but this is the last time I'm going to make the offer. Without that tracker, you're going to have to stay here, locked in the brig."

Vega smiled.

"Somehow," she said, "I'm sure the accommodations here will be much nicer here than they will be on Ra."

That was certainly true.

"Well, all right, then," I said, standing up and moving to the door, "if that's the way you want it."

"It's for the best," Vega said. "But don't worry, I won't change your description to a fat old cow with bags under your eyes."

"Thanks," I said, palming the handprint reader to open the hatch. "You're a pal."

X O X O X

What I could not know, of course, was how soon our course to Ra would be detoured. Four weeks later, dropping out of jump to skim more fuel at the gas giant Volada III, we met a much larger ship--the Coalition transport Kruytercorp Endeavor--coming the other direction.

Here, for a change, it was good that we looked like a beat-up old freighter. The far trader design is very well known--two bow forks, one for the bridge and one for crew quarters, framing a forward cargo hatch; two more hatches to port and starboard; extra crew quarters in the top deck loft; and an airfoil "roll bar" back above two small, low-powered thruster bells--and aroused fear in no one.

"Shall we send our transponder code?" asked my navigator, AkakEE 'Deep Six' Siltwater.

"Damn well better," I said, noting that the transport was already within a hundred thousand kilometers, well within optimum laser range. "It's that or get blasted."

"Yes, sir," Deep Six agreed, deftly manipulating his commo board with the barbels at his snout. A Schalli, he was helpless out of water without his rollerchair, but he more

than made up for the disability with mental flexibility; while I had my hands full just flying the ship, Deep Six routinely ran the comms board, and the sensor board and navigation simultaneously--operating the latter two boards with the four flukes emerging from the bottom of his streamlined torso.

"Signal received and confirmed," Deep Six said a few minutes later.

"What about their code?"

Endeavor's code is good, sir."

"Well, thank God. Send her regards, then, and we'll move on to the gas giant."

"Aye, sir," Deep Six said, and that, I thought, was that. The two ships, after all, had very high and opposite velocities, and breaking to dock would take the better part of a day.

A few seconds later, though, Deep Six discovered a remarkable fact. Kruytercorp Endeavor, he learned from her radio chief, was bound directly for Oriflamme, and therefore we did have a compelling reason to dock. Whereas I could get the junior technarchs to Oriflamme in four months, the transport could get them there in one.

"Well, ordinarily," said Captain Walden Kaufman, a gray-haired veteran trader, "I'd agree to take them aboard, but that would require a lot of braking. Who are these people, exactly?"

"Lady Liu An-Wing, Captain," I said, "and an economist on retainer to her family, Bela Masaryk."

"Oh."

"You heard of them?"

"Yes. Liu is the heir to Lord Leon An-Wing, our business partner."

"Oh, you don't say."

"Yes," Kaufman said, "well, I guess that's that. We'll come about to meet you, Hornet."

"Well, if you think that's best," I said, hiding my glee.

"Endeavor out."

X O X O X

Six hours later, then, Kruytercorp Endeavor and Hornet did come alongside and dock. Burdened with an incredible amount of luggage--over twenty pairs of shoes, several dozen skirts and dresses, two large jewelry boxes and a personal styling appliance the size of a small desk--Liu An-Wing barely had time to pack, but I

suspect she was just as glad to be off of Hornet as I was to be rid of her. Although she was wearing a bulky vac suit--like every other person aboard the ship during general quarters--Liu was fully packed well before we met the transport, and told me as much in a video link from her stateroom.

"I just wanted you to tell you we're ready," said the pale-complected Liu, sitting next to her curly-haired assistant Bela.

"Glad to hear it," I said, meanwhile watching the approach of the transport on my HUD. "We should be docked in a matter of minutes."

"Then, I take it, we'll be able to leave."

"No," I said, "not quite. I'll let you go just as soon as we finish inspections."

"Inspections?"

"Viral inspections, Madame Liu," Bela said. "Hornet's crew will send a party aboard the transport to look for signs of Virus, and the transport will do the same."

Liu, lacking Bela's technical education, appeared confused.

"I don't get it," she said. "How do you 'see' something that lives inside a computer?"

"To hazard a guess," Bela said, "they'll probably use a canary."

"That's right," I said. "We've got a good tech level 15 model, about the size of a beach ball."

"A canary," Liu said quizzically, "the size of a beach ball?"

"It's a computer," I said.

"Oh."

"Yes," Bela explained. "Basically, you plug the canary into a ship's computer, and if the computer's infected, the canary will raise an alarm."

"Oh," Liu said, turning her attention back to me, "well, as long as you know what you're doing."

"One hopes," I said. "Bridge out."

In truth, though, I knew there was little we could do, in fact, Kruytercorp Endeavor was unfriendly. Where my ship had two heavy weapon turrets and eleven passengers and crewmembers, Kruytercorp Endeavor had ten heavy weapon hardpoints and the capacity to carry more than fifty crewmembers; our escape would therefore be problematical if the transport proved hostile.

Someone had to go aboard the transport, though, so I summoned my two best technicians--the lanky, bearded engineer Glaive 'Crowbar' Arkwright; and our Hiver advisor Newton--to the starboard air lock after we were docked. Our muscular Marine sergeant, Vin 'Drop Kick' Escher, and I then moved to meet them at the lock, ready to guard their rear as they left to board the transport.

As usual, however, Newton was less than enthusiastic about exposing itself to potential danger. With the fingers of its tail--the rearmost of six limbs emerging from a central torso--the mute Hiver typed a message into the voder slung under its chest, and the voder then translated the message into monotone, strangely emotionless, Anglic.

"Red Sun," the voder said, as Newton eyed the air lock anxiously with the six eyes of its prime limb, "I wonder if it might not be prudent to find another crewmember for this mission."

"Well, maybe you'd feel better," Crowbar suggested, checking the magazine of his autopistol, "if you carried a gun."

"On the contrary," Newton said, turning toward the engineer on its four central legs, "I would feel much worse. We Hivers are natural cowards."

"I don't know about that," Drop Kick said. "Snapshot says some Hiver armor companies are pretty tough."

"With apologies to your fiancée," Newton answered, "anyone can be brave inside a tank."

"I resent that," said Drop Kick, a tanker by training.

"Perhaps I should restate that," Newton said. "Any Hiver can be brave inside a tank. Outside a tank, we're all quivering gelatin."

This, I suspected, was a human idiom--probably picked up from Physic.

"Just try to relax," I said. "Even if Endeavor is a Vampire ship, you're too valuable to injure."

"Yeah," Drop Kick said, "an engineer like you--they'd probably chain you to the jump drive."

Newton mulled this over a moment before responding.

"I see your point. Indeed, Crowbar and myself are far less expendable than you two."

Drop Kick frowned at this, but I merely shrugged. Many humans--Vega foremost among them--have taken the Hiver style of speech as cold and heartless, but Hivers are alien, after all, and it does not behoove us to judge them by human standards.

And anyway, I didn't care if Newton had to psyche itself up to do a job. What I could not know was that yet another twist in the story of Hornet lay mere minutes away, as Crowbar and Newton ventured over to Kruytercorp Endeavor, and their opposite number--two vac-suited spacers--boarded us.

X O X O X

The unexpected twist was that one of the boarders--her red hair and green eyes hidden by the silvered visor of her vac suit visor--was Tirese Serene, absolutely the last person I expected to meet in the deep frontier.

To fully appreciate my stunned amazement, however, I must digress for a moment and explain how I first came to meet the remarkable Tirese. That was in 1201, about one year earlier, when Hornet pulled into the Kruytercorp starport at Kruyter Belt, just after helping to capture a freighter trying to smuggle contraband through the system defenses.

Unfortunately, the backer for this smuggling operation turned out to be August Delpero--the husband of my friend Physic--and this in turn devastated the doctor. It gave Physic a clue, however, to the shifty behavior of her husband, and the doctor was therefore receptive when Tirese Serene--who was not only a Kruytercorp director, but also a telepath--offered to regress her hypnotically, revealing suppressed memories of her life with August.

In the Last Imperium, of course, telepathy was outlawed, so few people knew anything about it, and most of those who did perished in the Collapse. That notwithstanding, though, the hypnosis appeared to work, and Physic confronted definitive proof of her husband's treachery. But what was more, the definitive proof would link August to Vega and her plan to kill the Hivers, helping us stop that plan before its full and deadly blossom.

Looking back, then, I was fond of Tirese, but I never expected to see her again; Tirese, was after all, a senior Kruytercorp administrator, and presumably tied to her desk. Fourteen months later, though, there she stood in my starboard air lock, alongside a junior drive hand from Kruytercorp Endeavor

"Hello, Coeur," she said.

"Tirese?" I said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Inspecting your ship, I think. This is Lt. Yang, by the way, with the canary."

I nodded, shaking the lieutenant's hand. I could not help but keep my eyes on the director, however--intersecting unexpectedly with my life again.

"This is pretty odd," Drop Kick said to Tirese, reflecting my surprise. "Aren't you a little too valuable to risk in a boarding party?"

Tirese smiled, both flattered and amused.

"Actually, no. Once we got close enough, I scanned your ship clairvoyantly, and saw you were on the level."

"You can do that?" I asked.

"Yes," Tirese said, "I can do that. Now, maybe we should get the canary here to your main computer, though."

"Yes, of course," I said. "Drop Kick, show Mr. Yang to the computer bay."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said, stepping away and leading Lt. Yang forward to the flight computer bay, just behind the bridge and opposite my stateroom.

"So what about you?" I asked Tirese. "If you've already looked us over..."

"It doesn't hurt to double-check things," Tirese said. "I'll head aft to check out the rest of the ship."

"I'll go with you," I said.

In my mind, though, I was still uncertain this could be a coincidence--just happening to meet her out there like that--and Tirese, a telepath, read the concern from my mind as we headed aft.

You're wondering, she thought to me, what I'm really doing here.

"Come to think of it," I said, stopping before the starboard laser turret, "yes."

"Well," she said, "I could tell you it's just a coincidence, but..."

"That's not entirely true," I guessed.

"Yes," Tirese confirmed, "that's not entirely true. I had a strong intuition I should come along with Kruytercorp Endeavor"

"Why? What did you think would happen?"

"I can't say exactly. I've had intuitions like this before, though, and I've come to believe I can trust them."

"What? You mean you can see the future?"

Tirese shook her head.

"No, I wouldn't say that. It doesn't really matter, though--what matters is I'm here, and I've got a job to do."

"Yes," I said. "The engine room is this way."

Tirese nodded.

"After you, Coeur."

X O X O X

Tirese Serene, of course, didn't really need directions to find her way around a far trader--apart from her clairvoyance, she was also a former merchant, and had owned a far trader when most of my crew were still in elementary school.

For Tirese Serene--seemingly a young, attractive woman in her thirties--was far, far older than she looked. She was, in fact, 85--having preserved her youth through the relic drug anagathic--and had used her youthful vitality to pursue a remarkable range of careers, from work as an attorney to work as a sailor and a belter.

And yet, for all her experience--and her inscrutable powers--Tirese was not a proud, unapproachable woman. In the engine room, for instance, she greeted the doctor-cum-engineer Physic with hearty, friendly hug, belying the fact that the two of them had met only once.

"Captain," Physic said, "why didn't you tell me Tirese was here?"

"I didn't know," I said.

"Oh, don't blame the captain," Tirese said. "I wanted to surprise you."

"Well, you did," Physic admitted. "I nearly fainted when I saw you there."

"I have that effect on people," Tirese admitted. "So, are you well?"

The diminutive Physic, usually congenial in disposition, frowned slightly, looking down at the deck. Brilliant and pretty--with black hair, dark brown eyes and a round, high-cheekboned face--Physic was once irrepressibly cheerful as well, but divorce and the battle with Vega's virus had left her grim and bitter.

"I suppose," Physic said. "I could be worse."

Tirese nodded, saying nothing for a moment. As Physic herself nodded back, though, I suspected they were conversing silently, by telepathy.

"Thanks," Physic said finally. "Maybe you should see for yourself."

"See what for yourself?" I asked.

"What possessed Vega Zorn to kill all those Hivers," Tirese said.

"Oh," I said. "Well, you could always ask her. She's right up in the loft."

"Thank you, Coeur," Tirese said. "I think I shall."

A few minutes later, then--after pausing to check out the luggage of the junior technarchs--we advanced to the brig. A veteran spacer, Vega wasn't surprised by the

visit--knowing an inspection party was entitled to inspect any portion of the ship--but she was surprised when I explained who my companion was.

"Vega," I said, "this is Tirese Serene. She's a Kruytercorp administrator."

"Ms. Serene," Vega said, shaking her hand politely.

"And she's also a telepath," I added.

"A what?"

"A telepath," Tirese said. "I have some limited psychic ability."

"What, you mean like a circus magician?"

"No," Tirese said, "I received actual psionic training, just before the end of the Last Imperium."

"So, you're a remnant, too."

"Yes, I am," Tirese said. "I'd rather talk about you, though. I have an interest in history, and you are certainly an interesting historical figure."

"Is she for real?" Vega said to me.

"Yes," I said. "She's an old friend."

"Oh," Vega said. "Well, you can't be all bad, then. Have a seat."

"Thank you," Tirese said, accepting one of the two chairs next to Vega's desk. Vega then took the other, when I elected to stand.

"So what do you want to know?" Vega asked. "Why I killed all those Hivers?"

"You must have read my mind," Tirese said. "Yes, I'd like to know that. I've read you were a decorated officer once, and you certainly don't seem like a raving lunatic."

"Thanks," Vega said. "Basically, I've determined that the Hivers are trying to steer us down a path to destruction, and barring that, they'll settle for turning us into sheep."

"That's quite a claim."

"Oh, I've got proof. You remember the Dawn League plan for peaceful exploration of the Wilds? The plan that lost us a dozen ships and hundreds of personnel?"

Tirese nodded.

"A Hiver idea. Plus, there's what they did to my ship, Taylor the Bruce

"That was a fat trader, wasn't it?"

"Yep, lost in 1200. Our Hiver advisor steered us into a meeting with a Vampire ship, and the ship was completely destroyed."

"It could have been an accident."

"Accident my ass. Hivers are cowards, ma'am, with no integrity. They blamed us for creating the Virus, then took steps to neutralize us as a threat forever."

"How does your ship fit in there?"

"Simple. The Hiver planned to get us infected with Virus, then have the ship spread the infection to the rest of the Dawn League."

"You know," Tiresa said, "some people would say you're just paranoid--that you're reading sinister motivations into everything you see."

Vega shrugged.

"Yeah, well, I'll let history be the judge of that. My case is here, in this manuscript."

She then turned to her desk, flipping on her computer's display screen.

"Your biography?"

"Yes, ma'am. They'll kill me, but this will live on."

"Hm," Tiresa said, leaning forward for a better look at the screen.

"What?" Vega said. "Did the spell-checker miss something?"

"I don't know about that," Tiresa said. "There is something interesting there, though--what were you talking about here on this page?"

"Oh," Vega said, "this is when I bought the Hiver plague from the Mercantile Guild."

"I see," Tiresa said, still studying the text intently. "And these people you describe here--do you know who they were?"

"No, the Guild kept everything anonymous."

"Interesting."

By this point, of course, I was curious what exactly they were talking about and moved over closer for a better look. There, I found displayed a tense little snippet of narrative prose describing Vega's midnight encounter with a haughty, pasty-faced Guild captain, a goggle-eyed technician and a scarred, one-eyed starmerc on the wind-swept grounds of Sauler Downport.

"It's kind of odd, actually," Vega said. "I remember being there, but it's more like a dream, somehow, than a real event."

"I wonder if you could do me a favor," Tirese said at last, looking up from the screen. "I wonder if you'd be willing to let me read your mind."

"Can I stop you?" Vega asked.

"No," Serene said, "but I can't get anything useful unless you cooperate. I'd like you to try to remember that incident--the one you describe in the manuscript."

Vega--and I--were confused.

"Trust me," Serene said. "It's important."

"Okay," Vega said. "What do I do?"

"Just close your eyes," Serene said, closing her own eyes as well, "and remember the scene. The 3rd of Aquarius, 1201...Sauler Starport...the wind all around...Vi Et Armis, sitting in the starlight..."

And then her voice trailed off, as Vega likewise closed her eyes. Silence then followed, though Tirese's eyes flicked quickly back and forth behind her eyelids.

"Has it started yet?" Vega asked.

"Yes, you can open your eyes."

"I didn't feel anything."

"That's a good thing," Tirese said, smiling. "I saw what I wanted."

Tirese then turned to me.

"Captain, we should talk."

"Okay."

"I meant alone."

"Very well," I said, letting her stand up, and then following her out into the loft.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Vega Zorn," Tirese said, softly. "I don't think she's guilty."

"What?"

"Well, not in the legal sense, anyway. She may have done what she's accused of, but she was not the mastermind."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think I should say any more," Tiresé said. "Not right now, anyway. What I would like, Coeur, is permission to stay aboard your ship--if Vega will let me serve as her attorney."

Incredulous, I didn't speak for several seconds.

"You're serious."

"Yes, quite. Captain Kaufman won't be happy, I suppose, but that can't be helped."

"What matters is justice, and discovering the truth."

X O X O X

Revealing nothing of her thoughts, unfortunately, Tiresé gave me nothing to base a decision on; it seemed incredible--indeed, ridiculous--to assume that Vega might evade execution.

In the absence of data, then, I went with intuition. I allowed her to make her offer to Vega, and Vega accepted. Tiresé and I then explained the situation to Captain Kaufman, who was outraged. No threatening or pleading could bend Tiresé from her course, however, and in fact Tiresé ended up extracting a free load of jump fuel from the transport as a gesture of corporate support for the Coalition.

"You are something," I said later, meeting Serene in the lounge for our first supper after jump.

Serene only shrugged, though, modestly maintaining she had no choice but to stand by the truth. Just exactly what the truth was, however, Serene wouldn't say, even under prodding from Physic, Drop Kick, Newton and the girl gunners, Denise "Snapshot" Valencia and Johanna "Gyro" Solomon.

"I don't get it," Physic said. "Zorn said she did it--how could she not be guilty?"

"Indeed," Newton seconded, "the captain's admission of guilt is a matter of record."

"For what it's worth," Tiresé said, "I don't condone Vega's actions. Certainly, there is no justification for taking the law into one's own hands, and attempting genocide."

"How can you defend her, then?" asked the blonde laser gunner, Gyro.

"Maybe she figures it's some kind of conspiracy," speculated Snapshot, Drop Kick's freckle-faced fiancée.

"What do you mean? Somebody set Vega up?"

"Yeah, sure. I wouldn't put it past my people."

"What? Oriflamme?"

"Yeah, why not? They've done crazier things."

"Not that crazy," Physic said. "That was dissolve the Coalition for good."

"Yeah," Gyro said, "it would have to be somebody foreign, like the Guild."

"Or maybe the Solee," Drop Kick ventured. "They're pretty treacherous."

All this speculation, however, would not bait Tirese into the open. Instead she sat by quietly, eating her autogalley fish sticks and waiting for a quiet interlude to give her opinion.

"People," she said, "I think it might be better if you avoided speculation. I understand the motivation, but there's enough danger out here in the Wilds already without dreaming up even more of it."

"Amen," I said. "We've still got four jumps to go and we ought to stay focused."

"Yes, sir," said the XO, Gyro, speaking for the crew.

"Well," Physic grumbled, "I just hope this doesn't change the way we treat Vega. I'd rather not have that animal released."

"Don't worry," Tirese said. "Vega hasn't asked for special treatment."

"Yes," I said, "and on the bright side, Tirese's agreed to help out the maintenance detail, with Drop Kick and Newton."

"Well, that's something I guess," Drop Kick conceded. "We tried to get the j-narcs to help out, but they were pretty clumsy."

"Indeed," Newton said. "Having the sewage back up in my stateroom was not congenial."

"Right," I said, "so things aren't all bad."

"Well, just tell me this," Physic said to Tirese. "Back when you were an attorney, how many cases did you lose?"

"Oh, that was a while ago. It's hard to remember."

"How about round numbers."

"Round numbers? Well, actually, I don't remember ever losing a case."

Which prompted a sigh from Physic.

"Well, that makes it official," Physic said. "Life sucks."

X O X O X

Physic's opinion notwithstanding, the mood on the ship actually did lift after the junior technarchs left. After that first supper, my crew stopped prodding Tirese about her defense of Vega, and the good-natured Tirese in turn never mentioned it either.

Instead, Tirese focused on being generous and helpful. For instance, when Newton absent-mindedly burned a hole in Gyro's jacket with a soldering gun, Tirese insisted on replacing the garment with a lavender bomber jacket of her own, bearing the patch of her own far trader Porfira. It was almost certainly older than Gyro, and likely a precious memento, but Tirese gave Gyro to believe otherwise, persuading her to keep it as a gift from spacer to spacer.

And indeed, Tirese was a spacer, deserving the name. She was so helpful with the maintenance gang, in fact, that Newton--on the sly--suggested I ought to try persuading her to join the Arses.

"You know, I'd like to hate her," Physic confided to me later, in my stateroom, "but she's so nice, it's really hard."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "It must be hard maintaining your sour attitude."

"Tell me about it. She's so humble, it's almost annoying."

"Yes," I admitted, "sometimes I wonder if there's anything she can't do."

"Well," Physic said, with a smirking smile, "there's one thing you can do that she can't."

"What?"

"Get pregnant. I did a complete physical on her, and it looks like a side effect of anagathic was induced sterility."

"I wondered about that," I said. "The biography says she was never married, either."

"What does she live for, then? Money? Adventure?"

"I don't know, exactly. She told me the other day, though, she was hoping to live long enough to visit the Zhodani."

"The Zhodani? Gaia, they're way on the far side of the Great Rift."

I shrugged.

"That's what she said. It does explain her interest in longevity, though--she had to be gambling she could live long enough to see the spacelanes reopen."

In my heart, though, I was not entirely satisfied with this explanation. It was one thing to want to live for the future, but it was quite another matter to sacrifice everything for a future that might never come.

Tirese had said, however, that an intuition led her to join the crew of Kruytercorp Endeavor, just as other intuitions guided her before. Was it possible, then, that a vision of the future held her when she was young, giving some glimpse of the world all the rest of us could only wonder at?

Perhaps, I thought. The thought was so outrageous, though--so far beyond my personal experience--that I declined to bring it up in conversation.

"Well, whatever," Physic said. "Once we get to Ra, it won't matter what we think anyway."

X O X O X

And indeed, Physic had a point. When she said this, we were nine days from Ra--assuming one more day in our present jump, a day of skimming in Bestor system, and seven more days for a final jump--and there, Vega and Tirese would become the responsibility of the planetary republic.

Yet, if this trip taught me anything, it was not to take anything for granted. Two days later, maneuvering away from the gas giant Gromada VII, we met the Coalition clipper Helios--pride of the Coalition deep space fleet--precipitating out of jump, and her skipper in turn asked to speak with me personally, after the exchange of transponder codes.

This skipper was Colin "Bulldog" Donnelly, a veteran officer ten years my senior, with a square jaw and penetrating ash-gray eyes. For all his commanding presence and seniority, though, Bulldog was a good friend--a fellow instructor from the Aubaine Technical Academy, back before either one of us could swing a command.

"Hello, Red Sun," he said. "What are you up to?"

"Delivering a prisoner," I said. "Vega Zorn, to Ra."

"Vega Zorn? How'd you manage that?"

"It's a long story. That's my priority, though, unless there's something I can do for you."

"Well, as a matter of fact, there might be. You're fueled up, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. We just completed a skimming run."

"Super. If you can come around to meet us, then, I'll tell you what I've got in mind."

A few minutes later, then, Hornet made another detour in her journey, turning away from her jump point and coming about to bear on Helios. As we closed on the clipper, I could not imagine much we could do that a clipper could not.

The essence of a clipper, after all, was flexibility. Although the basic hull was simple--a 144 meter long meson gun doubling as a spine, with a command module on one end a drive module on the other--a fully-loaded clipper could carry 14,000 cubic

meters of specialized payload modules "clipped" to her central spine. Hornet's entire volume, by comparison, was 2800 cubic meters.

A clipper couldn't be everywhere, though, so I figured we'd probably be picking up a secondary mission better suited to a freighter--supplying agents in the field, for instance, or hauling back relic prizes for auction. And indeed, as we came alongside the clipper four hours later, we could see the ship was kitted out with troop transport modules, and externally docked assault landers--clearly a ship with a higher priority than carrying cargo.

"That's a pretty belligerent loadout," Deep Six said. "She could be trouble, if she isn't one of ours."

"No problem," I said. "I asked Tirese to scan her earlier, once we got close enough to dock."

"Oh, I'd forgotten she could do that."

"Lucky for us, she can," I said, picking up the channel to the director's stateroom. "Tirese, this is Red Sun. Can you see the clipper yet?"

"Yes, captain. She's very large, but I can't sense anything suspicious."

"Lots of Marines, I take it."

"Yes, Captain, at least a company. You ought to know, though, some of them seem nervous about us."

I had to smile at that, unaccustomed to the benefit of this perspective.

"Well, I guess that figures," I said. "We've got to look suspicious, just popping out of the Wilds like we did."

"Yes, Captain."

"So, anything else I ought to know?"

Tirese was silent a moment, thinking this over.

"No, Captain. I'm sure it's safe to dock."

"Very well, then. I'm taking us in."

X O X O X

Just as Tirese predicted, the clipper Marines who boarded us were clearly tense at first--wary that we might be Vampire lackeys--but we put that fear to rest pretty quickly, and Crowbar and Newton likewise confirmed the friendliness of Helios. Both ships relaxed, and I went in person to visit my old friend Bulldog.

The visit lasted exactly thirty-three minutes.

"That was quick," Physic said later, greeting me on my return to the ship.

"No kidding. Get back to the engine room and secure the drives for jump."

Picking up the no-nonsense tone, Physic hustled off immediately. I then hustled myself to the bridge, surprising Deep Six in turn.

"Back already, sir?"

"Check," I said, strapping myself into the pilot's couch. "Reset the jump board, and calculate a new plot for Fisher's World, orbit four."

"I take it," Deep Six, moving instantly to obey the order, "we're moving out."

"Yes," I said, "and in a hurry. Secure the air lock, and signal all hands to stand by stations."

"Aye, sir. Air lock secured--all hands standing by."

"Roger that," I said. "Detaching lock."

And a moment later, Hornet detached from Helios, hanging a few seconds in space beside her, then powering off to a new jump point behind the clipper.

"If I may ask, sir," Deep Six said, "where are we going, exactly?"

"Syr's Subsector," I said, keeping an eye on the sensor plot.

"Sir," Deep Six said, dubiously, "that's halfway across the Old Expanses."

"Yes, it is," I said. "A damn hell of a long way."

"Sir?"

"Nothing."

Drop Kick nodded, bobbing up and down in his rollerchair.

"Sir, it looks like we're entering the jump window."

"Roger that. Engage the jump drive."

"Aye, sir," Deep Six said, and the stars winked out a second later, replaced by the velvet blackness of our jump field and the crackling of jump fire--static electricity arcing between the field and the hull of the ship.

Mesmerizing as the fire was, though, my thoughts were drawn inward for a long moment afterward, as I pondered how to break some very bad news to the crew.

"Sixer, who's up for the next bridge and watch rotation?"

"Snapshot and Gyro, sir."

"Very good. Wait for Snapshot to relieve you here, then signal all hands to assemble in the lounge."

"Including Director Serene, sir?"

"All hands," I repeated, standing up from my seat, "including yourself."

"Yes, sir."

I then moved back to the lounge, slipped a disk from Bulldog into the holographic projector in the center of the lounge table top, and waited for the crew to assemble. Less Snapshot, Gyro and Vega, this comprised a total of six people--but I made sure the shipwide intercom was on as well, so everyone aboard would hear what I had to say.

"Hey, Skipper," Crowbar said, "what's up?"

"A little detour," I said, inviting Crowbar and Physic, Drop Kick and Newton, Deep Six and Tirese to join me at the table. "It looks our trip to the Coalition's going to be a little bit delayed."

"Don't tell me," Physic said, "another mission?"

"Oh, fikk," Drop Kick said.

"That's what I said," I admitted. "That's our luck, though--we've got to take what we get."

I then engaged the holographic projector, bringing up a three-dimensional, rotating view of a Coalition starship. Named Cymbeline Victrix, she was clearly based on the familiar Victrix-class sloop--essentially a long slab with radical streamlining and broad delta wings, roughly twice the displacement of Hornet--but heavily modified, with a huge extra hull compartment bolted to her keel.

"This is Cymbeline Victrix," I said, "a one-off conversion of the multimission sloop."

"I am familiar with that vessel," Newton said. "She was a research vessel, I believe, designed for deep frontier survey and exploration."

"Yes," I said, "launched from Oriflamme about a year ago. She's been declared overdue, though, and our mission is to find her."

"A year?" Drop Kick said. "Where the hell did she go?"

"Syr's," I replied, pulling up another display, this time a map of the Old Expanses. Comprising 222 star systems, this was once a frontier province of the Last Imperium,

full of high-population worlds, but the sector was a wasteland in 1202, and only the Reformation Coalition--then 20 worlds in a corner of the sector--was an island of social and political stability.

"Syr's," Tirese said, "that's a ways."

"Yes," Deep Six said, "far beyond our Area of Operations. What could possibly be of interest there?"

"This," I said, highlighting a triad of systems twenty parsecs from the edge of the Coalition. "This is the Research Cluster--Waroh, Sulthanbran and Vinooks--three worlds all in the same subsector, all with research stations in the Last Imperium. Luckily, they're all within two parsecs--one jump for us, or Cymbeline Victrix--but it's way the hell in the middle of nowhere.

"Basically, then the mission was this: Cymbeline Victrix was supposed to visit all three systems, gather as much as she could from the old research stations, and scoot on back to the Coalition. She was not supposed to dawdle, set up any bases or stay at any planet more than two weeks. "

"In other words," Drop Kick said, "stay out of trouble."

"I guess that didn't work," Physic said.

"Actually," I said, "we don't have any idea where the ship is, or what could have happened to her. That's why we're going to stop in every system from Fisher's World to Waroh--and check every world she might have stopped at, one-by-one."

"Oh God," Crowbar groaned, backed up by a moan from Physic.

"Well, I guess we'll be putting off the wedding," Snapshot offered to Drop Kick, from the bridge.

"Oh, it won't be so bad," Tirese said. "I'm sure it'll all be over before you know it."

"Somehow," I said, "I expected you to take this a little bit harder. Since this a priority mission, I'll have to take you and Vega along, whether you want to go or not."

"I'm sure you had no choice," Tirese said. "As for me, I'll help in any way I can."

"Ditto here," Vega said, from the brig. "Whatever you say, Red Sun."

"Thanks," I said.

"You know what I don't get," Physic said, "is how it's us going on this mission, if it's such a priority--wasn't Helios on this job, originally?"

"Yes," I confirmed, "but frankly, she's not as quick as we are. She's not streamlined, for one thing, so she has to spend extra time skimming fuel through her fuel tender.

"Plus, on top of that, she's got another priority mission--a smash-and-grab on Lote. That, and her speed deficit, would put her at Syrs a month behind us."

"Oh," Physic said.

"There's no choice, then. This mission was probably not well-advised--as far as I can tell, the planning went back to the Dawn League, when people didn't know any better--but one way or another, there's 86 people on Cymbeline Victrix who are counting on us to get them back."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said, pushing aside the indulgence of disappointment. "We'll find 'em."

"That's the attitude we want," I said. "The full mission details are in the ship's computer, along with news updates from Helios--I recommend you review that. Dismissed."

And with that, the meeting concluded. It was startling stuff--a right-turn bend in our plans for the future--but Crowbar, Physic, Deep Six and myself had been working sixteen hours straight at that point, and the general attitude in the lounge was therefore more resignation than protestation; mumbling opinions among themselves, the crew scattered, and I was left alone in the lounge.

Alone with Tirese Serene.

"Well," I said, "that's life, I guess."

Tirese nodded, looking pensively down at the holographic projector.

"Something on your mind, there, Tirese?"

"Yes," the telepath said, after a minute. "I didn't want to tell you earlier, but now maybe I think I should."

"What?"

"You remember how I said earlier," she said, looking up, "how I had a feeling I should come on this trip?"

"That's right," I said. "I think you called it an intuition."

"Well, it was more than an intuition. I don't like to mention this, since people tend to think I'm crazy, but sometimes I have visions of the future where I see things happen--and they happen, just like I see them."

A sudden sensation ran down my back at that, like ice water poured down the back of my body sleeve.

"Like what?"

"Like when I was a little girl," Tirese said, "I saw a huge wave sweeping over my house on Oriflamme, killing everyone I knew. It seemed like a dream, kind of--not something you'd take seriously--but my mother took it seriously, and got us off the planet, right before the Virus hit. Later, I found out a Vampire ship dropped a bomb on the Regentiel Seawall, and killed a million people in a massive flood.

"Then later, I remember meeting the first mate from DLS Trigger, before she went on a mission to Keipes. When I was standing there beside him, I had this vision of him being sucked out into space, and that's what actually happened--the ship was holed by a meson gun, and the first mate was blown into space."

"Well, Gaia, didn't you tell anybody?"

"I wanted to," I said, "but I usually can't tell exactly when something's going to happen--just that it will, somehow."

"And what about us?" I asked. "Did you have a vision about us?"

"Yes, I did. After I met you at Kruyter Belt that first time, I had a vision of Hornet consumed in fire--completely destroyed."

"Fikk," I said.

"I'm sorry," Tirese said, "maybe I shouldn't have said that. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it's all flukes and coincidences."

"No," I said, "I'm glad you told me. Of course, it would help if you knew when this was going to happen..."

"Sorry, Coeur. All I know is what I felt--a sense of foreboding, and a sense I should be aboard Kruytercorp Endeavor

"So the two weren't related at first, then--the intuition and the sense of doom."

"No. I was scared, in fact, when I realized I was going to have to be aboard Hornet

"Well, you didn't have to join us," I pointed out.

"On the contrary," Tirese said. "Once I realized what happened to Vega, I had no choice."

"Okay," I said, "so why didn't you tell us about this sense of doom?"

"I wasn't sure it would matter," Tirese said. "I mean, I've never been able to tell how far into the future I'm looking."

"Still, you could have told me."

"And what would you have done? Abandoned ship in the middle of the Wilds?"

"No, of course not."

"That's right. The way I saw it, we were so close to Ra, there wasn't much that could keep us from getting there."

"But now that's changed."

"Well, obviously. If we go all the way to Syrs, it'll be a year before we get back home."

"Assuming we get back home."

"Yes, assuming that."

I thought about that a moment before responding. In a way I was glad that Tirese had made this admission--at least it made her presence on the ship a bit less mysterious--but another troubling question nagged at my mind, one that would haunt me all the way to Syrs, far across the sector.

"Well, I'm glad you told me, all the same," I said. "I have to wonder, though--with all these visions that you have, how often do they not pan out?"

"You mean, how many times have the visions failed to foretell the future?"

"Right."

"Never," Tirese said.

"Never?"

Tirese shook her head.

"No. What I see," she said, "happens."

THE BACKWARDS MASK

a *Traveller* novel by Paul Brunette (amiwakawaiidesu)

(based on situations and settings from the RPG *Traveller* created by Marc Miller, which is not owned by myself.)

CHAPTER ONE

Although Vega Zorn anticipated a year in *Hornet's* brig, the actual confinement lasted one day. Over a strong objection from Physic, Coeur ordered that Vega be released from confinement--with a tracking implant--and placed in the maintenance detail under Newton.

"Captain," Vega said, when Coeur, Drop Kick and Serene came to get her, "you don't have to do this for me."

"I'm not doing this for you," Coeur said. "I'm doing this for the ship. Where we're going, I need every hand I can get."

"What will I be doing?" Vega asked.

"Maintenance," Coeur said, "damage control and boarding defense--if it comes to that."

"You're going to trust my client with a gun?" Serene asked.

"If," Coeur said, "it comes to that."

In her heart, though, Coeur wasn't worried about Vega hijacking the ship; on Mexit, she'd had ample opportunity for treachery which she did not take. The real problem was how she would interact with Physic and Newton.

"I take it we're going to surgery," Vega said, as her companions escorted her into the loft.

"That's right," Coeur said. "Then afterward, you'll meet with Newton to discuss your duties."

"That should be fun."

"Just remember," Coeur said, "if you start anything with Physic or Newton, or anyone else on this ship, you'll be back in the brig for the duration."

"Very well."

"And just as a point of clarification," Coeur said, stopping at the loft elevator door, "you and Tirese are both civilians on this voyage. What that means, as long as you're members of the crew--is you'll obey any orders given to you by any member of my staff."

Both women nodded.

"Plus," Coeur said, "you've both got call-signs, as of this moment. Tirese, you're 'Serene', and Vega, you're 'Vega'."

"Same as the Dawn League," Vega noted.

"Can't I have something more inspiring," Serene asked, "like 'Killer' or 'Psycho' or something?"

"Maybe later," Coeur said, opening the elevator door. "What's important is the call sign has to have two syllables."

"And has to be unique," Drop Kick said.

"Speaking of that," Vega said, "how'd you get your sign, Drop Kick?"

"Training accident," the sergeant said, following the others into the elevator. "My drop capsule rocket gave out, and I fell a couple thousand meters before it kicked back on."

"Fun. And you, Red Sun?"

"It's the emblem I wore when they took me out of suspension," Coeur explained. "The red sun of the Imperial Scout Service."

"Oh. I thought it was because you jumped too close to a sun."

"That too," Coeur said, feeling the elevator drop, then stepping out with the others into the lounge. "This way."

Led by Coeur, the party then moved across the cargo hold--empty and ringing with the echoes of their boot heels--and into the port bow fork. There, in the closetlike sick bay adjacent to Newton's stateroom, they found Physic preparing for surgery.

"Physic," Coeur said, standing in the sick bay doorway, "you ready?"

"Yeah, I'm ready," Physic said, lifting a hypodermic syringe. "Drop Kick, strap the prisoner to the table."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said, guiding Vega onto the surgical table, then strapping her down at the wrists, ankles and chest. Serene and Coeur, meanwhile, looked on from the doorway.

I don't know, Serene thought to Coeur, but it seems like she's enjoying this way too much.

Don't worry, Coeur thought back. Physic can be objective.

To see Physic double-checking Vega's restraints, though--cinching them tighter than was absolutely necessary--Coeur had her doubts.

"You know, Doc," Vega said, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Damn right you're not," Physic said, sticking the syringe into Vega's neck. Vega then slumped, unconscious, and Physic turned to Drop Kick.

"This could be messy," she said. "You might want to wait outside."

"Yeah, sure, Doc," Drop Kick said, withdrawing through the sick bay door, then letting it close behind him.

"Picking up a hostile vibe there?" Drop Kick asked Serene.

"A little," Serene admitted.

Coeur did not comment, however, noting instead the presence of Newton, peeking around the corner with its six extended eyestalks.

"You can come out, Newton," she said. "Vega's unconscious."

"No, that's okay," Newton said. "I'll just stay here."

"Well, you can't hide forever," Drop Kick said. "After the surgery, you're going to have to brief Vega on her duties."

"Unless, of course," Newton replied, "Vega suffers an accident."

"You haven't been tampering with the sick bay, have you?" Coeur asked.

"Alas, no. I lacked the initiative."

"You weren't seriously contemplating murder, were you?" Serene asked.

"Murder is a matter of perspective," Newton said. "Some would call it justice."

Serene glanced over at Coeur.

Let's not tell Vega he said that, Serene suggested.

Yeah, Coeur thought back. *Good idea.*

X O X O X

Vega's death, of course, would be a nightmare for Coeur--beyond losing Vega, she'd also lose Physic, locked in the brig pending court martial for murder. Happily, though, Physic's sense of duty overcame her lust for vengeance, and Vega was conscious again within an hour.

Vega was not up and around, however, until Drop Kick entered the sick bay and released her restraints.

"Will Vega need to recuperate?" Serene asked Physic, noting the bandage on her neck.

"I'd recommend a day of recuperation," Physic said. "In the meantime, she might want to be on the lookout for dizziness and fainting spells."

This, Coeur noted, was Physic's way of slighting Vega--referring to her in the third person. Vega seemed to shrug it off, however, and--at any rate--the surgery was successful. Vega suffered no ill effects from the implant, and with the implant in place, Deep Six discovered that he could now track Vega anywhere aboard the ship.

There was still another matter to attend to, though: the meeting of Vega and Newton. Obviously, if Vega was to be any use to the ship, she and Newton would have to work together, and yet--when the time for a meeting came--Newton at first

hid behind a sheet of heavy armor plate in its stateroom, with a bulletproof suit and the bodies of Serene, Drop Kick and Coeur between itself and Vega.

"Drop Kick," Coeur said, "you did lock the weapons locker, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then," Coeur said to Newton, "you don't really need that body armor."

"If it's all the same, Red Sun, I'd rather leave it on."

"Suit yourself. Now maybe we should discuss Vega's duties."

"Very well. Vega, you'll be on the graveyard maintenance detail with Drop Kick."

"Why with me?" Drop Kick asked.

"Because," Newton replied, "that's when I have my rest cycle."

Vega smiled.

"That's fine," she said. "Really, though, you don't have to worry about me. I don't have anything against you Hivers, personally."

"How curious. I was under the impression you tried to kill the lot of us."

Vega glanced at Serene, then back at Newton.

"That's not really true. I wanted to scare you out of human space, not kill you altogether."

"Somehow, the difference seems academic."

"Not at all. From what I see, it's not individual Hivers that are dangerous. It's when the whole bunch of you get together you start getting dangerous."

Newton cocked its prime limb to one side, regarding Vega thoughtfully.

"That's hardly a revelation, Captain. Our society is fraught with internecine struggle and manipulation. The sum effect is confusion on the part of our neighbors--an inability to perceive our true objectives."

"You admit that?"

"Of course. Most humans like to think we have a grand plan, an overarching vision of the future, but the reality is quite the opposite. There is no central plan behind our actions--only a matrix of manipulations propounded by gifted master manipulators, sometimes at cross purposes."

"Well," Vega said, "why is this the first I've heard of this?"

"Because," Newton explained, "the master manipulators don't like to have their plans examined."

"Aren't you a master manipulator?" Serene asked.

"No, I'm young and foolish. I was perfectly happy on Glea designing anti-Virus software, but then I was sent by my topical club to deliver programs to the Aubaine Academy, and I was stranded after the topical club disbanded."

"That's pretty odd."

"Yes. I later learned the topical club itself was created as part of another Hiver's manipulation to take over my job designing software."

"Well, Gaia," Vega said, "couldn't you do something? Sue, or protest or something?"

"No," Newton said, "I was manipulated very well. Besides, I wouldn't want to protest a brilliant manipulation anyway; it would only add to the manipulator's standing, and subtract from my own."

"That is one weird system," Vega said.

"Well," Newton said, "it's the way we are. I rather think if you could look at yourself through other eyes, you would seem just as strange--powerful centralized states with rogue, independent citizens--crazy wars for no purpose whatsoever--bizarre, ritual mating...it's all very odd."

"Yes," Vega said, "I can see that."

"I'm surprised. I would have thought you'd be a champion of your culture's values."

"I was going to say the same thing."

"Perhaps we were mistaken."

"Indeed," Newton conceded. "Perhaps we were."

X O X O X

And indeed, from such humble beginnings, a peculiar relationship sprang up. At first terrified of Vega's very presence, Newton rapidly came to see it had nothing to fear from the pirate, and by the time that *Hornet* was entering her second jump at Shenk system, Vega was often seen conversing alone with the Hiver, discussing some point or other of difference between the Hiver and human way.

Lest she spark a fight in the lounge, though, Vega early on decided to avoid taking meals with the rest of the crew. Her congenial relationship with Newton notwithstanding, Vega took all her meals alone in the brig--now kept unlocked--and Physic, taking her meals with the rest of the crew, steadfastly pretended that Vega did not exist.

"It's the damndest thing," Coeur confided to Serene, retiring to her office with the telepath after a mid-jump supper. "Physic won't even talk to Vega, but Vega's practically Newton's best friend."

"Well, I don't know if I'd say that. I'd say they're both intensely curious about each other, for their own reasons."

"Maybe Vega wants to know if she was justified in killing the Hivers."

"I think that's a fair assessment. God only knows what Newton wants, though."

"Can't you tell, by telepathy?"

"No," Serene admitted. "I've never been able to sense anything from a Hiver."

"Really. That must be another one of those limitations on your power you mentioned earlier."

"You could say that," Serene agreed. "Actually, though, I've never picked up much from a Schalli or an Ithklur either."

"Why you suppose that is?"

"I don't know. Different brain structure, I guess."

"Does Newton know that? That you can't read his mind?"

"I don't know. I haven't told him."

"Well, good. As long as he doesn't know, don't tell him."

"Why not?"

"Because," Coeur said, "helpful as he is, he can make trouble sometimes. You know Drop Kick and Snapshot?"

"Yeah, what about them?"

"He got them together. They hated each other at first, but somehow he manipulated them into getting engaged."

"Wow. That's some manipulation."

"Yes, it is. That's why I'd rather he didn't know we can't tell what he's thinking."

"I see your point," Serene said.

"Yes," Coeur said. "This'll be a long journey, and I'll take every edge I can get to keep the crew happy."

X O X O X

The problem Coeur eventually came to have, ironically, was a crew that was *too* happy. Fraught though her course was with peril, skirting the edge of the Solee Empire and stabbing into unknown territory, *Hornet* met no opposition anywhere along her course--from the subsector Shenk, through Thoezennt and into Syrs--and the crew relaxed accordingly. A few ships were out there--the odd far trader and scout/courier, glimpsed at long range by sensor drone--but clearly, there was no interstellar civilization on a par with the Coalition, patrolling the stars with dedicated warships.

At the end of Sagittarius, though, tension on board *Hornet* heightened palpably as the ship approached the Research Triangle. With no sign of *Cymbeline Victrix* as yet uncovered, only the three-world cluster ahead remained to be searched, and battle drills aboard *Hornet* therefore took on an extra urgency. In charge of the drills, Deep Six tormented the gunners Snapshot and Gyro with simulations of massed SDBs, relic Imperial fighters and even a colonial cruiser, blowing up the simulated *Hornet* again, and again, and again.

The 31st of Sagittarius was a rare day for Coeur then--a day when she took a few minutes for a personal indulgence. Five days into jump, with the system Vinooks two days ahead, Coeur retired to her quarters after supper, sat at her desk and pulled out a faded faux leather valise embossed with the red sun of the Imperial Scout Service.

This valise was the only significant reminder of Coeur's life from before the Collapse, but she opened it only once a year, on the birthday of the man depicted in a holographic portrait inside the valise. Youthful and handsome, with a good-natured smile countered by sad blue eyes, this was Darien Hayes, an engineer and shipmate of Coeur's on the Imperial Scout cruiser *Alnitak*. Unlike Coeur, though, Darien did not survive the Collapse, dying instead in a selfless sacrificial act that Coeur, even now, did not fully understand.

To her lasting regret, Coeur did not know Darien well--on a ship vastly larger than *Hornet*, they simply had no occasion to meet. After the ship was mauled in an ambush, however, and the ship's senior officers were killed, they came to know each other very well, working together to jump the ship out of danger, then taking command of the few surviving crewmembers as the ship went adrift in interstellar space, dangerously low on air, food and water.

The irony, Coeur thought, looking back on that time, was how much she found she liked Darien, and wished she'd known him earlier. He was, after all, friendly, resourceful, and slow to panic--a man who inspired hope and confidence even as things grew bleak--and Coeur looked forward to knowing him better after they were rescued. In the meantime, though, the supply of consumables reached a critical level, and Coeur realized that the only way to live long enough to *be* rescued was to put the crew in suspended animation.

On top of the supply crisis, however, was another crisis, for less than half the low berths available were functional--meaning only a fraction of the crew could be saved. Rather than risk a riot among the crew, then, Coeur programmed the ship's

computer to assign the low berths at random--even including herself in the lottery--and all hands agreed that the expedient was satisfactory.

All hands, that was, except for Darien, who--as chief engineer--would supervise the induction of his mates into low suspension. Although he seemed to agreed with the plan in principle, he was also the only person who knew for certain which berths were functional, and Coeur viewed with some concern his grudging promise not to place her in a good berth if--in fact--she drew a bad one.

"All right," he said, "I'll do what you say."

But, unfortunately, he did not do as he promised. 75 years later, when the survivors were awakened by a party of rescuers from the planet Aubaine, Coeur found herself in the berth assigned to Darien, and Darien dead in the berth assigned to her. Darien apparently anticipated Coeur's surprise, though, for he did leave a brief and cryptic note beside his body--a note Coeur still kept taped to the back of his portrait:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: PLEASE NOTE THAT LOG DATA FOR UNITS 16 AND 23 ARE REVERSED.

FOR COEUR: SORRY. THOUGHT THE FUTURE COULD USE YOU MORE THAN ME.

I wonder, Coeur thought, reading the note, then flipping the picture back over. Was I blind? Were you in love with me, or was it just loyalty, why you did what you did?

Darien did not answer, however, and after four years of celebrating this solemn anniversary, Coeur knew it was fruitless to dwell on the matter. Leaving the portrait sitting up on her desktop, she moved over to her bunk and stripped off her body sleeve.

"Lights," she said, lying down and closing her eyes.

Even as the computer darkened the room, though, Coeur could not take her mind off the note. During most of the year--through the force of will and habit--Coeur had kept her mind on other things, but now that she let the memory come back, it came all the way back in a flood of emotion.

Maybe it would have been easier, she thought, opening her eyes and looking at the ceiling, if you hadn't left that note. I mean, the way things turned out, the future could've used you a lot more than it could have used me. I mean really, you, a tech level 15 engineer--God, you'd be busy every minute of the day...

But then again, it's not like you could really see the future, right? I mean, really, how could you have known that the Imperium was going to collapse? If you'd told me that back then, I would have thought you were crazy.

But what do I know? Maybe you didn't mean anything at all. Maybe the only reason you left that note was to make me feel better.

Maybe, or maybe not...God knows, I don't know...

Coeur's thoughts trailed off after that, though, and the next she knew she was waking from her sleep on a swaying hammock, with a big straw hat pulled down over her face. Palm fronds rustled overhead, though, and the white noise of sea waves crashing on a beach nearby suggested she must be on Gresham--the world that *Alnitak* had originally been bound for.

Conclusive proof didn't come until a moment later, though, when a man wearing tropical print shorts walked up to her--a man she somehow knew to be Darien although she could only glimpse the lower half of his body underneath her hat.

"Oh, there you are," he said. "I was looking all over for you."

"What for?" Coeur asked.

"Well, you didn't give me your answer last night."

"Answer? What answer?"

"Whether or not you'd marry me."

A distant buzzing interrupted her, however--the alarm clock above her bunk waking her for the morning bridge watch.

Looking back--as she stood up, slipped the picture of Darien back into its valise, then dropped the valise back into the top drawer of her desk--it was only a small comfort that she knew perfectly well that the real Gresham was a vacuum world, with neither oceans nor beaches.

X O X O X

Given the bond of sisterly affection between Coeur and Physic, the two women never actually became hostile after the liberation of Vega--they simply stopped talking to each other as much. After it became clear, however, that Vega was dining alone, and not endeavoring to plead her case before the crew, Physic began to lighten up and look for opportunities to renew her friendship with Coeur.

On the morning of the 32nd of Sagittarius, then, Coeur was not surprised to find Physic--also in the lounge for breakfast--game to elicit a conversation.

"Rough night?" Physic asked, observing Coeur's rumpled appearance.

"Bad dream," Coeur responded, drawing a cup of coffee and a carbostick.

"That's funny," Physic said, following Coeur to the lounge table with her own cup and carbostick. "I had a weird dream, too."

"What's that?"

"It was about the jump drive. You know how the drives are a month overdue for calibration?"

"Yes. It couldn't be helped, obviously."

"Well, in the dream, we got stuck in jump space and we never came out."

"Fun. So, what happened?"

"Oh, the usual--we all went crazy when the food ran out, and tried to eat each other."

"Well, I'm no psychologist," Coeur said, "but that sounds disturbing."

"Oh, I don't know," Physic said. "I'd rather have it happen in a dream than in real life."

"Are you suggesting that's a possibility?" Coeur asked. "A misjump?"

"I don't know. So far, every jump we've made has been perfect, but sooner or later, the jump governor's going to fail."

"Yes, Crowbar said that, too. I was almost hoping we'd find the wreckage of *Cymbeline Victrix* sooner, so we wouldn't have to tax the governor, but that's the way it goes."

Physic sighed.

"Well, enough of that. What about your dream?"

"Oh, it was nothing," Coeur said.

Physic lowered her eyebrow, directing a sidelong stare at Coeur.

"Let me guess," the doctor said. "Darien."

Coeur stared back at Physic, impressed.

"Good guess."

"Hardly. Yesterday was Darien's birthday."

"How'd you know that?"

"Because you told me a year ago, after that raunchy dream with the sex on the beach."

"Oh, that dream."

"Yeah, that dream. So what was it this year, more of the same?"

"No. I had a dream he asked me to marry him."

"Really."

"Yeah, but I didn't say anything. The alarm woke me up."

"Bummer," Physic said, letting Coeur take a sip of her coffee while she thought of another question to ask. Before she could speak, however, a sudden shrill alarm blared out in the lounge, making both women start.

This, both women recognized immediately, was the jump klaxon, signaling imminent precipitation, and both leapt up at once, hurling their coffee cups into the autogalley recycler.

"Hold that thought," Coeur said, rushing forward to the bridge.

Well, I was just going to ask if he was naked, Physic thought, moving off in the opposite direction, back toward the engine room.

X O X O X

Arriving on the bridge, where she pulled on her vac suit, then secured herself in her pilot's couch, Coeur thought about the early jump klaxon, and thought in turn about the warning Physic had offered of a jump drive overdue for maintenance; this early precipitation could be a routine aberration, or it could be a sign of precipitate disaster. The calm of Deep Six at the navigator's station notwithstanding, there was no way to tell what they'd find when they'd come out of jump; if this were a catastrophic misjump, they might arrive in the middle of open space, out of fuel and unable to secure any more.

Thus, then, when the crackling of the jump fire ceased a few minutes later, Coeur was relieved to find the blue-green crescent of Viraga IV twelve million kilometers off her bow. Nestled in a shining white ring, and accompanied by a half-dozen major moons, this was the closest of the gas giants to the system mainworld Vinooks, where *Cymbeline Victrix* would have headed after a brief delay to replenish her fuel supply.

"That's one big planet," Coeur said, in a hushed, respectful tone.

"Yes, sir," Deep Six replied. "It's actually the smallest giant in the system, though."

"Lucky us. What have you got on the sensors?"

"Nothing, sir, just background static from the planet itself. Based on densitometer data, though, the old survey data appears correct--one ring system, six significant moons--nothing major to interfere with navigation."

"Good. How long until we can reach the atmosphere?"

"I would estimate fifteen hours, sir, before we can start our skimming run."

"And then how long to Vinooks?"

"8.62 days, sir, assuming a routine run."

"Good enough. Deploy the passive array and log any anomalies."

Deep Six nodded, bobbing in his rollerchair, and Coeur meanwhile addressed the crew on the shipwide intercom.

"All hands," she said, "we have arrived at the system Vinooks. We won't be able to get to Vinooks, though, until after we skim, which should take about a day. Until then, all hands will remain on alert at general quarters."

"Bridge out."

She then shut off the intercom and joined Deep Six in studying the sensor track. "Looks quiet," she offered, after a few minutes.

"Yes, sir," Deep Six said, expertly sifting a wide range of EM wavelengths. "No drive emissions, and no signals from the mainworld either."

"It could be a boneyard."

"That is quite possible, sir. Conditions on the surface are somewhat harsh."

Coeur smiled at the Schalli understatement. Vinooks was, in fact, a hellhole even in the Last Imperium. The megacorporation SuSAG was known to have had a research complex there, and a few miners also scraped a living out of the surface, but there was little incentive for others to visit a desert planet where equatorial temperatures exceeded 90° Celsius, where deadly bacteria contaminated the atmosphere, and where virtually all the water that was available was undrinkable.

Coeur's ruminations on Vinooks were cut short, however, a few seconds later.

"Sir," Deep Six said, "I think I've got something, bearing two-nine-five. It could be a ship."

"Is it active?" Coeur asked.

"No, sir, dead quiet."

"How can you tell it's a ship, then?"

"This, sir," Deep Six said, pulling up a spectrographic analysis of the target for Coeur. That Deep Six could see it at all was amazing--it could not be more than 70 meters long, one-and-a-half million kilometers away--but it was not clearly not a rock or block of ice. The spectrograph gave her surface as a superdense alloy, akin to the alloy *Hornet* herself was built from.

"You've got some eyes," Coeur said.

"Thank you, sir."

"Yeah, that could be a ship. It seems a little odd, though, her just hanging out in space like that."

"She might be a derelict."

"True. Unfortunately, though, whatever she is, she's a lot bigger than we are. We can't afford to take that chance."

"We'll have to inspect her, then, and find out."

"What about our fuel supply?" Coeur asked. "If we maneuver to intercept, can we still make the skimming run?"

"That depends, sir. If we simply maneuver to intercept, yes, but it could get iffy if we have to enter combat."

"I'll take the chance. Plot course to intercept."

"Aye, sir," Deep Six said, completing the plot very quickly.

"Course laid in, sir. Estimate 6.2 hours to intercept."

"Roger that," Coeur said. "Stand by."

Coeur then flipped the intercom back on, addressing a ship otherwise resigned to a long, boring trip to the gas giant.

"All hands," she said, "this is the bridge. I know you had your hearts set on that skimming run, but something new's come up, a bogie about a million clicks off our port bow. She's silent, so we're going to check her out."

"Captain," Serene said, from her stateroom, "could she be *Cymbeline Victrix*?"

"It could be," Coeur said, "it's roughly the right size. We'll need to get closer, though, before we can tell."

"Have we received a distress signal?" Vega asked.

"Negative."

"Well, okay," Physic said, "have we sent a signal of our own?"

"Negative," Coeur said, "and we're not going to until we're right on top of her. If she's got lasers like ours, and she's planning an ambush, we're already way too close."

"You want I should keep the laser trained on her?" Gyro asked.

"Roger. And Snapshot, get the drone out there. I want a good look at that ship before we get too close."

"Yes, sir. And maybe I should launch some other missiles, too--just in case--on a parallel course."

"Negative. If we don't use them, it'll take time and fuel to bring them back on board."

"Yes, sir."

"In the meantime," Coeur said, "let's all stay sharp and focused. Bridge out."

Coeur then took over active control of the ship's maneuver controls, swinging the ship around--passive array and all--and moving toward the target.

X O X O X

Snapshot's drone being much faster than her mothership, it got to the target long before *Hornet*, coming to within 10,000 kilometers of the bogie within an hour, and sending back the first definitive image of the vessel.

"Well, it's not *Cymbeline Victrix*," Deep Six said.

"Negative," Coeur confirmed. "That's a Stellar class liner."

One hardly had to be a remnant, though, to recognize one of the more distinctive starship classes from the Last Imperium. Very broadly, a Stellar class ship resembled a lollipop when viewed from above--with a wide saucerlike compartment forward, trailed by a bridge, quarters and drives--but they were not nearly as common now as they were before the Collapse. Back then, they were almost as common as far traders like *Hornet*, carrying up to 21 passengers in sumptuous comfort, and 20 more passengers in somewhat less comfort, frozen in the low berth hold.

"Curious," Deep Six said. "I wouldn't have expected this would be a major tourist destination."

"Maybe," Coeur answered, "she didn't come here until after the Collapse. She could be a pirate, or a privateer."

"Well, whatever she is," Snapshot offered, from her turret, "she's awful quiet. The drone's a perfect target, but the liner hasn't so much as locked an active sensor on her."

This Coeur recognized as a positive sign; only a very confident captain would let himself be probed like that without locking on his active fire control sensors in response. Most likely, the ship was a derelict.

There was still only one way to be sure, though--come alongside and board her.

"Shall I send a friendly hail, sir?" Deep Six asked.

"Roger," Coeur said, "but don't send it directly. Bounce the signal off the drone."

"Aye, sir," Deep Six said, sending a recorded radio message. The liner, however, did not respond.

"Fine," Coeur said. "Repeat at fifteen minute intervals."

"Aye, sir."

Hornet, meanwhile, continued her approach, powering imperceptibly closer with every second. Eventually, four hours later, *Hornet* drew within a hundred thousand kilometers--close enough to let her short range EMS take over from the large, unfolded array--and Coeur pulled back the main array accordingly.

"All right," Coeur said, "we're getting close. Tell Serene we'll need her on the bridge."

"Yes, sir."

Coeur herself then got on the speaker to the loft.

"Bridge to Drop Kick, come in please."

"Drop Kick here."

"Sergeant," Coeur said, "it's time to suit up. I want you to ditch your vac suit and switch to battle dress."

"We boarding?"

"Looks like it," Coeur confirmed. "Oh, and when you've got a minute, break out a laser rifle for Vega."

"Sir?"

"Just do it. I've got a feeling there's more to this contact than a derelict, and I'll need every veteran available."

"I understand, sir."

"Just keep it low key," Coeur recommended. "Vega won't make a big deal about it if you don't. Red Sun out."

Coeur then shut off the intercom and glanced down briefly at her flight controls. Sensing Deep Six staring at her, though, she looked up at the navigator after a second.

"Need something, Sixer?"

"Just thinking of something, sir. If Vega does leave the ship to board the liner, I will lose contact with her transponder."

"Think she'll try to run away, Sixer?"

"Just thought I ought to mention it, sir."

"Thanks. Now maybe we ought to keep our eyes on the sensor track."

"Yes, sir."

X O X O X

In an ambush situation, the ambushing captain generally preferred to open fire at the optimum range of his weapons--after all, his first shot might be the only shot he could get. In known space, however, the "optimum" range of laser weapons varied widely, with some low-tech lasers having trouble firing accurately beyond 50,000 kilometers--one-tenth the range at which a relic laser like *Hornet's* could deliver pinpoint fire. At no point in the approach to the Viraga IV bogie, therefore, did Coeur accord herself the luxury of letting her guard down.

The silent starship did not open fire, though, and eventually *Hornet* came close enough to let the bridge crew see her with their naked eyes. This crew, by then, included Tiresa Serene, and--yet again--Coeur was glad to have not only a psychic, but another veteran spacer, in the form of this woman.

"She looks pretty beat up," Serene said. "Look at all those pock marks from meteor hits."

"Yes," Deep Six said, "she must have been here for a while. At any rate, there's nothing on the neutrino sensor, and nothing on the EMS."

"What about the NAS?" Coeur asked.

"Negative, no life signs."

"I agree," Serene said. "I can't sense any life over there."

"What about interior conditions?"

"It's hard to say," Serene admitted. "There's no light, but I do sense confusion, like junk or debris floating in zero-G."

"But no bodies."

"Hard to say. There could even be people alive over there, but hiding with psi shields."

"Joy," Coeur said, turning to Deep Six. "Any progress finding a name there, or insignia?"

"A little," the navigator confirmed. "I've got a patch of hull I'm trying to augment, just behind the bridge."

Looking out of the canopy at that area, just about a hundred meters away, Coeur didn't see anything at all but battered hull just behind the opaque dome above the liner's bridge. Abundant experience, however, reminded her of the Schalli's ability to see the invisible.

"Here it is," Deep Six said, a few seconds later, "Anglic script--ESS *Ankaa*--and a number--one-zero-zero-four."

"That doesn't sound like one of ours," Coeur said.

"No, sir."

"What about that prefix," Serene said, "ESS? Ring any bells?"

Coeur shook her head.

"Nope. We'll probably have a better idea, though, after we board her."

"Captain," Serene said, "before you do that, I was wondering if it might not be too late for me to volunteer for that duty."

"Yes, it's too late. I want to you to stay here on the bridge, and back up the boarding party."

"Okay, so who's the boarding party?"

"Myself," Coeur said, "Drop Kick, Crowbar and Vega."

"Do you think that's prudent, sir?" Deep Six asked.

"I think she knows what she's doing," Serene said, before Coeur could answer. "She's taking all the people who've got experience with guns--including herself."

Coeur smiled, looking at Serene.

"You must be psychic or something."

"Or something," Serene replied.

"All right," Coeur said. "I'm taking us in."

X O X O X

A few seconds later, under Coeur's steady hand, the two ships came together, and a docking collar extended from the starboard hatch of *Hornet* locked into a receptor ring on the port side of *Ankaa*, not far away from her bridge.

"All right," Coeur said, releasing her seat restraints and standing up. "Deep Six, you have the conn."

"Very well," Deep Six said.

Serene, meanwhile, moved to the rear of the bridge with Coeur, helping her strap a flak vest from the suit locker on above her vac suit. This, and a combination gauss rifle and grenade launcher, would be Coeur's primary defense.

"Go ahead and sit in the big chair," Coeur said, nodding to her pilot's chair.

"Thanks," Serene said. "I'll try not to get too comfy."

Coeur smiled, stepping back through the aft hatch and into the lounge. There she found Crowbar and Vega, armored like herself--but armed with lasers--and Drop Kick, in battle dress, with a fusion rifle.

In civilian life, of course, battle dress was almost never seen--its use was tightly controlled, and restricted almost exclusively to elite military units. For Coeur, though, the sight of battle dress was almost commonplace, worn by Drop Kick and the various other troopers carried by *Hornet*. Commonplace or not, though, it was impressive--full body armor thick enough to stop any bullet or laser pulse, mounted on a powered exoskeleton effectively doubling its wearer's strength.

"Captain," Drop Kick said. "Will we be going in silent?"

"Yes. Hand signals only."

"Oh, damn," Vega said. "My Anslan's a little rusty."

"How about this?" Drop Kick said, making a circling gesture, followed by a slash across his throat.

"Oh, I know that," Vega said. "'We're all dead'."

"There, see?" Drop Kick said to Coeur. "She knows her Anslan."

"Good. Crowbar, let's get that cable hooked up."

"Aye, sir," the engineer said, dragging over a 1.5 megavolt cable linked directly to the ship's power plant.

Coeur, meanwhile, slung her rifle over her back and--covered by Drop Kick and Vega--advanced into the air lock with a laser torch. With this she burned a hole in the armor plate of *Ankaa*--exposing part of the hull frame beside her sealed hatch--then summoned over Crowbar with his cable.

A veteran engineer, Crowbar didn't need to be told what to do with the cable. Dead as *Ankaa* appeared to be, an ambush could be waiting on the other side of the hatch, with hostile crewmembers prepared to use every nasty trick available to disable the boarding party. Among other things, this could include flickering the ship's gravity rapidly on and off--bouncing the boarders to death--but the grav plates were usually connected to the hull frame, so an arc from Crowbar's cable would probably short them out.

"I didn't get a chance to ask earlier," Coeur whispered to Crowbar, helping him position his cable's lead. "Does Physic know about Vega?"

"Yeah, she knows."

"She pissed?"

"I don't know. She didn't say."

"That's means she's pissed," Coeur said, with a smirk. "That secured?"

"Yeah, it looks good."

"All right," Coeur said, backing into a corner of the air lock with Crowbar, "give her the juice."

"Here goes," Crowbar said, flipping open an access panel in the side of the air lock and throwing a heavy switch. The air itself then seemed to explode with ferocious crackling, and the brilliant blue-white arcing of the contact. This lasted only a moment, though, and then Crowbar shut off the current, leaving only smoke, and a sharp smell of ozone in the air.

"Love that smell," Vega said.

"Yeah, right," Coeur said, helping Crowbar remove the cable from the air lock. She then flipped down her visor, and gestured for her companions to join her inside the lock.

"Too late to chicken out?" Crowbar asked Coeur, through a combination of mouthed syllables and Anslan gestures.

"Too late," Coeur replied, sealing the air lock to protect the interior of *Hornet*. *"Drop Kick, blow the hatch."*

X O X O X

Although *Ankaa* was silent and seemingly dead, she did at least reveal her interior atmospheric pressure through an interlock between her air lock and that of *Hornet*. This was about a quarter of normal atmospheric pressure--making the atmosphere unbreathable, even if it was pure oxygen--so sealed vac suits were more than just defense against nerve gas and bacteria from decomposing bodies; they were essential, and Crowbar, Coeur, Drop Kick and Vega therefore double-checked each other's suit seals before Drop Kick moved to plant a small shaped charge against the outer *Ankaa* hatch.

This was quite small--so small in fact that it's detonation could not be felt outside of *Hornet's* airlock--but it did the job of weakening the hatch. Drop Kick's great strength then finished the job, as he first kicked open the hatch, then pushed it aside.

Wary of a party hiding just inside the air lock of *Ankaa*, meanwhile, Coeur, Vega and Crowbar took up defensive positions with their guns up, but nothing emerged from the hatch. In fact, the only curious thing in the hatch was a bizarre image painted on one of the liner's interior walls, which Drop Kick immediately registered through the low-light sensors of his battle dress.

"It looks clear," Drop Kick signed, *"but turn on your lights and have a look at that."*

The others did and immediately saw what the sergeant did. Something resembling the open jaws of a giant beast--badly rendered in red paint, but easily the size of a standing human--covered most of *Ankaa's* inner air lock door.

"Well," Coeur saw Vega mouth inside her helmet, "there's something you don't see every day."

"Maybe they want to scare us off," Crowbar suggested.

Coeur shook her head.

"Just watch yourselves," she signed. *"Drop Kick, move out. We'll cover you."*

Drop Kick complied by leaning into the doorway--a maneuver that would have led to a clumsy fall but for the fact that *Ankaa's* gravity was out. The 290 kilograms of Drop Kick and his battle dress did not, therefore, smack into the floor of *Ankaa's* air lock, but drifted instead into the middle of the compartment. There he floated for a moment, looking around, and then signalled the others to follow.

What would follow next, assuming the other compartments were also uninhabited, would be a section-by-section search of the liner, with Drop Kick forcing open the interior doors as they went. Coeur knew something curious was up, though, when her people broke through the inner air lock door and into the long port gangway, running most of the length of *Ankaa*.

Junk in incredible quantities--food packages, crumpled paper, dirty clothes--met the boarders when they floated into the gangway, partly obstructing their view of more bad artwork painted on the walls of the corridor. Caught in the suit lights of the boarding party, this artwork was hard to make sense of, being a hodgepodge of geometric symbols and illegible words in Anglic script, but downward-dripping paint streaks revealed that the paint-slopping was certainly done when the ship possessed gravity, and therefore was in some sort of working order.

What was that Serene said she sensed, Coeur thought, confusion?

God, what a mess. What kind of idiot captain would let his crew carry on like this?

Thinking of her own experience as a spacer, 13 years altogether, she had never seen anything quite like it, and by the look on Vega's face, she hadn't either. Even the best-designed starship was a maintenance headache, with kilometers of wiring and a myriad of delicate electronic parts that didn't react well to filth and grime; deliberately soiling the interior of a starship, therefore, was all but unthinkable to any kind of responsible spacer.

On the other hand, though, Coeur thought, after a moment drifting idly in the middle of the corridor, the crew might be insane. Hard to tell until we see some more of the ship.

"Let's move on to the bridge," Coeur signed to Drop Kick, pointing forward. "That way."

Since the bridge was just a few meters away, past a broad reception area leading forward to the passenger lounge, it took only a few minutes to reach it, pausing only long enough for Drop Kick to force two hatches along the way. What they found, however, brought them all up short.

Like the port gangway and the reception area, the large bridge of *Ankaa* was also full of suspended junk and painted symbols--which must have been quite an effort, considering the fact that the bridge was as large as *Hornet's* loft--but it was the ghastly figure strapped into the helm workstation that grabbed the spacers' attention. Though most of the figure was clothed in a high-tech vac suit, the body was clearly dead, since the human skull sticking up through the suit's collar ring was all-but devoid of soft tissue, dotted only with a few wispy hairs and hints of flesh.

"I guess you can forget the interrogation," Vega quipped, through a combination of signs and silently mouthed words.

"Yeah, right," Coeur said to herself, floating into the bridge along with the others. Coming closer to the body, she saw that there was no way to guess what its sex or age at death might have been, but an arm patch did bear the ship name *Ankaa*, superimposed on a stylized starship rocketing across a stylized galaxy, and an ID patch, M. REDWOOD, at least gave the person a name.

"Hey, check this out," Crowbar said, moving around to the rear of the bridge and gesturing for the others' attention.

What the others saw, when they glanced in Crowbar's direction, was not quite as startling as the body, but odd in its own way. Caught in the engineer's suit lights was a particularly large and lucid message, occupying much of the rear bridge bulkhead:

BEWARE THE SHUKUGAN!

Familiar with the Vilani language, Coeur immediately recognized the last word as an Anglic transliteration of the Vilani word for 'dragon'. 'Shukugan' was better known, however, as the class name for a common type of system defense boat and this was the association that came first to the mind of Coeur's companions, who didn't speak Vilani.

"Suppose they ran into a SDB?" Vega asked.

"I don't know," Drop Kick said, turning to Coeur. "Doesn't that word actually mean 'dragon' in Vilani?"

"Yes," Coeur said.

"So what does it mean?" Crowbar asked.

Coeur shrugged.

"Who knows? Look around the bridge, and see if there's any crewmembers we missed."

Nodding assent, the others fanned out to survey the rest of the bridge, but found nothing. In, around and under the four workstations beside the helm, there were no more personnel.

"Fine," Coeur said. *"We'll continue the search astern."*

And so the party went, continuing aft to inspect the crew's quarters, passenger's quarters, drives and cargo deck. Within this volume, many interesting things were found--more debris, more graffiti, the personal belongings of several dozen crewmembers and hold compartments stuffed to capacity with high-tech munitions, life support equipment and compressed survival rations--but no more crewmembers beside the one decomposed on the bridge. Notably, too, the ship's drives and primary weapons--two laser turrets and a missile launcher--were at least superficially intact, though all the ship's fuel tanks were completely empty.

Very odd, Coeur thought. *The ship's got a good hull, good equipment, and a valuable cargo, but the fuel's all gone, the crew's missing and the pilot went mental before he died.*

Man, even if I towed the ship back to Aubaine, they'd never believe this one.

If nothing else, though, Coeur was satisfied that *Ankaa* was dead, and posed no immediate threat to *Hornet*, beyond the possible threat of a Virus strain lying dormant in the liner's unpowered computers. As long as the liner's computers remained unpowered, however, and unconnected to data links from *Hornet*, that threat would remain hypothetical. Following Coeur's lead, then, the boarding party turned its radios back on and Coeur sent a contact signal back to *Hornet* from the bridge of *Ankaa*.

"Captain," Deep Six said, "I take it you're well."

"Yeah, we're fine. Tell Serene she's right--there's no one alive over here."

"Roger that. Will you be returning to *Hornet*, then?"

"Negative," Coeur said, "not yet. I'm going to stay over here and look around."

"Will you need any help?" Serene asked.

"No, I don't want any more people over here than necessary, since we don't know what killed the crew. You can spell Physic in the engine room, though--I'll need her over here with a canary and a forensic lab kit."

"We copy," Deep Six said. "I shall notify the doctor."

"Red Sun out," Coeur said, signing off. She then turned to Crowbar, floating in the thin air of the bridge beside her.

"Got a job for me, boss?"

"Yes. I want you to see if you can get life support restored over here. If nothing else, some lights would help."

"Aye, sir. I'll get right on it."

"So," Vega said to Coeur, "you planning on staying here awhile?"

"Negative," Coeur said. "Just as long as I have to. Drop Kick, you and Vega check out the cargo hold and see how much of that stuff is worth salvaging."

"Got it," Drop Kick said. "But, where will you be?"

"Down here on the main deck," Coeur said, directing her attention not at Drop Kick, but at the skeleton on the bridge as she spoke. "I want to figure out why Mr.--or Ms.--Redwood here went bughouse before he died."

X O X O X

Six hours later, Coeur sat in her sealed vac suit at the helm workstation of *Ankaa*, on a bridge with light, heat and gravity restored, pondering a pile of documents that she'd recovered from various parts of the ship. Since Physic had taken the remains of the liner's pilot back to *Hornet* for storage, after a field autopsy, Coeur was now alone on the bridge, but she still had the feeling that she was not alone, surrounded as she was on all sides by the painted graffiti of the liner's last crewmember.

What Coeur knew for certain about the last days of the liner were limited, but interesting. The handwritten captain's log, covering dates from late 1148 to mid 1149, revealed that the dead pilot was in fact the ship's commander, a woman named Meredith Redwood, who was 32 at the time of the last log entry. Hailing from the nation of Ganshagaar on the nearby planet Exage, Captain Redwood held a commission from a lofty-sounding entity called the Reconstruction League, which neither Coeur nor her mates had ever heard of, but which possessed a fair amount of knowledge for a post-Collapse culture.

Based in Ganshagaar, the RL took the starship and galaxy emblem on the vac suit of Redwood as its symbol, and possessed a charter as lofty as its motto, "Fortes Fortuna Juvat"--"Fortune favors the brave". Hung in a glass case in the crew lounge behind the bridge, this charter included provisions forbidding the exploitation of low technology cultures, and ordering the dissemination of high technology to as many survivors of the Collapse as possible. This was not just pie-in-the-sky hyperbole, however; early on, the RL discovered how to Virus-proof a starship by removing most of its automation--and consistent with this--*Hornet's* canary found no trace of Viral infection in any of the liner's three flight computers. The RL, thus, managed to field a modest space fleet as early as 1145, dedicated to the reconstruction of Syrs Subsector and all surrounding regions.

Nice idea, Coeur thought. Pity you didn't take care of things at home first.

Indeed, a flatscreen newspad from *Ankaa* suggested the reason why Coeur had never heard of the Reconstruction League. According to a Ganshagaar news report, dated 361-1148, Ganshagaar was, at the time, on the verge of defeat by an alliance of its militaristic neighbors, even as its space fleet made its first tentative surveys of the subsector. The weapons in *Ankaa's* hold, therefore, gathered from various worlds in the subsector, were probably intended for the direct relief of the government back home.

A commotion forward shook Coeur from her thinking, though, and she looked up to see Physic, also in a sealed vac suit, crunching through piled-up garbage as she returned to the bridge.

"Hey there, Skipper. You done going through all that stuff?"

"No," Coeur admitted, "but I can always take these records back to *Hornet*. What have you got for a cause of death?"

"Hard to say," Physic said. "I don't think it's anything unusual, though. I ran some tests on the bone, and hair, and what soft tissue I could find, and I couldn't find anything unusual. My guess is the captain died from some kind of natural cause."

"Could you narrow that down a little?"

"Well, fine. In the absence of contrary evidence, I think she suffocated when the life support gave out."

"That simple."

Physic shrugged.

"Well, speaking of air," Coeur said, "do you think we should still keep the suits on, even though the life support's restored?"

"Yes, just to be on the safe side. Something sure made the captain go crazy."

Coeur nodded.

"Yeah," she said, leaning back in her chair. "Unfortunately, though, it's hard to make any sense of all this stuff she left behind. As far as I can tell, the scrawl around the ship has four main elements--pictures of dragons, geometric shapes, random sentences about 'being followed', and another phrase that's repeated all over the ship."

"What's that?"

"'It shall not pass, it shall not pass, it shall not pass.'"

"Weird."

"Yeah, well, I did get it all down on the holorecorder, so the shrinks can look it over later. One thing I do know, though, is whatever happened to Redwood must have happened after she left Vinooks. Here, take a look at her log book."

Intrigued, Physic moved around behind Coeur to get a look at Redwood's personal log book, which Coeur had pulled out from underneath the other documents piled up at the helm.

"Here," Coeur said. "Date 62-1149, *Ankaa* finds a city on Vinooks and sets down at the old spaceport there. Captain Redwood writes, 'Discovered city of Godsarc, magnificent technology, opportunities for trade, authorized shore leave.' But that's the last regular entry--the last one that makes any sense. After that, all you find in the log book are these scrawled references to 'the shukugan'--how 'the shukugan' is everywhere, and Redwood can't trust anyone in her crew because 'the shukugan' is inside them."

"Yeah, that's what it says," Physic said, looking over Coeur's shoulder at the log book, then glancing up at the message on the wall behind them.

"So what makes this straightlaced captain," Coeur went on, "all business through the rest of this log book--suddenly go nuts? It's not stated in the log, but my guess is that Redwood stole *Ankaa* from her own crew--which was on shore leave--and tried to use the fuel she had left on board to try to reach Viraga IV."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Physic said. "She obviously didn't have enough fuel to reach the gas giant and make a skimming run."

"Well, I don't know if it makes sense," Coeur replied, "but she obviously did it, and trashed the inside of the ship on the way. The question I have for you, Doctor, is why? What made her snap?"

Physic shrugged.

"God if I know," the doctor admitted. "Really, you know more than I do, since you're the one who's gone over all these records."

Coeur grimaced, unsatisfied with the answer.

"Well, whatever," Coeur said. "Obviously, we're not going to solve this here. The longer we wait, the more fuel it will take to get back to the gas giant."

"So we're leaving, then."

"Yes. Drop Kick and Vega should be finished transferring cargo to *Hornet*."

"I hope," Physic said, "we're not taking everything."

"No, it would take forever to check everything for Virus. We're just taking the most valuable items, like pulse fusion cartridges, a life support controller for Baldur, and stuff like that."

"What about the ship itself? We going to nuke her?"

"No, we're not going to nuke her. We'll leave the rest of the cargo on board, and let another mission pick it up later."

"What if the Solee get to it first?"

"They probably won't," Coeur said. "The orbit's very eccentric, and it's just luck we found her at all."

She then turned in her seat, hearing the approach of boots crunching through garbage. Done with their business in the cargo hold, Drop Kick and Vega were now approaching through the aft hatch.

"All cargo secured, sir," Drop Kick reported. "Crowbar's back aboard *Hornet*, so we're ready to leave whenever you are."

"Good," Coeur said, standing up and scooping her pile of documents into a handy bungee-net bag.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Vega said, taking her laser rifle off her shoulder and handing it to Coeur, stock first, "here. You'll probably want to put this back in the gun locker."

"Oh, thanks," Coeur said. As she took the weapon back from Vega, however, Coeur glanced quickly at Physic to see her reaction. With all the time the two had been working together aboard *Hornet*, Coeur secretly harbored the hope that Physic's opinion of the pirate might be starting to lighten up, if just a little.

The expression on Physic's face was anything but light, however. The muscles of her face were rigid and her eyes were fixed in a glowering stare.

"Come on," Coeur said after a moment, steering the others toward the forward hatch. "Let's get the hell out of here."

CHAPTER TWO

"You'd think," Coeur said, keeping her hands firmly on her flight controls as *Hornet* shuddered through turbulence in the murky upper atmosphere of Viraga IV, "after all the skimming runs I've done, I'd get used to this."

"I don't know, sir," Deep Six asked, keeping his eyestalks on his sensor readouts. "I don't think I'd ever *want* to get used to it."

"That's true," Coeur agreed. "You let your attention slip here and you're dead. How do we look?"

"700 cubic meters, sir. Almost full."

"Probably another thirty minutes," Coeur said. "Good."

"Sir," Deep Six said, a moment later, "I don't mean to pry, but you've been rather quiet this run. Is something the matter?"

"No. Just thinking."

"About the liner?"

Coeur shrugged.

"Well, it's hard not to think about it," she said. "It was pretty troubling."

"I should imagine. That video you shot did look pretty weird."

"Actually, I was thinking about Captain Redwood. You know, she was the same age as me when she died."

"32."

"Yes."

"A coincidence, surely."

"Yes, of course," Coeur said.

She could not keep a thought out of her mind, though--the thought that 32 was a very young age to die. For a long time, Coeur had thought of herself as fairly old, being ten years older than her youngest crewmembers, but the desperate circumstances of the Collapse had forced all members of the Arses to take on responsibility beyond their years.

Coincidence or not, 32 was a very young age to die.

X O X O X

Although the crew of RCS *Hornet* were employees of the RC government, Coalition law permitted them to receive a share of the profit from any relic goods they recovered that were later sold at auction. During her one year in the field, however, *Hornet* had not yet had the opportunity to recover very much salvage at all, so the crew was naturally interested in the value of the cargo that Drop Kick and Vega recovered from *Ankaa*.

"I don't think it's that we're greedy," Coeur wrote in her personal log, after the skimming run was complete. "After all, we left most of the cargo on the liner. And anyway, nobody does this job because they want to get rich. I just think the crew likes to know that there's a little more reward for this work than a paycheck and thanks from the captain.

"I guess it means a little bit less to me, though, than the others. After I lost everything I had in the Collapse--my parents, my home, my world--it's a little hard to get worked up about stuff you can lose all over again."

Coeur's opinion notwithstanding, however, most of her crewmembers were interested in the value of their salvage shares, and this was the topic of discussion at the first mess after the skimming run.

"So," Snapshot said, following Coeur, Physic, Newton, Serene and Drop Kick from the autogalley to the lounge table with her food tray, "just exactly how much stuff did we collect?"

"Not much, really," Drop Kick said, "about a half a tonne. It's good stuff, though. The life support controllers are on a salvage bill for Baldur, and you know the government's going to pay a lot for the fusion ammo too."

"A lot, as in how much?" Snapshot asked her fiancé.

Drop Kick frowned, chewing on an Oriflamman cabbage cake, textured to resemble a steak, as he tried to work the numbers in his head. Newton, however, was better with figures and came up with an estimate first.

"Based on fair market values," Newton said, turning its mute head toward Snapshot, "I would estimate a potential value of 26,840 credits. The actual value may be different, however, depending on the situation on Baldur."

"You mean how desperate they are for spare parts," Physic said.

"Of course," Newton said, turning to face the doctor. "Without spare parts for their life support plant, the Balduri will certainly die. That tends to have an effect on the market value of life support components."

"Somehow," Coeur said, speaking up for the first time, "I think you're overstating things a bit. I don't think the RC would ever gouge Baldur for essential materials."

"Well, even so," Snapshot said to Newton, "just how much do you think the shares would come to for each of us?"

Newton paused a moment while thinking it over.

"Based on my earlier estimate," the Hiver said, "perhaps 270 credits for each member of the crew, and about 1200 credits for Red Sun."

"Well," Drop Kick said, looking at Coeur. "I guess we know who's paying for the drinks when we hit Startown."

Coeur smiled.

"Actually," she said, "my share's going to the shipboard maintenance fund. Sorry."

Drop Kick shrugged.

"Hold on, wait a minute," Physic said, doing some quick calculations of her own on her personal computer. "According to my figures, your estimate's a bit low. I get 300 credits per person."

"Curious," Newton said. "My calculations assume a ten-share for shipboard maintenance fund, one thirty-share for the captain and two thirty shares split among the other nine of us."

Suddenly, Physic frowned.

"Wait a minute," she said. "There aren't ten people in the crew."

"Actually," Coeur said, "there are. I think you're forgetting Vega."

"Wait a minute," Physic protested, "Vega? Why should she get a share?"

"Because," Coeur said, "she's a member of the crew, and all members of the crew get a share. Period."

"Hrm," Physic grumbled.

Actually, Serene thought to Coeur, Vega is willing to forego her share, if it's going to cause any trouble.

I'd rather she kept it, Coeur thought back. She can use it to make a down payment on your bill.

Okay, fine, Serene replied, with a smile.

The mood at the table, meanwhile, was quiet after Physic's protest, and Snapshot finally piped up to break the silence.

"All I know," she said, poking the sergeant in the shoulder with her fingertip, "is you better use your share to buy me a good ring."

"Actually," Drop Kick said, "I think I'd rather spend it on a good last bachelor party."

"Drop Kick...!" Snapshot said, slapping him on the shoulder.

"Sorry, Dear. What you said."

X O X O X

If there was one thing that dirtsiders did not understand well, Coeur knew, it was just how big space really was. Holoivid films and news programs tended to give the impression that a ship merely powered out to jump point, spent a few days in the hole and then popped out right on top of her destination. Even a brief trip from one

mainworld to another through jump space could routinely run to more than seven or eight days.

That sort of ennui was nothing, however, compared to the tedium of a world-to-world transfer inside a system. As *Hornet* maneuvered away from Viraga IV, for instance, and aimed toward Vinooks, there came a time when neither planet was visible, and *Hornet* seemed to hang suspended, motionless, among the stars. With no radio traffic in the system, and no sign of other ships, it was as if the entire known world beyond the ship had ceased to exist.

This must have been what it was like, Coeur thought, manning the bridge alone one evening, when the first strains of Virus came. One day, you're flying your ship and there's radio traffic everywhere you go. Then, suddenly, nothing--dead air on every channel.

Coeur hadn't seen the start of the Collapse, though, so she resisted the temptation to imagine how it might have been. Like the magnitude of space, the magnitude of the Collapse defied human comprehension--with its trillions upon trillions of humans killed--and it was difficult to find any meaning or purpose at all in it. It was better, by far, to face forward and look to the future. Soon enough, eight days after blasting out of the gravity well of Virage IV, the sandy yellow surface of Vinooks hove into view, pushing aside all other considerations except the search for *Cymbeline Victrix*. There, at last--as *Hornet* slipped into orbit--Deep Six picked up the first faint trace of radio transmissions from the surface, and this was therefore the highlight of Coeur's first address to her crew.

"All right," Coeur said, on the shipwide intercom, "here's the situation. Sixer and I have picked up scattered radio signals from the surface of Vinooks, but we don't think any of those signals are from cities or any kind of permanent settlement; more likely, they're from nomads roaming the surface with old relic radios. At any rate, we haven't picked up any kind of active distress signal from the sloop, so we're going to wait twelve hours while we scan the surface, then--if we still haven't seen any sign of the sloop--we'll send a contact signal of our own down to the surface.

"However, we cannot let our guard down. For all we know, we could be tracked right now by ground sensors, with PDMs or meson guns behind them. Therefore, all hands will remain at battle stations, in vac suits, until further notice."

"Captain," Serene said, from her quarters, "I have a question. Based on the *Ankaa* logs, we know the city of Godsarc must have been inhabited as recently as fifty years ago. Do you plan to set down there?"

"Possibly," Coeur said. "I don't want to leap to any conclusions, though. The logs say that Godsarc had a population of 30,000 in 1149, but there's no sign of radio signals from the latitude where Godsarc is located on our old Imperial charts. It's hard to imagine a city that big being absolutely silent."

"Yeah," Vega seconded. "The city could have struggled along for a while after the Collapse, then disappeared."

"A plausible suggestion, Captain Zorn," Newton offered.

"Thank you, Newton."

"Just for the sake of argument, however, I would point out that the city of Godsarc was located very near the north pole, far from the searing temperatures at the equator. That is probably one of the few areas where people could survive without extensive life support."

"Well, let's be realistic," Crowbar countered, from the engine room. "Even near the pole, the daytime high is 60 degrees."

"Right," Physic agreed, "and there's the atmosphere. Omniphagic bacteria would kill anything the Virus didn't."

"So what you're saying," Snapshot quipped, "is you agree with Vega."

"In this narrow context," Physic answered, "yes."

Coeur smirked, amused by the turn of the conversation. She could not, however, be amused by the brutal conditions on the surface of Vinooks. Most apt, indeed, was the meaning of the planet's name in the Terran language Afrikaans: "to swindle" or "to cheat". Almost, certainly, "swindled" was what the earliest colonists felt when they were suckered into settling on a planet with almost no potable water, and heat that would kill any unprotected individual in minutes.

Yet, the planet did have some advantages. For one thing it was small, with a diameter of 6300 kilometers and a mean density of 5.5 g/cm³, rendering an agreeable surface gravity of 0.5G, making construction and work in general easier than they would be on higher G worlds. What was more, though, the very inhospitableness of the world made it a plus for people and organizations that liked their privacy--organizations like the megacorporation SuSAG. Foremost among its rivals, SuSAG was famed for its obsession with security--protecting a lucrative chemical and pharmaceutical business ranging from the manufacture of anagathic, to CBW munitions and highly illegal psi drugs--and, in fact, nobody really knew for sure where the main SuSAG plant on Vinooks might be. Quite probably, it had been swallowed up by the sands of the world desert, never to be seen again.

"All right," Coeur said, finally, "that's enough speculation. Sixer has begun the orbital survey, and I will hold another briefing as soon as we have anything substantial to report."

"Bridge out."

Coeur then switched off the intercom and directed her attention to the first real-time images from the ground-scanning sensors. As she expected, they revealed a virtual hell of rugged mountains and endless sun-baked plains, surely populated by no more than a handful of ragged nomads.

"It is bleak," Deep Six offered.

"Yes," Coeur said, "but all the same, keep your eyes on the passive EMS array--just in case we get some company here in orbit."

"Yes, sir."

Relaxing in her seat, though, Coeur did not really expect any company. Unless this planet held a very well-concealed lure, only ships that were very badly lost, or badly misinformed, would have any reason to come here.

Again, there was little to do but wait.

X O X O X

The waiting, as it happened, was briefer than Coeur expected it would be--just six hours. At that point, halfway into the planetary mapping mission, Deep Six spotted unmistakable evidence of a Victrix-class sloop, almost certainly *Cymbeline Victrix*, on the surface of Vinooks, and Coeur recorded the event in her typical understated manner.

"Ship's log, 8-X-1202, 0734 hours:

"Success. Victrix-class sloop, likely Cymbeline Victrix, located at planetary coordinates 72.86 degrees north, 14.98 degrees east. Ship-to-ship contact, however, as yet unestablished.

"Further developments will follow as warranted."

In fact, *Cymbeline Victrix* was discovered right where Serene had guessed it might be, parked on one of two spaceport landing platforms overlooking a canyon that an old Imperial map called the Kimberley Rill, originally the site of the city of Godsarc, but Coeur refrained from speculating about Serene's prophetic powers in her official log. Of more immediate significance was the apparent lifelessness of the region: the shallow, winding canyon--at most a thousand meters wide and a thousand meters deep--was square in the middle of the sun-baked Severine Desert, and Coeur was not too surprised to see that Godsarc appeared to be destroyed, consisting of a handful of building foundations and a few standing bridges over the meandering Kimberley River. It further followed, therefore, that neither spaceport facilities nor advanced technology remained there to help the sloop. Given this, and the fact that the sloop was also completely quiet--and therefore quite possibly dead--Coeur's announcement to the crew was just as understated as her recording in the ship's log.

"All hands," she announced on shipwide intercom, "this is Red Sun. I don't want to get anyone's hopes up, but Sixer and I think we may have found the sloop."

The crew's immediate response was a spontaneous hoop of joy, echoing through every corner of the ship.

"Well, that's great," Physic said. "Do they have any casualties? Does the crew need medical assistance?"

"We don't know," Coeur said. "In fact, we don't even know if there *are* any survivors, since we're not picking up any active emissions from the ship. We'll continue investigating, then let you all know as soon as we have something more definite."

"Bridge out."

Coeur then turned to Deep Six.

"How much time do we still have over the canyon," she asked, "until we're out of sensor contact?"

"About twenty minutes, sir."

"But we're still not picking up any transmissions from the sloop?"

"No, sir. I would point out, however, that the sloop's configuration on the landing pad suggests a controlled landing, as opposed to a crash. Also, that semi-transparent material draped over the ship is probably an all-weather shroud, which would have required substantial manpower to erect."

Coeur nodded.

"Perhaps, then," Deep Six suggested, "we should send down an active transponder signal."

"Very well. Use a maser, though, point-to-point between ourselves and the sloop. I don't want to give our position away to any automated defenses on the surface."

"Aye, sir. Sending transponder hail...now."

Since *Hornet* was now just a few hundred kilometers from the surface, its maser signal would not take more than a fraction of a second to reach the surface. The nature of a transponder hail was such, though, that Coeur did not expect an immediate answer. If the ship on the surface was a member of the Coalition fleet, its computer would first have to analyze the transponder code from *Hornet* to determine if it was legitimate, then alert a human communications officer--and probably the CO--who would then decide whether or not he should answer the signal.

"Sir," Deep Six said finally, a full minute later, "signal received and answered. Shall I attempt voice contact?"

"No," Coeur said, feeling the hairs raise on the back of her neck. "I'll take it. RCS *Cymbeline Victrix*, this is RCS *Hornet*. Do you copy? Over."

"Roger, *Hornet*," a man's voice responded, "receiving you loud and clear. Good Gaia, we thought you would never come!"

"Sorry, *Cymbeline Victrix*, we came as quickly as we could. I'm Lt. Coeur D' Esprit, by the way--call sign 'Red Sun'--*Hornet's* commander."

"Pleased to meet you, Red Sun. I'm Lt. Mikhail Antonov--call sign 'Bender'--*CV's* acting commander."

Coeur was surprised at this, looking down at the crew roster of the sloop.

"That's odd," she said. "I have you as the chief engineer."

"Actually, I'm that, too. Almost all the command staff was killed before we got to Vinooks."

"How?"

"It was a fluke. We were ambushed by a *Broadsword* after we came out of jump at Viraga IV, and a single missile hit took out the bridge and all the personnel there."

"But you must have escaped."

"Yeah, luckily. We took out the cruiser, then put down on Vinooks about a year ago."

Coeur nodded, struck by the parallel with her own situation on board *Alnitak*. There, too, a lucky hit destroyed the bridge and left command to a junior officer--herself.

"At least you're alive," Coeur said. "I think it might be good idea, though, if we switched to visual communication."

"Think I might be a Viral simulation?"

"I could be, too."

"Yeah, you're right. I ought to warn you, though, I'm not much to look at. I haven't shaved in days."

Coeur smiled.

"I'm sure you look fine."

"Okay, stand by."

A moment later, the video monitor beside Coeur's sensor screen lit up, revealing two seated figures on the bridge of *Cymbeline Victrix*--a man in a black body sleeve with deep-set blue eyes, high cheekbones and a friendly smile, and a youthful woman in a green body sleeve with a determined look in her big brown eyes. Happily, the appearance of these people conformed quite closely to the appearance of two crew portraits in the *Cymbeline Victrix* mission data--Bender, the engineer, and 1st Lt. Mydara Andustihl, call sign "Ripsaw", the sloop's Marine ground tactics chief--but fatigue was also clear in their pallid expressions. Both Bender's blue eyes and Ripsaw's brown were clear and focused, but unshaven whiskers dusted the chin of the former, and the latter wore her long black hair loosely about her shoulders, not pinned up neatly as it was in her mission portrait.

On the other hand, Coeur knew, even this could be a simulation, but the intricacy of the image was compelling. Behind the command station where Bender and Ripsaw sat, other personnel attended a pair of battered workstations at the rear of the bridge, pulling out and rewiring components, and the compartments containing the ship's computers were likewise badly damaged, with burn scoring over most of their surface.

"Red Sun," Bender said, looking back at the image of Coeur and Deep Six relayed to his own monitor, "this is 'Ripsaw' Andustihl--our grand tactics chief."

"Yes," Coeur said, nodding at Ripsaw, "I recognized you from the dossier. Oh, this is 'Deep Six' Siltwater, by the way--my navigator."

"Well, whoever you are," Ripsaw replied, looking back forth between the images of Deep Six and Coeur on her own display, "we're glad you found us. I don't know if I recognize that name, though--*Hornet*."

"No, I've heard of her," Bender said to Ripsaw. "She used to be an engineering project back at the academy."

"That's correct," Coeur said.

"And," Bender added, "I think I've heard about you, too. Weren't you that Scout they pulled from the cruiser *Alnitak*?"

"One of them," Coeur said. "I'm surprised you recognized me."

"Well," Bender said, "you've got a memorable face."

Coeur lifted an eyebrow, not quite sure what to make of that.

"Which I mean in a good way," Bender explained, "not like you're a freak or something."

"Thanks," Coeur said. "Back to business, though--what sort of assistance will you be needing there, exactly?"

"Actually, we don't need all that much help, since the Arkies have helped us fix most of our damage. The main thing we need is a new jump program, to let us leave the system."

"Excuse me," Coeur said, "'Arkies?'"

"Oh, sorry, I should have explained; Arkies are the people from Godsarc, the city we're next to. The pad we're on is part of the old Godsarc spaceport."

"Wait a minute--you mean the city's intact?"

"Oh, yeah, it's doing all right," Bender replied. "I forgot, though, you probably can't tell that from orbit."

"No, we can't," Coeur said, glancing at Deep Six. "From here, it's looks like you're parked on the edge of a canyon."

"Interesting," Ripsaw said. "That's probably what the Arkies want you to think."

"Right," Bender agreed. "A long time ago, the city had a lot of trouble with Vampire ships, so they set up a strict emissions discipline to keep from being detected. Once you actually meet the Arkies, though, they're pretty friendly."

"Or most of them, anyway," Ripsaw said, with a sour look.

"What do you mean?" Coeur asked.

"Well, let me put it this way. A lot of the governments you find out here are TEDs, or dictatorships of some kind, but Godsarc is an honest-to-God democracy, with debate and dissent and the whole nine meters. On the plus side, that's made this a really nice place to live, but there's also a minority of people who don't support the government--who don't want to open the city back up to travellers."

"Right," Bender said, "the Anti-Spacers. They're a minority, but some of them do have key positions with the government. Ripper and I learned that the hard way."

Bender then looked at Ripsaw, inviting her to elaborate.

"When we got here," the Marine said, "about a year ago, we were pretty shot up, so we figured we'd take any help we could get. Since the Arkies seemed pretty friendly, we let their technicians have limited access to the ship--you know, to help with repairs--but then, about two months ago, after we finished most of the major repairs, one of these Arkies went and snuck a Virus sample into the main computer and knocked out the whole system."

"Virus?" Coeur said. "Where the hell'd he get that?"

"A lab in the city," Bender said. "Apparently, this guy worked there as a researcher. Wherever it came from, though, this thing was *nasty*--before we could stop it, the strain exploded inside the flight computers, wrote its code over all our files, then locked down itself *and* all three flight computers. My guess is the strain was custom-designed for sabotage."

"Fikk," Coeur swore. "Is this guy still on the loose?"

"No. Ripper's troops chased him off the ship, then the police caught him and killed him."

"He resisted arrest, then?"

"That's what the police said," Ripsaw confirmed. "I'd rather we got to question him, but he was brandishing a fusion pistol."

"Is this kind of thing common?" Coeur asked.

"No, hardly. If there's one thing they don't take lightly here, it's Virus."

Good, Coeur thought.

"If I may," Deep Six interjected, "I have a question for Bender. If Godsarc has no active traffic net, how did you find the city yourself?"

"That would be luck," Bender answered, "mostly. Like I was said, we took out the *Broadsword*, but afterward we were mauled and we knew we'd need a place to set down and start repairs. As it happened, the polar desert was the most hospitable place we could find, and our launch spotted the city on a survey flyover."

"That's luck, all right," Coeur agreed. "How much of your crew survived?"

"About 75," Bender said, after a pensive moment. "We lost seven in the battle, then another four afterward, in accidents in the city."

"What kind of accidents?"

"Mostly mining accidents," Bender replied. "That reminds me, though, I ought to tell you--we think we've found the old SuSAG factory. The Arkies were starting excavations anyway, so I had a few of my people volunteer, and few have been lost in cave-ins and accidents."

Gaia, Coeur thought, grimacing, *what a way to check out--25 parsecs from home in a hole in the ground.*

It would be something, though, if they actually found the SuSAG plant. That would make those deaths mean something.

"That is something," Coeur agreed. "Hammer'll be glad to hear about the find. Back to your flight computers, though, I assume what you basically want to do is reboot all the computers to dump the Virus code, then load in replacement programs from *Hornet*."

"Actually, it shouldn't be that hard," Bender said. "Most ships only have three computers, but we have five counting the ones in the lab module. Since the two lab computers didn't get infected, we should be able to load a jump program from your computers into them."

Coeur looked at Deep Six.

"It seems reasonable," the Schalli said. "Obviously, we'll have to make other modifications, too, to turn the lab models into flight computers, but it should be possible."

"Actually," Bender said, "we've already made those modifications. All we really need is the jump program."

"Well, then, it shouldn't take more than a couple of days."

"Even better," Coeur said. "The only question left, then, is how we get down to the surface without a traffic net. I'd rather not show up unannounced."

"I think we can handle that," Bender said. "We're patched into the local communications network, and we should be able to get you in touch with someone official."

"That'll be fine. We're going to be sliding over the horizon pretty soon, but I'll put up a drone to keep the signal lock."

"Roger," Bender said. He then added, in a slightly hushed voice, "Not that your ship looks suspicious, but the city does have orbital defense batteries. They obviously didn't shoot Ripsaw down when she brought the launch down, but still, it won't hurt to let them know you're on the way."

"Agreed," Coeur replied. "We'll be waiting for the message."

"Very well, *Hornet*, we'll be back with you shortly. *CV* out."

Coeur then shut off the maser link and switched to Snapshot's missile turret channel.

"Snapper, " she said, "how's the fuel situation with the sensor drone?"

"Pretty good," the gunner answered. "I've shaved 36 G-hours from the solid fuel in the other missiles."

"Good, the drone will need it. I want you to launch the drone and set it in a holding station over the pole so we can bounce a signal to the surface."

"Aye, sir," Snapshot said, quickly computing the launch trajectory. "So, we must have reached the sloop."

"That's correct. The sloop is parked on top of a city, though, so I don't want the line to go dead while I'm talking to a city official."

"Yes, sir. That would be bad."

"Just make sure the drone's in position. Bridge out."

Switching off her comms panel, Coeur then relaxed in her seat.

"So," she said to Deep Six, tipping her head toward the planet outside the bridge canopy, "what do you think? Do you think Bender's on the level?"

"That's difficult to say," the Schalli replied. "The admiralty should be pleased, however, if we manage to get most of his crew back alive."

Yes, Coeur thought, nodding, not to mention how pleased they'll be to hear we found a friendly government with high technology halfway across the sector.

That might almost make up for getting half-a-billion credits' worth of starship trashed by Virus.

"Yeah," Coeur said. "I'm sure they'll be real happy."

X O X O X

A curious feature of Vinooks--which Coeur got a good look at only after *Hornet* passed over the north pole--was a little patch of greenery centered on that area. It was not really anywhere near as green as it looked, however, since it was only lush and verdant in comparison to the rest of the barren surface; this and the south polar steppe were really just fields of scraggly scrub brush, and would be thought of as wasteland on any other world.

Yet this kind of brush was as close as Vinooks came to hospitable terrain, and Coeur marked with interest the distance between Godsarc and the edge of the polar steppe. That was a good 400 kilometers, and notwithstanding a local aquifer feeding the Kimberley River, Coeur could only imagine the climate in Godsarc must be absolutely hellish.

"Still no word from the city?" Coeur asked, five minutes after the drone took up its position.

"No, sir. We've got a solid link with the drone, though."

"That's a good thing. The sloop's almost over the horizon."

Coeur wouldn't have to wait much longer, though, for her message from Godsarc. Just a few seconds later, none other than the mayor of Godsarc himself appeared in a visual signal from the city.

Waiting for the call, Coeur had resisted the temptation to guess what the character of a person from Godsarc might be like--having, as yet, no direct contact with the city--but Mayor Janos Korda was anything but exotic. Though the hard life of people in the Wilds made guessing ages an imprecise art, Korda appeared to be a middle-aged man, perhaps in his fifties, with a dark complexion, a broad flat nose and a pleasant smile, dressed in a rumpled brown double-breasted tunic. Indeed, the only odd thing about the image from Godsarc was Korda's background--a lush ornamental garden with a burbling waterfall, visible through the mayor's office window.

Probably a hologram, Coeur thought.

"Lieutenant D' Esprit," Korda said, cheerfully, "this is certainly a wonderful way to start the afternoon. We've heard a lot about the Coalition from the crew of *Cymbeline Victrix*, and we've all been looking forward to further contact with your state."

"Thank you, sir," Coeur said. "I'm sure our headquarters will be just as glad we found you. Right now, though, I'd like to know how we should go about landing at your city."

"Actually," Korda admitted, "we don't really have a landing protocol. We have civilian aircraft, of course, but it's been a long time since regular traffic came to the city from space."

"That being said, though, I think we've come up with a way to get you safely down to the surface."

"Safely, Mr. Korda?"

"I'm thinking about our planetary defenses, Lieutenant. I don't want to give you the impression that we're bloodthirsty or paranoid, but we do have some fairly substantial defenses."

"I see. You didn't shoot down the launch from *Cymbeline Victrix*, though, when she came in to land."

"As I said, Lieutenant, we're not a bloodthirsty people. I ought to tell, you, though, that we spotted you the first time you passed overhead, and our sensor command has determined that this transmission is being relayed through a satellite."

"I expected as much."

"Not that we blame you for being cautious. God knows, I don't blame anyone for being cautious with the Vampire fleets out there. That being said, though, my science advisor, Dr. Trigant, believes you'll be safest if you keep a maser link to *Cymbeline Victrix* open while you come in for a landing next to the sloop."

"No problem," Coeur said. "I'll pass the message on to Bender. Before we actually come down, though, I'm a little curious about this anti-Virus stance you've taken. It's sensible, but I wonder what made you so vigilant."

"Our history, Lieutenant. A long time ago, most of Godsarc was destroyed by a Vampire ship, and after that the survivors decided to conceal Godsarc in case the Vampires came again. Eventually, about thirty years ago, we tried sending signals into space again, but that just attracted another Vampire ship. We've been silent ever since."

"I take it," Coeur said, "you handled the second Vampire better than the first."

"Yes, we did. The Vampire did insinuate some code into our computers, though, before we blew it up, and we lost a few hundred people from accidents with infected equipment."

"That explains your attitude."

"Yes. Since I was elected mayor, I've tried to encourage more contact with space, but this *is* a democracy, and a lot of people still remember the Slaughter of '68."

Coeur's eyebrows rose at that. Bender had mentioned something about the city being a democracy, but this second mention of that fact reminded her how rare that form of government was in the Wilds.

Coeur kept the thought to herself, however, conscious of the fact that she had yet to see the city of Godsarc, or the crew of *Cymbeline Victrix*, in person. And what was more, the awkward matter of the starship *Ankaa* was still quite a mystery, with the

connection between the liner's visit to Godsarc and her captain's dementia still unclear.

"You know, Mr. Korda," Coeur said, "I've got just one more question. Apart from *Cymbeline Victrix*, and the odd Vampire ship, have any other ships ever made it to your city?"

"Oh, yes," Korda said, "mostly by accident. It's a very rare occurrence, though; the last ship we saw was a free trader scout ship that crashed in the desert about thirty years ago, and the last ship before that was before I was born."

"You don't say."

"Yes," Korda said, nodding his head with a suddenly faraway look in his eye, "she was a liner, I think, from some other part of the subsector. I remember the strangest thing about that ship was the captain left without the rest of the crew, and nobody ever saw the ship again."

"What about the crew? Did they know why the captain left?"

"No--which is pretty odd. We got them all jobs, though, in the city, and tried to make them happy."

"That was kind of you."

"It's the least we could do."

"Are any of those people still alive?"

"I don't know. The last I heard, a couple still were."

Coeur nodded, not wanting to press the matter.

"Perhaps," Korda said, "after you land, and make contact with your people, we can try looking into the matter."

"Well, if it's no inconvenience," Coeur said. "Certainly, I do look forward to seeing you, and your city in person."

"Thank you, Captain. We'll be standing by for your arrival."

"Roger that," Coeur said. "*Hornet* out."

"Godsarc out," the mayor replied, shutting off the maser link.

"All right," Coeur said to Deep Six, "inform *Cymbeline Victrix* of our arrangement with the city, then plot a course to take us to the surface. I'll take a few minutes to prepare a briefing, then we'll make the de-orbit maneuver."

"Yes, sir," Deep Six said, working his comms panel to regain contact with the sloop. Within seconds, Bender confirmed his understanding that *Hornet* would be coming down with her maser link open, then added that his own communications chief would put out a maser signal to guide in *Hornet* once the freighter got close to the surface.

Acknowledging this, Deep Six then turned to his second task--the de-orbit burn calculation--and Coeur began her address to the crew. "All hands," Coeur said, over the intercom, "this is Red Sun. I promised you a briefing and this is it. In brief, we believe that we have found *Cymbeline Victrix* and we're going to attempt to reach her on the surface in a few minutes. Unfortunately, the ship did lose her captain in a scrap with a Vampire, but the ship and most of her crew are still intact. Therefore, I direct your attention to the planetary surface map I'm now pulling up on your duty station computers."

A moment later, seven identical maps of the Kimberley Rill appeared at stations throughout the ship, one for Drop Kick in the air raft, one each for Gyro and Snapshot in their turrets, one for Crowbar and Physic in the engine room, and one each for Newton, Vega, and Serene in their staterooms.

"This," Coeur continued, "is an area called the Kimberley Rill, very near the north pole of Vinooks. As you can see from the flashing red dot, *Cymbeline Victrix* is parked on a landing pad on the east lip of the canyon, and that's where we're going to put down."

"Captain," Newton interrupted, "I am curious about something. Based on this image, there appear to be nothing but ruins in the area. Did *Cymbeline Victrix* receive any help from the indigenous population while she was here?"

"As a matter of fact," Coeur said, "yes. I know it's a little hard to believe, based on the sensor data, but according to 'Bender' Antonov, the acting CO, the city of Godsarc is still populated. Somehow, the city has instituted some kind of radical radiation discipline to keep from being detected, and--even though we can't see them--there are a number of caves and fissures in the canyon, and those could be where the people live."

"Weird," Crowbar said. "I mean, a whole city with an ECM shield?"

"You said it," Drop Kick seconded. "Captain, maybe we should think about putting a team down in those mountains to the west, just in case this is a trick."

"I thought about that," Coeur replied, "but we can't afford to lose any personnel on another operation. What we'll do is make a low pass over the DZ, see if it's safe to land, then send a party out to check out the sloop."

"Any idea who'll be in the party?" Gyro asked.

"Yes," Coeur answered, "the absolute minimum--Crowbar and myself. Drop Kick, I want you, Serene and Vega standing by at the port air lock in case there's trouble."

"Armed?" Drop Kick asked.

"Check," Coeur said. "But no heavy weapons. And no gun for Vega, unless there's trouble."

"Shucks," Vega said.

"*Cymbeline Victrix*," Coeur went on, "has the right to send her own inspection party over to us, so I don't want a firefight breaking out between her people and us."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said.

"Captain," Phycis interjected, "you mentioned that the sloop lost her captain. Will the ship be needing medical assistance?"

"I doubt it," Coeur said. "They've been here for over a year, so they've probably got their casualties under control. We will ask if they need help, though."

"That's good," Phycis said. "Even if they don't need help, though, it might not hurt to take along a doctor just in case something happens."

"No," Coeur countered, "I'd rather have you stay here. We'll call you in if there's trouble."

"But what about you, sir?" Gyro asked. "Wouldn't it be better if *you* stayed aboard *Hornet*?"

Coeur smiled, knowing what Gyro was getting at. As Coeur's XO, Gyro was naturally concerned for the safety of her commander, and more than willing to take her place.

"Maybe," Coeur said, "but I know the specs on this class of ship inside and out. If everything goes well, and the sloop looks secure, we'll let you know."

"What about your check-in schedule?" Drop Kick asked.

"We'll check in once an hour," Coeur replied.

"And if you don't check in?" Gyro asked.

"If we don't check in," Coeur replied, "you will use your judgment to formulate a measured and appropriate response."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then," Coeur said, slapping her hands together, "if that's all, then let's do it. Bridge out."

Coeur switched off the intercom and turned to Deep Six.

"Signal all hands to secure for landing."

"Aye, sir. All stations signal secured for landing."

"How about the approach plot?"

"Laid in, sir. If we burn in five minutes, we will hit the DZ in one-half hour."

"Good," Coeur said. "Time enough for one last job."

"Writing your will?" the Schalli asked.

"Ha ha," Coeur said, patching into Snapshot's turret channel. "No, I've already done that. Snapper, this is Red Sun. Do you copy?"

"Right here, boss. What's up?"

"A little last-minute job," Coeur answered. "Since your drone's already out there, I want you to program it to complete the rest of the surface survey."

"No problem," Snapshot offered. "But how about this: while I'm at it, I could also angle the drone's EMS array to watch for other ships approaching the planet, and have the drone dump its data whenever it passes overhead."

"Very good," Coeur said, impressed with Snapshot's initiative, "go ahead. But before you do that, how many missiles do we have left altogether?"

"Total? Four. Three FIMs in the ship, plus the drone."

"All right, good, then here's what I want you to do. You remember that program you wrote a couple of months back, to make a missile tumble like a meteoroid in orbit? Well, I want you to load that in the two ready FIMs and then launch them overboard."

"Okay...why?"

"Because I want some insurance up here in orbit. If something happens to us on the surface, we'll be able to call in the missiles for fire support."

Snapshot paused a long moment before responding.

"Sir," she said, "I don't mean to sound stupid, but those missiles are armed with nuclear warheads. You're not thinking of bombing a city with those, are you?"

Coeur smiled, amused by this role reversal. More than once, Snapshot had suggested using her nuclear warheads to vaporize planetary targets, but Coeur flatly refused whenever there was any chance of collateral damage on civilians.

And even if there wasn't any chance of collateral damage, Coeur was still reluctant to order such use, mindful of the indiscriminate bombing in the Final War. Indeed, Coeur had once slugged Vega for dropping two nuclear warheads on Ra, even though their target zone was not inhabited.

"No," Coeur said, "I'm not thinking of bombing a city. Off to the west, in the open desert, there's a circular structure that's probably the city's passive EMS array. In a pinch, that'll be the target."

"Right, sir. Sorry."

"No problem. Just make sure the program's running to tumble those missiles. Since we're still on the far side of the planet, the city sensors shouldn't see the launch."

"Yes, sir," Snapshot said, working as she talked. "Loading program. Readies away."

"Very good," Coeur said, watching Snapshot's missiles tumble quietly out of their launcher and into space.

"You realize, of course," Snapshot said, "that leaves us with just one missile on board."

"Don't worry," Coeur said. "We'll keep you on anyway."

"Thanks."

"Bridge out."

X O X O X

Three minutes later, the de-orbit clock in front of Coeur counted down to zero, and Coeur began a familiar maneuver, firing *Hornet's* thrusters to nudge her 2,000 tonnes out of a high elliptical orbit and down toward Vinooks.

Familiar as the maneuver was, though, Coeur still found pleasure in the actual act of flying. Getting to fly, in fact, was why Coeur joined the Scout Service in the first place 89 years before, and she still enjoyed the freedom of flight--the transition from orbit to surface--nine decades later. Although an autopilot could handle many routine maneuvers, the de-orbit transition was not among them, and a competent pilot was therefore critical to the safety of the ship.

I guess it's a lucky thing, Coeur thought, watching the horizon tilt up before her, I like flying.

As *Hornet* began her approach to Godsarc, however, swinging around the north pole to dive toward the Kimberley Rill, Coeur didn't have much time for idle thought. The geomagnetic pole of Vinooks was just 800 kilometers southeast of Kimberley Rill, and--since it functioned as a magnet for charged particles from the solar wind--EMS sensors were seriously degraded in the area. Coeur, therefore, was even more cautious than usual as she followed a parabolic arc around the magnetic distortion and began a steep dive toward the Severine Desert, beyond the jagged Concordia Mountains to the west.

"On the plus side, though," Deep Six said, referring to the geomagnetic pole, "it would make a nice aurora during the winter."

"Great," Coeur said, gripping her joystick as *Hornet* shuddered into the stratosphere. "Just keep your eyes on the sensors."

"Yes, sir."

Flying became easier for Coeur, though, as *Hornet* entered the planet's stratosphere and denser air began to flow across the ship's lift surfaces. Like most small starships, *Hornet* possessed an array of contragrav generators to neutralize the gravitational pull of a planet as it landed or lifted off, but Coeur was loath to rely on the contragrav too much. The original architect of the *Jayhawk*-class far trader had gone to a lot of trouble to give the ship atmospheric streamlining, so Coeur exercised the additional lift it gave her to increase her approach angle over the Concordia Mountains, which in turn would cut a few seconds off the ultimate trip length.

God, those mountains are bleak, Coeur thought, pulling out of her dive just a kilometer above the foothills of the mountains and then powering east at 1100 kph. *It just doesn't look like there's anything alive at all down there.*

Yet a brief glance at the polar steppe--pale green with seasonal growth--reminded her this wasn't so. Though it might not be pretty, this and the omniphagic bacteria were life.

"Slowing to NOE speed," Coeur said, keeping her eyes on her HUD as she flew down closer to the dusty surface of the planet. "How's the homing beam from *Cymbeline Victrix*?"

"Solid," Deep Six said. "It's curious, though--as we've gotten closer to the surface, I've started picking up other signals, too."

"Local traffic?"

"Yes, that's my guess. Probably comms lasers from local vehicles."

"Hm," Coeur said. "I guess they'd have to be pretty short range if we didn't notice those from orbit."

"Yes, sir. It's worth noting, though, that most of the beams are issuing from Kimberley Rill at a low angle, making them difficult to spot from overhead."

"Keeping the low profile, I guess," Coeur said. "Range to the city?"

"Twenty clicks," Deep Six said, as the ragged gash of Kimberley Rill just came visible in the distance. "We'll be over the spaceport in five minutes."

Well, it's no Grand Canyon, Coeur thought, recalling her childhood home in the Arizona Desert as she looked at the canyon through her HUD, *but I guess it is big enough to hide a city in. We'll see when we pass overhead.*

"Any active lock-ons?" Coeur asked.

"None detected. It is still possible, however, that we may be tracked by passive sensors."

"No doubt," Coeur said, mindful of the relic weapons that might be trained on them even now. "I'm going to make a high, slow pass over the canyon, though, before we land, so you can scan for anything suspicious before we land."

"Yes, sir. Recorders are running."

What the Schalli's EMS recorded, however, as the ship swung up high above the canyon, was neither an ancient fortress nor a humble desert enclave.

"My God," Coeur said.

"Ka'a ak'EE," Deep Six agreed, in Schalli. "Unbelievable."

And indeed, Godsarc was unbelievable. Where it was built, Kimberley Rill was a half a kilometer wide and nearly a kilometer high, but the city was gigantic on even that large a scale. Seemingly hewn from the solid rock, Godsarc occupied a massive cavern in the eastern wall of the canyon, towering over the river below and dominated by two colossal cylinders each over 400 meters high. These paraboloid structures, resembling the smokestacks of low-tech nuclear power plants but clearly designed for human habitation, flared outward to a width of 200 meters at their bases and caps, so massive that they could conceivably provide structural support for the cavern.

Despite its immensity, though, Godsarc was not a blasted relic. Dozens of light aircraft flitted about the city cavern, and beautifully landscaped terraces occupied every square centimeter of the cavern floor, densely occupied with one and two-story structures. Overall, the impression that Godsarc gave was of a thoroughly modern community--not a relic, but a living city.

Hornet's view of the city was cut off, though, as she passed over the edge of the canyon. Only the two landing pads of the spaceport were now visible, perched in the rocks overlooking the canyon, and Coeur couldn't help but be struck by the contrast between the living city and the lifeless desert as she swung around in a long arc, heading back toward *Cymbeline Victrix*.

"You get all that recorded?"

"Yes," Deep Six confirmed. "It's in the computer."

"Holy fikk," Snapshot exclaimed, from her turret, "you see the size of that thing?"

"Yes," Coeur said, "I saw it. Just keep your eyes on your gunsight, though, in case there's trouble."

"Yes, sir."

Despite her calm, however, Coeur was not as cool as she sounded. In all the Coalition, only a handful of cities were built on the scale of Godsarc, and those were

almost all of ancient origin. Those so-called arcologies abounded in the Last Imperium, where technology and huge populations combined to make the prospect of living in a giant box attractive. To be sure, a few like Godsarc were beautiful and elegant, but most were nothing more than overgrown apartment complexes, designed to house as many as 10 million people within a single structure. Coeur herself was born in such an arcology--the cubic monolith of Phoenix on Terra--and knew very well that only a wealthy and technologically skilled population could hope to maintain, let alone build, such an edifice.

Which raises a logical question, she thought. Who the hell are these people?

X O X O X

Over in the port fork, meanwhile, Newton was also impressed by the scene that had just passed before its stateroom window. Alone aboard *Hornet*, Newton was the only individual who had both a view and no immediate duties, so the Hiver pressed itself up close to the portal to get the best possible view of the city.

Among its crewmates, Newton preferred to appear aloof, but alone in its stateroom it was willing to let its guard down a bit. Although its vac suit helmet prevented it from pressing its prime limb flush against the window, it did have a TL-15 holocamera standing by to record the city of Godsarc as it passed below, and marvelled at the architecture captured through the viewfinder. Newton then promptly played the recording back after the city moved out of view, and made a quick journal entry in its personal log.

"Viewed a remarkable human arcology," it noted, in its native Hiver. "Doubtless, the city managers must have perpetuated impressive manipulations upon the population to sustain the city through the Collapse.

"At the earliest convenience, I must maneuver Red Sun into permitting a firsthand investigation of the site."

X O X O X

Although *Hornet* required no downward thrust to land, alighting as she did within her contragrav field, the minimal flow of plasma from her aft HEPIaR thrusters and attitude control jets was still enough to raise a cloud of dust from the empty landing pad next to *Cymbeline Victrix*. Hearing the high-pitched whine of *Hornet's* thrusters, then, the scattered personnel on the ground had already taken cover in nearby warehouses and under the wings of *Cymbeline Victrix*, only reemerging after the freighter came to a rest on her tripod landing gear, facing toward the stern of the sloop, overlooking the canyon below.

"Well, she looks all right," Coeur said, taking her first direct look at the multimission sloop, parked below its weather-proof shroud. "Apart from the burn marks, anyway."

"Yes," Deep Six agreed, "she is a fine-looking ship."

That, Coeur had to agree with. Unlike a far trader, which was designed merely for adequate atmospheric maneuverability, a *Victrix*-class sloop was optimized for

hypersonic maneuverability, at five times the best speed of *Hornet*. Even the laboratory module below the belly of *Cymbeline Victrix* was sleek in profile, though it dangled sewage and fuel lines at the moment, linked to receptacles in the tarmac.

No, Coeur thought, *I wouldn't mind flying that ship. Not one bit.*

Coeur cut her admiration short, however, when Deep Six called for her attention.

"Captain, I have incoming signals from Bender and the Godsarc comnet."

"The Godsarc comnet?"

"Yes, sir. It's a local laser signal."

"Oh, all right. Give me the comnet first."

"Aye, sir."

A moment later, a youthful woman with blue eyes and curly brown hair, casually attired in a loose blouse and sleeveless sweater, appeared on the viewscreen before Coeur.

"Captain," the strange woman said, "you probably don't know me, but my name is Amanda Trigant, and I'm the mayor's science advisor."

"Yes," Coeur said, "he mentioned the name. What can I do for you?"

"I believe it's more a question of what we can do for you. Mr. Korda would like to know if you'd be interested in linking up to the municipal comnet."

"Sounds good. What is it?"

"A basic link to the city information network. In addition to data links, it'll let you have contact with your personnel in the city--assuming you let us lend you some personal comlinks."

"Sounds nifty. Is that what you've done for *Cymbeline Victrix*?"

"Yes, they logged on about a year ago, when they got here."

Coeur nodded, thinking it over.

"Okay, I'll tell you what: I like the offer, but I'd rather postpone a decision until after we meet with our people aboard *Cymbeline Victrix*."

"As you wish," Trigant said, smiling politely. "If you change your mind, though, you can always reach the comnet on this frequency."

"Thank you. We'll consider it."

Trigant bowed her slightly, then shut the channel off.

"You got a lock on that frequency?" Coeur asked Deep Six.

"Affirmative, stored in memory."

"Good, we'll want to keep that."

Coeur then turned her attention to the second waiting signal, which was also a video feed. This, an image of Bender on the bridge of his sloop, resembled the setting of the earliest message from the sloop, except that Ripsaw was no longer present.

"Bender," she said, "good to see you."

"Likewise," Bender said. "I've informed the crew of your arrival, and they're all looking forward to seeing you."

"Good," Coeur said. "Listen, I'm a little curious about something, though. I can't help but notice your people walking around outside without any filter masks. Isn't the atmosphere supposed to be dangerous here?"

"Actually, no. I forgot to tell you, but the Arkies did some kind of geneering on the local bacteria to make them harmless."

"The Arkies have that kind of technology?"

"Well, I've got to admit, I was skeptical at first. Our doctor's checked out the air, though, periodically, and it seems to be okay."

"I guess we'll just have to check that out ourselves," Coeur said. "In the meantime, maybe we should go ahead and exchange our boarding parties."

"Sounds good. Shall we make it simultaneous?"

"Yes. I'll be coming over myself, with my engineer Crowbar."

"Roger that. I'll be sending over Ripsaw and one of her sergeants, 'Mad Dog' McKenney."

A minimal team, Coeur noted. Good.

"Very well," Coeur said. "See you soon."

"Bender out."

Coeur answered with a polite nod, then shut off the video screen.

"Sixer," she said, standing up from her seat and slipping off her vac suit, "tell Crowbar I'll meet him at the port air lock."

"Aye, sir."

"Oh, and tell him to bring a gun," Coeur added, drawing a gauss pistol and a filter mask from the locker where she stowed her vac suit. "God forbid he'll need it, but we just can't let our guard down--not until we know that ship's in friendly hands."

X O X O X

"Roger that, Sixer," Crowbar said a few seconds later, hanging up his own and Physic's vac suits in the locker at the rear of the engine room. "I'll be there in a minute."

Hornet's chief engineer then took off his radio headset and hooked it over the edge of the main engineering panel where Physic still sat. This broad bank of controls, just forward of the jump drive on the lower of *Hornet's* two drive decks, controlled all the ship's power and propulsion systems, but the latter would not likely be needed for several hours at least, so Physic took over the task of switching the systems to their stand-by mode. The experienced apprentice engineer completed this work quickly, then stood up with a computer clipboard, planning to double-check the pressure at certain key fuel valves on the starboard bulkhead. This work was not urgent, however, and Physic paused near Crowbar as he picked up the gear he expected he'd need--a filter mask, a laser pistol, a tool belt and a canary.

"So," Physic said to Crowbar, as he stuffed the sphere into a bungee-cord sack at his waist, "are you just going to take the one canary?"

"Yes, I'll leave the smaller canary as a back-up with Newton."

Physic nodded.

"Good, better to take the big one."

"Well, the skipper did say there might be a dormant strain of Virus in the flight computers. It's best to be careful."

Physic smiled, looking up at the bearded face of the engineer. Crowbar was, by his own admission, gangly and awkward-looking, but he was never clumsy around machines.

"Right," Physic said. "So you be careful over there."

"Yes, Mother," Crowbar answered. "I'm sure we'll be fine. What I'm really hoping is we can get a chance to look at that city--man, could you believe that place?"

Physic nodded, recalling the Godsarc images Coeur had sent up from the bridge.

"Yes. It's very impressive."

"Impressive? Fikk, it's amazing!"

"Yeah, I suppose. I know what you want, though--you want to see their power plant."

Crowbar smirked, amused at his own transparency.

"Yes, I do," he said. "If they've got a fusion system from the Last Imperium, it could revolutionize our whole approach to power system architecture."

"Maybe," Physic said, "or maybe not. What if the Arkies don't want to let us see the plant?"

"Then we'd have to ask real nice-like."

"Hm."

"Well, anyway," Crowbar said, "I should go. See you later, Physic."

"Yes," Physic replied, watching him leave, then adding to herself, "one hopes."

X O X O X

Although Coeur got to *Hornet's* port air lock ahead of Crowbar, she was not alone when she got there. The loft was directly above this location, so Vega and Serene had already moved to join up with Drop Kick, and all of them had already strapped on their own flak jackets. Newton, however, was not to be seen among them.

"So, where's Newton?" Coeur asked Drop Kick, as the sergeant handed a pair of autopistol gunbelts to the junior technarchs.

"Over there," the sergeant said, tipping his head toward the corner of the nearest passageway. There, just visible peeking around the corner, was the slightest tip of a Hiver eyestalk.

"Oh," Coeur said.

"Hello there, Captain," Newton said. "Just taking cover."

"Taking cover?"

"In case of a weapon malfunction," the Hiver explained.

"Oh, yes, of course."

"If it helps," the unarmed Vega said to Newton, "the pistols do have their safeties on."

"Thank you, Vega. I think I'll just stay here, though, for the moment."

Vega shrugged.

"All right, everybody," Coeur said, "just make sure you keep your weapons slung and holstered when we're boarded. These weapons are just a precaution, in case the sloop turns out to be hostile."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said, slinging his own gauss rifle/grenade launcher over his shoulder. "Oh, by the way, I talked to Snapshot, and she said she's got two targets acquired on the tarmac below the sloop, both in green body sleeves. Probably our Marines."

"Uh...thanks," Coeur said, uncertain how Ripsaw and Mad Dog would like being referred to as 'targets'. Coeur was accustomed to the gunner being blunt, however, and let it go, turning to Serene.

"What about you?" Coeur asked. "You picking up any bad vibes over there?"

"Negative," Serene replied. "It's kind of strange, really--the ship appears to be in good order, but the crew isn't excited like you'd think they'd be."

"Maybe they're nervous," Drop Kick said, "wondering about us."

"Perhaps," Serene said. "At any rate, I don't sense any overt hostility."

"That's what I want to know," Coeur said, hearing the approaching footsteps of Crowbar in the port gangway. "Stay sharp when the boarding party comes aboard, though. If you sense they're up to anything, let Drop Kick know immediately."

"Yes, Captain," Serene said.

Crowbar, meanwhile, had just stepped into the lounge, ducking to pass through the open aft hatch, then pulling up to his full height in front of Coeur.

"Crowbar," Coeur said. "You ready?"

"Yes, sir," Crowbar said. "I was wondering about this filter mask, though--do you really think it'll keep out whatever's in the atmosphere?"

"Well, if we're lucky, it won't have to. Bender says the Arkies have suppressed all the lethal microbes in the area."

"Oh. That's nice."

"I'd rather we wore the masks, though, anyway," Coeur said, "for safety's sake."

"Our captain," Crowbar said, pulling on his filter mask. "So trusting."

"Yeah, right," Coeur said, pulling on her own filter mask and then palming the inner air lock door release. She then stepped into the air lock, followed by Crowbar, sealed the inner door and opened the outer hatch.

As Coeur expected, the air outside was extremely hot--the thermometer inside the outer hatch frame read 55 degrees Celsius--but there was very little humidity. The conditions when she stepped out of the ship and onto the ladder leading to the ground, therefore, were stifling, but not unbearable.

God, that sun is bright, she thought, glad for the polarized visor of her filter mask. *It's hard to imagine it's actually dimmer than Sol.*

Coeur cut her planetological reflections short, though, when she stepped off *Hornet's* ladder and saw before herself, not fifty meters away, the object of her five month expedition. So close was *Cymbeline Victrix*, in fact, that Coeur could just make out the features of the troopers--Ripsaw, with a squat, powerful body, and Mad Dog, at least 30 centimeters taller, with a weathered face and a drooping mustache. Neither Marine, however--standing at the foot of the sloop's forward cargo ramp with slung gauss rifles--wore a filter mask, which lent weight to Bender's claim that the local atmosphere was safe.

"You ready?" Coeur asked Crowbar, now stepping off the ladder beside her.

"Ready."

"All right," Coeur said, waving to the troopers beneath the sloop, "let's go."

Picking up the wave, the troopers started forward a moment later, heading toward a meeting with Coeur and Crowbar halfway between the ships. Much like Coeur, Ripsaw was markedly shorter than her male companion, but walking briskly the two sets of spacers came together quickly and stopped a meter short of each other.

"Lieutenant," Ripsaw said cordially to Coeur, noting--but not commenting on--the Arses' filter masks.

"Lieutenant," Coeur replied. "I'm glad to see you're well."

"Thanks."

"So," Mad Dog said, "the weather hot enough for you?"

"Hell," Crowbar said, "it's not even 60 degrees yet. We must've caught you in a cold snap."

Mad Dog made an amused little snort, and everyone relaxed very slightly.

"So," Ripsaw said, "you got a canary?"

"Right here," Crowbar said, patting the sack at his waist, and noting a similar sack on the sergeant.

"Maybe we should get this over with, then."

"Right," Coeur said, nodding. "Good luck."

"You too," Ripsaw said, as the two groups broke up and headed again in their opposite directions.

"Nice tarp," Coeur said softly, a few seconds later, as she and Crowbar drew closer to the shaded area around the hull of the sloop. "Maybe you should put one up over *Hornet*."

"Yeah, I'll do that. It'll shield the antennas from dust storms."

"Actually, I was thinking about Vampire ships. A tarp's not perfect, but it might keep a lazy sensor chief from spotting us on the ground."

"Oh, right."

Quickly, though, the *Arses* passed underneath the shade of the sloop's weather shroud and ceased their whispered conversation. The few odd crewmembers working under *Cymbeline Victrix*, Coeur and Crowbar realized, had dropped their work to stare at the *Arses* as they approached, aiming mostly hopeful--but also a few cautious--looks at them. All of them understood the purpose of the boarding party exchange, however, and refrained from either moving, or speaking out to the visiting *Arses*.

"Excuse me," Coeur said, at the foot of the loading ramp. "Who's the senior person here?"

"Right here," a familiar voice called from the top of the ramp, and Coeur turned to see Bender accompanied by a female crewmember.

"Lieutenant," Coeur said, turning to face him. "Request permission to come aboard."

"Permission granted," Bender said, trotting down the ramp to join the *Arses*. His crewmate, meanwhile, followed close behind, her tool belt jangling as she walked. "Red Sun, this is Chief Petty Officer Dosanjh, call sign 'Jitters', our computer specialist."

Coeur and Crowbar nodded, politely, to the lightly built, dark-skinned woman.

"Pleased to meet you," Coeur said. Then, to Bender, she added, "This is Crowbar, my engineer."

"Don't tell me," Bender said, snapping his fingers twice as he thought, "Class of '98?"

"No, actually, I was Class of 1200," Crowbar said. "I spent a couple of years putzing around with the Lancers."

Bender's eyebrows rose, revealing his surprise.

"I wouldn't knock it," Jitters said to her commander. "Lancers have to be pretty resourceful."

"Tell me about it," Crowbar said.

"Red Sun," Bender said, returning to the work at hand, "I assume you'll be wanting to look at our computers."

"That's the priority," Coeur agreed. "I'd also like to take a look around the ship, though, to see how things look."

"You ever serve on a sloop before?" Bender asked.

"No, but I was next in line to command *Suleiman Victrix*."

"Oh. I guess you probably know your way around a sloop then."

"One hopes."

"How about this, then: I could show you around the ship while Jitters takes Crowbar to look over the computers."

Coeur and Crowbar exchanged glances and nodded.

"Acceptable," Coeur said.

"Good," Bender said, gesturing toward the ramp behind him, "this way."

Following Bender's direction, Coeur and Crowbar walked up the long ramp before them and into a surprisingly large compartment at the front of the sloop's exploration module. This was the sloop's machine shop, filled with computer-assisted manufacturing rigs, laser drills and presses, all showing the dents, dings and scratches of equipment under heavy use. The machinery was quiet at the moment, however, as the handful of personnel on hand paused to watch the arrival of Coeur and Crowbar. Unlike either Bender or Jitters, none of these individuals wore military insignia on their black body sleeves, and Coeur therefore guessed that they were members of the sloop's substantial civilian science section--fully a tenth of her complement.

"Red Sun," Bender said, nodding to a man with wheat brown hair and a sleepy expression on his face, "this is Dr. Aaron Ziffer, call sign 'Wingding', our assistant science chief."

"Captain," Wingding said, shaking Coeur's hand, "Glad to meet you."

"Likewise," Coeur said, noting that the others machine shop workers had similar languid expressions. Given the long hours they probably served manufacturing new parts for the ship, though, Coeur wasn't too surprised and let it pass.

"Here to look us over?" Wingding asked.

"Just a bit," Coeur said, while Crowbar stepped away to poke around the workshop machinery. "You say you're the assistant science chief?"

"Yes, sir," Wingding said. "Our section leader is down in the digs."

Coeur nodded, looking at Bender.

"That's Smoker, right? Dr. Ishimaga?"

"Right," Bender said. "He's down there with a squad of Marines."

"What about your Hiver?" Crowbar asked, walking back to join the others.

"He...disappeared," Bender said, "a couple of months ago, down in the digs."

"I didn't know that," Coeur said. "How'd it happen?"

"Actually, we're not sure how it happened. There's a lot of crevices and deep caverns down there, and we think he might have fallen into one."

"You mean you couldn't find him?"

Bender shook his head.

"No. We tried, but he didn't tell anybody where he went before he disappeared."

"Sounds like a Hiver," Crowbar quipped.

"What about the other people you lost?" Coeur asked Bender, ignoring the comment. "Did you recover their bodies?"

"Two," Bender said, "yes. The other casualty blew himself up with a blasting charge."

"Blew himself to bits, in fact," Wingding confirmed. "I picked up the pieces."

Coeur nodded, frowning grimly.

"I assume that's all in your log," she said to Bender.

"Yes, it's all in there."

"All right, then maybe we should get on with the inspection."

"Very good," Bender said. "Jitters?"

Jitters nodded, putting one hand on Crowbar's shoulder and pointing with the other toward the aft hatch.

"Crowbar," she said, "why don't I show you to the module computers."

"Right," the engineer said, turning back to Coeur. "Skipper, I'll catch up with you later."

"Right," Coeur said, letting Crowbar depart with the computer specialist. She then turned to Bender.

"So," Bender asked, "what do you want to see first?"

"Let's start with the module launch bay," Coeur replied, recalling the plans of *Cymbeline Victrix*, "then work our way up to main engineering, the forward avionics bay and the bridge."

"I guess you do know your way around a sloop," Bender said.

"We'll see about that," Coeur replied. "After you."

X O X O X

Although Coeur couldn't quite put her finger on it, something was definitely odd about *Cymbeline Victrix*. Although most of the sloop's components appeared intact--her 10-ton launch *Imogen*, her drives, weapons, life support and flight controls--many minor repairs appeared incomplete, and the same languor Coeur saw in the machine shop personnel seemed to grip many of the spacers, civilians and Marines elsewhere on the vessel. To be sure, crewmembers weren't asleep at their stations, and spare parts weren't strewn willy-nilly throughout the ship, but Coeur noted little things like Arses wearing civilian-style fatigues in place of body sleeves, and crewmembers less-than-overjoyed about the prospect of rescue. Instead, people were strangely self-content about their future, and only a few individuals like Bender and Jitters appeared to shrug off this curious equanimity.

On the other hand, though, as Coeur inspected random staterooms on the module deck, mid deck and upper deck, she saw no sign of people leading anything but normal lives. By the looks of their effects, troopers and ratings read bad novels, played cards, lifted weights and otherwise amused themselves when they weren't on duty.

So maybe it's nothing, Coeur thought, following Bender forward from the engine room, up the starboard mid-deck gangway. *A long mission, a strange planet--who knows what it might do to people.*

"You know," Coeur said, "I couldn't help but notice there weren't any officers in the engine room, just ratings. How many officers are there on board?"

"Just four," Bender said, "including me."

"Four, on the whole ship?"

"That's right: Ripsaw, me, the doc and the gunnery chief."

"So," Coeur said, remembering the gunnery chief, a 3-term Navy veteran, from the crew roster, "Tracer survived?"

"No, I meant the acting gunnery chief, Ensign 'Stella' Peasely."

"Ensign," Coeur said, with a somber nod.

"Yeah, Stella pretty much came straight from the academy."

Oh, great.

"If you'd like," Bender said, pausing at a hatch in the forward end of the corridor, "we could stop in and see Hacker, the other officer. I was going to go to the bridge through the starboard hatch, but there's a shortcut through the sick bay."

"I remember," Coeur said. "Sure, lead on."

Bender nodded, palming the port hatch and leading Coeur into a truly remarkable sick bay. Not a closet like Physic's dispensary on *Hornet*, or even a standard eight-bed compartment, this was a spacious sixteen-bed facility with additional lab equipment, rivaling the best facilities of a combat clipper. As Bender and Coeur walked in, though, the only occupant was Hacker herself, a dusk-complected woman with curly black hair, who opted for loose green fatigues instead of a standard Coalition body sleeve. Also, Coeur noted--as the doctor stood up from the electron microscope she was working at--Hacker was rather tall, easily as tall as Bender and a good deal taller than herself.

"Hey there, Hacker," Bender said.

"Bender," Hacker said, moving over to greet her guests. "This must be Red Sun."

"That's right," Coeur confirmed, shaking the doctor's hand. "Lt. Coeur D' Esprit, RCS *Hornet*. I'm just taking a walk around the ship to look things over."

"Oh, a Virus-check," Hacker said, bobbing her head up and down.

"Actually, the Virus-check is more Crowbar's job," Coeur said. "My job is more to see if the crew and equipment's in good order."

"And," Hacker asked, "are they?"

Coeur paused a moment before responding--a moment she was conscious of, but which she hoped that Bender and Hacker didn't notice.

"Sure. I'm a little curious about something, though--sort of a medical question."

"What's that?"

"It's about the atmosphere, doctor. I understand the city's supposed to have suppressed the bacteria somehow, but I'm curious if you've seen any adverse affect on crew health from being here on the planet."

"Hm," Hacker said, thoughtfully. "No, not really. We have had some silly accidents--plus hernias, back strain and such--from people getting use to the point-five gees, but that's it. There's virtually no disease or illness in Godsarc."

"Wait a minute--no disease at all? What about viral diseases and microbes and such?"

Hacker laughed.

"Well, there's microbes, of course," the doctor said, "but all the lethal varieties are under medical control. Here, have a look at this."

Accepting the invitation, Coeur followed Hacker over to the display screen of her microscope, showing an object Coeur recognized as some sort of microorganism.

"It looks like a virus," Coeur said.

"Yes, it's a very deadly virus called HRV-1101. If you caught it, you'd probably be dead."

Coeur glanced first at Bender, then back at Hacker.

"Okay," Coeur asked, "so what's it doing here?"

"Actually," Hacker said, "I bought it in a drugstore in Godsarc."

"You're kidding."

"No. Apparently, the Arkies did some engineering on the virus and now--instead of trying to reproduce itself in the human body--it gets into the muscles and temporarily increases the production of the nucleotide ATP. The Arkies actually sell it over-the-counter like a vitamin."

Hacker then handed Coeur the actual product, in the form of a small spray bottle, to prove her point. Labeled with the invigorating brand name VITRON B, it featured slick holographic artwork and small print instructing the user to spray the product into the mouth up to three times a day to increase vitality and stamina.

Interesting as that was, though, it wasn't nearly as interesting as the price--marked as "Cr 1".

"Okay, so you're not kidding," Coeur said, turning over the bottle and pointing at the price. "Is this the money they use here? Imperial credits?"

"That's right," Bender said. "It's kind of lucky, actually, since we happened to bring along some hard Imperial currency."

"Us, too," Coeur said, turning over the bottle in her hand. "I never saw anything like this in the Last Imperium, though."

"Wait a minute," Hacker said, surprised by Coeur's matter-of-fact statement. "You're a Remnant?"

"Yes," Coeur said, "I used to be an Imperial Scout before the Collapse."

"Really," Hacker said, glancing at Bender. "Did *you* know that?"

"Yes," Bender said, "it's in the fleet record."

"Well, that's great," Hacker said, moving quickly to the computer at her workstation. "A real live Remant. So--just to get this down in my notes--what you're saying is that engineered retroviruses weren't common in the Last Imperium?"

"Well, not in over-the-counter medicine, no."

"Interesting," Hacker said, typing at her keyboard. "Tell me, do you think you might be able to stay here a few minutes? There's some other things I'd like to know about the Last Imperium..."

"Maybe later," Bender said, moving to step between Coeur and Hacker. "Right now, I think Red Sun wants to finish her inspection."

"Oh, of course."

"Sorry," Coeur said, handing the bottle of Vitron B back to Hacker. "I'll try to swing by later."

"I'll look forward to it," Hacker said, remaining on her feet as first Hacker, and then Coeur, exited through the forward sick bay hatch and passed into the mess hall.

"Well, she's pretty lively," Coeur said, after the hatch closed behind herself and Bender.

"I think self-absorbed is a better description," Bender said. "She is an MD, but sometimes it seems like she's more interested in pure research than she is in medicine."

"Well, this is a research ship," Coeur said.

"True," Bender conceded, nodding toward the next hatch before them. "Anyway, if you're ready, the bridge is that way."

"Yes," Coeur said, "let's go."

Inwardly, though, as Coeur followed Bender to the bridge, she was glad to see another person free of the general torpor of the ship.

And, in its way, the formula she'd thought of earlier did make a certain amount of sense: a strange planet, plus a long mission, plus a dead captain and staff could equal one pretty spaced-out crew.

I just hope that's all it is, Coeur thought, because if there's one thing I hate, it's a mystery.

X O X O X

Since Coeur was familiar with the plans of *Suleiman Victrix*, she found the layout of the bridge of *Cymbeline Victrix* quite familiar--communication, sensor and navigation stations lined up against the forward bulkhead, flanked by two gunnery workstations, and four more command workstations above and to the rear on a half-meter high platform. She did not, however, expect to see as many crewmembers there as she did--perhaps a dozen people conducting repairs on partially disassembled workstations--since the damage from the Vampire attack should have been long before cleaned up. Whatever they were up to, though, there was only one officer among them--a diminutive blonde woman with an ensign's rank insignia--who rose from the nearest gunnery station when Bender and Coeur stepped onto the bridge.

"Captain on the bridge," the ensign said.

"At ease," Bender replied. "Stella, this is Lt. D' Esprit, the commander of RCS *Hornet*."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Stella said, shaking Coeur's hand. "You must be here to rescue us."

"Hopefully," Coeur answered. "Right now, though, I'm more interested in getting this inspection over. If you'll forgive my curiosity, why are you still working on the bridge here? Was the battle damage that serious?"

"No," Bender said, "this is more recent damage. After Virus knocked out the flight computers, it sent out a power spike that shorted out most of the bridge controls. Kind of a drag, really, since we already had to repair the bridge once."

Coeur nodded, glancing around at the bridge. Though the original damage might have been repaired, burn marks on the walls and ceiling, and warped plastic fittings remained as testimony to the horrific explosion that had occurred right where she was standing.

"Well, I guess you've got to do what you've got to do. Do you have any idea how long these repairs will take?"

In response, Bender looked at Stella, but the ensign deferred to one of her subordinates, a black-haired male petty officer probably ten years her senior, soldering circuits at the pilot's station on the upper level.

"What do you think, BF?" she asked. "About a week?"

"About that sir," BF replied, looking up from his work and sliding his goggles up on his forehead. "Give or take a few days."

"BF's our chief electrician," Bender explained to Coeur. "Nobody knows the wiring better than him."

"Well, Pascal did," BF observed, "but he's not here."

Bender nodded, conceding the point.

"Well, that's fine," Coeur said. "A week's fine. We should be able to reprogram the lab computers by then."

"Assuming, of course," Bender said, "Crowbar's Virus-check pans out."

"Yes, assuming that."

Before Bender could respond, though, one of two hatches at the rear of the bridge behind BF opened up and Jitters--supposedly left with Crowbar--stepped out onto the bridge.

"Red Sun," she said, stepping onto the lower level and saluting Coeur, "Crowbar wants you to know that he's completed the scan of the laboratory computers."

"Excellent. So where's he now?"

"In the meeting room," Jitters replied, looking back the way she came, "right up there."

"The meeting room? Why? What's in there?"

"That's the main access to our flight computers," Bender said. "Or it is now, anyway. A while back, we ripped out the bulkhead between the computers and the meeting room to let us get in there easier."

"Oh, I see," Coeur said. "Well, maybe I'd better go up and see what he's up to. Bender, I'll be back in a second."

"Very well," Bender said, nodding to Coeur and then turning to see what help he could offer Stella with her gunnery panel.

"After you, Jitters," Coeur said, letting the computer specialist precede her onto the upper bridge level and then through the hatch to the meeting room.

What Coeur saw a moment later, when she entered the meeting room, was surprising, quite beyond the fact that several tons of fiber optic memory banks were now directly exposed at the front of the meeting room. Whereas the meeting room of a sloop was usually tidy and decorous--a suite reserved for the use of senior officers--this meeting room was instead a cluttered and messy storage area, stacked with electronic components, discarded circuit boards and wiring from the bridge. The advantage of the missing bulkhead was clear, though, as it afforded Crowbar direct access to the computer for his canary without having to use a peripheral port; indeed, as Coeur walked in behind Jitters, she found Crowbar just stepping back from his canary, which he had set on a wheeled cart and pushed right up to the nearest memory bank.

"Skipper," Crowbar said. "I guess you must have got to the bridge first."

"Guess so," Coeur replied. "Jitters says that you finished the job downstairs."

"That's right," the engineer said, pulling his personal computer out of his tool kit and handing it to Coeur. "This is the data on the two lab computers."

Taking the computer, Coeur flipped quickly through the relevant diagnostic screens and grasped immediately why the check on the lab computers had gone so quickly. Whereas a canary might take several hours to check over a large data system with numerous files, the lab computer's memory manager indicated that most of their memory sectors were completely unused.

"It looks good," Coeur said. "I'm curious why there's all this unused memory, though."

"I can explain that," Jitters said. "Originally, the lab computers were set up to store the data from our survey missions, but since we were attacked before we could do any survey missions, we never got a chance to record anything."

"Well, that's not true," Coeur said. "I know Hacker, anyway's, been doing some research."

"Actually, not as much as you might think," Jitters replied. "What we've done has been small-scale, with the data stored in isolated archives. It's probably just as well, though, since we wanted to keep these lab computers in perfect condition."

Coeur nodded, handing Crowbar back the computer.

"I can see that," she said. "But what about these computers here, Crowbar? I take it you just plugged in the canary."

"Yes, sir. It's a familiar configuration, though, so it shouldn't take too long to check it out."

"That is," Jitters interrupted again, "if there's anything to find at all. I was just telling Crowbar that the flight computers were completely locked up by Virus, and there might not be much for your canary to find."

"So much junk, in other words," Coeur said, glancing at the flight computers.

"Yes, so much junk."

And suddenly, as if to put the punctuation on that statement, the canary abruptly began to beep, signalling the completion of its work. Surprised for a moment, Crowbar then pulled out his computer again, and used a command program to first turn off the beeping, then analyze the canary's report.

"Well, it looks like she's right," Crowbar said, turning his display so Coeur could see. "The whole system's locked up by some kind of customized Doomslayer strain. It's really weird, though--the strain didn't leave itself active to infect any other systems--it destroyed the computer, then fried its own circuits afterward."

"Yeah, that is weird. You'd have to do some pretty radical programming to make a Doomslayer void its survival instinct."

"On the other hand, though," Coeur added, after a moment, "it is consistent with the report that Bender gave us earlier. Jitters, why don't you give Crowbar and me a minute to discuss the inspection."

"Yes, sir," the petty officer said, saluting and departing through the forward hatch to the bridge.

"So, what do you think?" Coeur asked, after Jitters was gone.

"Well, the computers check out, obviously," Crowbar replied, "and the ship looks like she's in good shape overall. The only funny thing is how lackadaisical the crew seems."

"You noticed, huh?"

"Yes. It's been a hard mission, though, and they have lost almost all their officers."

"Well, I've got to admit, I'm a little surprised that the crew here isn't happier to see us, but then again, they didn't exactly land in the world's worst hellhole."

"True. Dobroye and Brusman could seem pretty lame compared to the city of Godsarc."

"That notwithstanding, you would agree the sloop is in good order."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, good. Then let's get back in touch with *Hornet* and make it official."

Crowbar nodded, and together he and Coeur returned to the bridge.

"Bender," Coeur said, meeting him and Jitters on the lower bridge level, "our inspection's complete. *CV* checks out."

"Good," Bender said.

"And now," Coeur went on, "I'd like to get back in touch with *Hornet*."

"Very well," Bender said. "You'll want to use the command panel, though. The commo station's still disassembled."

"Isn't that your duty station?" Coeur asked.

"That's okay, you can use it," Bender said, guiding Coeur to the station at the front of the upper level, next to the pilot's station.

"Well, thanks," Coeur said, settling into the station. Before she could activate the commo panel, though, Bender interrupted with another thought.

"You know, I was just thinking," he said, "if we do manage to get this tub moving, it might not hurt to have an experienced pilot at the conn."

"Don't you have a pilot?" Coeur asked, looking up.

"Well, competent pilots," Bender said, "but not necessarily experienced."

"Well, then," Crowbar said, walking up beside Bender, "Red Sun's your woman. So far, she's beaten--what--four vessels?"

"With *Hornet*?" Bender asked.

"Crowbar is leaving out some facts there," Coeur said.

"Even so," Bender said, "that's very impressive. Maybe you ought to fly this ship."

"I would be honored, Bender. First things first, though--I'd better contact my ship."

"Yes, of course."

"Red Sun to *Hornet*," Coeur said, activating the comms panel, "come in. Over."

"*Hornet* here," Deep Six replied.

"Sixer, record in the log: Virus-check complete. There is a dormant strain in the flight computers, but it's locked itself down."

"Very good, sir," the navigator said. "And you'll be glad to know that Ripsaw and Mad Dog have just completed their inspection as well. They were just about to make their report to Bender when you called."

"Well, Bender's right here," Coeur said. "Why don't they go ahead."

"Yes, go ahead," Bender said, bending over the comms panel.

"Sir," Ripsaw said, "*Hornet* checks out. She's got a lot of unusual gear for a freighter, and there's also a prisoner on board--Vega Zorn--but everything looks to be in order."

"Excellent," Bender said. "Go ahead and come on back, then."

"Yes, sir."

"We'll come back ourselves," Coeur said to Deep Six, "after we hash out some repair plans here."

"Yes, sir. Oh, and there's one more thing: Physic wants you to know that she's completed an analysis of the atmosphere, and she believes it's safe to breathe--at least around the city."

"Well, thanks," Coeur said, glancing at Bender. "I'm sure the crew over here will be glad to hear that."

"Yes, sir."

"Red Sun, out."

Coeur then shut off the comms panel and stood up from the station.

"I'm glad to hear we're safe," Bender said, amused by the report. "Who's that person Ripper mentioned, though--Vega Zorn?"

"A pirate," Coeur said, "a former Dawn League Officer. She had a warrant put on her after you shipped out."

"Is she dangerous?"

"Hardly. Just don't tell my doctor I said that, or she'll give me hell for it."

Bender gave Coeur a curious look.

"It's a long story," Coeur said. "Right now, I see we've got two priorities. One: my Hiver, Newton, ought to get in touch with Jitters and work out a plan to reformat your lab computers, and two: you and I ought to get in touch with the city council and see what kind of formal arrangement they're going to want for future contact with the Coalition."

And three, Coeur left unsaid, get in contact with the Ankaa survivors.

"Agreed," Bender said, turning to Jitters. "Chief, get on it."

"Aye, sir," Jitters said, leaving the bridge.

Before Bender and Coeur could get on to the city council, though, the comms panel beeped and Bender, who was closest, answered it. A visual signal from the city comnet, it resolved as a head-and-torso shot of an incredibly beautiful young woman, with long red hair, hazel eyes and a tailored beige business suit that clung tightly to her generous bosom. Indeed, she was so perfect that Coeur was inclined to think she wasn't real at all--that instead, she was a computer-rendered pseudopersonality.

"Hello, Dagmar," Bender said. "What's up?"

"Bender," the woman replied, speaking with a deep, sensuous voice, "I hope I'm not interrupting you."

"No," Bender said, "we're just completing our inspections here."

"Oh, good. If it's convenient, then, Janos has asked me to escort you and Lt. D'Esprit to a meeting with the city council."

"That would be great," Bender said, looking at Coeur. "If that's all right with you."

"Sure," Coeur said.

"Super," Dagmar replied. "I'll be up at the spaceport within the hour, then."

"Roger that. We'll be waiting."

Bender then shut off the line.

"Good God Almighty," Crowbar said, "who's that?"

Bender smiled.

"That's Dr. Dagmar Larsen," he said. "Dr. Trigant's assistant."

"Well, she's a looker, whoever she is. Is she married?"

Coeur thought about slapping Crowbar, but didn't, making allowance for being cooped up a year in a starship.

"No, I don't think so," Bender said. "You might not like her, though, if you don't like older women."

"How old could she be? She looks about 25."

"More like 95," Bender corrected him. "Her and Amanda are both remnants."

"Really," Coeur said. "They use anagathic?"

"Probably. Old-time Arkies say they never went into suspension--they were just always here as long as anyone could remember."

"That means they're probably rich, too," Coeur extrapolated. "Anagathic isn't cheap."

"Actually, that's a funny thing about this city," Bender said. "They've got so much of everything that nobody really can be rich. Since robots do all the grubby work, you can have any kind of lifestyle that you want."

"You make it sound like paradise."

"Well," Bender said, with a shrug, "you'll see. All I know is, if this place ever joins the Coalition, I know where I'll want to muster out."

"Yeah," Crowbar said, "amen to that."

CHAPTER THREE

Although two elevator tubes connected Godsarc spaceport to the floor of the city 700 meters below, Dagmar Larsen didn't arrive at the spaceport in anything so common as an elevator cab. Rather she and Amanda Trigant flew up to the spaceport in a surprisingly quiet blue six-seat luxury speeder, which Larsen parked near the forward module ramp of *Cymbeline Victrix*. They then encountered Ripsaw and Mad Dog returning from *Hornet*, and paused to join up with them as Coeur and Crowbar, less guns and armor, and Bender, waited on the sloop's ramp with Bender.

"That is one quiet speeder," Crowbar said to Bender. "Are all their vehicles like that?"

"Yes," Bender said, "the Arkies have excellent noise cancellation technology."

"Among other things," Coeur observed.

"Actually, that's true. Offhand, I can't think of anything they *aren't* good at."

Before Coeur or Crowbar could respond, though, Ripsaw and Mad Dog began walking toward the ramp to report, with Trigant and Larsen in train. Despite the fact that Bender had already received his report from Ripsaw, the Marine lieutenant appeared intent on delivering a formal report in person and paused before Bender to do so.

"Sir," she said, saluting, "reporting inspection of *Hornet* complete. Shall I prepare a written report, or just enter my notes in the log?"

"No, the log will be fine. Carry on."

"Yes, sir," Ripsaw said, nodding to Mad Dog and then walking up the ramp with the sergeant. Ripsaw did aim a quick glance at Coeur as she passed, though, which Coeur interpreted as a look of approval for the condition of *Hornet*. Serene, at any rate, hadn't raised an alarm about either of the Marines, so Coeur felt comfortable turning her attention to the other visitors, Trigant and Larsen.

Although Coeur had seen both women before on video, she was nevertheless surprised to see how different they appeared standing side-by-side in person. Both were youthful women, consistent with a lifetime on anagathic, but the slightly built Trigant was by far the more casual-looking, wearing a comfortable-looking blouse and skirt, flat shoes and a practical vest. Larsen, on the other hand, was both stylish and statuesque, not really that much taller than Trigant, but appearing so in her short skirt and strappy high heels. In fact, the only thing the women seemed to have in common were the sleek personal computers they wore on their forearms, reminiscent of the "designer" computers once common toward the end of the Last Imperium.

"Lt. D' Esprit," Trigant said, offering Coeur her hand, "it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Madam," Coeur replied, accepting the handshake. "This is Lt. Arkwright, my engineer."

"Lieutenant," Trigant said, acknowledging Crowbar with a little bow, and then returning her attention to Coeur. "I take it, Lieutenant, that you haven't had a chance to visit our city yet."

"No, not yet."

"Well, then, perhaps you'll let us show around the city after your meeting with the council."

Coeur nodded, turning to Crowbar.

"All right, Crowbar, why don't you go ahead and give Jitters whatever assistance she needs."

"Right, sir."

Before Crowbar could move to leave, though, Larsen spoke up.

"Lt. D' Esprit, is it absolutely necessary for your engineer to stay at the spaceport? If not, he might enjoy a tour of the city as well."

Coeur glanced at Crowbar, who in turn was trying not to stare at Larsen.

Lovesick dufus, Coeur thought. I ought to have him stay here with the ships.

There was, however, no compelling reason to have him stay there, since Newton and Jitters could handle the programming work, and Drop Kick could put up the all-weather tarp. And besides, it wouldn't hurt to have a technical eye along on the trip to Godsarc.

"Well, how about that, Crowbar?" Coeur asked. "Think you'd like to come along?"

"Well, if you insist, sir."

"Excellent," Trigant said. "Perhaps we should go, then, so we don't keep the mayor waiting."

Bender nodded, and gestured for the others to start down the forward ramp before him. Coeur allowed the others to enter the speeder before herself, though, so she could send a last-minute message to Gyro.

"Gyro," Coeur said into her personal communicator, "this is Red Sun. Listen, I've decided to take Crowbar into the city after all. You can go ahead and set up the all-weather tarp, though, and start work on the sloop's computers while we're away."

"Yes, sir. In the meantime, shall I assume that you haven't authorized shore leave?"

"That's correct. Until you hear from me, all personnel will remain at the spaceport."

"Yes, sir. How will we contact you in Godsarc, though, if we need to?"

"You can patch a call through the sloop to Bender. That'll probably get on through to us."

"Very well, sir. Good luck."

"Thanks. Red Sun out."

Coeur then shut off her radio and stepped into the speeder, whose middle two seats she found turned to face the two seats at the rear of the vehicle. Sitting next to Crowbar in the rear seat, therefore, Coeur found herself facing Bender and Trigant while Larsen took the flight controls in the front seat.

"Oh, Lieutenant," Trigant said to Coeur, reaching into a side compartment and pulling out two small communicators, "you and your engineer might want to put on these comlinks. That way, you can talk to your ship without Lt. Antonov."

"Oh, thanks," Coeur said, slipping one of the communicators on over her wrist and giving the other one to Crowbar. "We'll give them back later."

"Oh, don't bother. You can keep them as long as you're on the planet."

"You're sure?"

"Actually, we'd prefer it. Those comlinks are specially designed to prevent signal leakage to space."

"Oh, I see."

"All right, Dagmar," Trigant said over her shoulder, "we're all aboard."

Larsen nodded in response and a moment later the speeder lifted back into the air, sliding gracefully off the ground and barely ruffling the dusty sand below. Even as the speeder lifted up above the grounded starships, though, and dipped down toward the gash of the Kimberley Rill, Coeur was struck by how utterly quiet the cabin of the speeder was, so quiet that the sound of the passengers' breathing was actually louder than the speeder's power plant and air conditioning.

Forget about the comlinks, Coeur thought, enviously, I want to know where I can pick up one of these speeders.

"Comfortable, Lieutenant?" Trigant asked.

"Oh, I'm fine," Coeur said, watching out the window as the cavern of Godsarc hove into view.

"God, that's beautiful," Crowbar said, looking out the same window. "I just can't believe something like that could survive the Collapse."

"Actually, most of it didn't," Trigant replied. "I can still remember when the city filled all of that canyon below us--4 million people at least."

The view of the canyon floor was brief, though, as Larsen steered into the city cavern itself, and locked onto the automated city traffic manager. Visibility within the massive cavern was good, though, since the mouth of the cave facing the canyon--perhaps a kilometer wide--was entirely open, and Coeur finally got a close-up look at the myriad aircraft she'd seen only briefly from *Hornet*. Like the speeder, all of these craft appeared to be restricted to a modest 30 kph inside the city, but even as the speeder slowed, Coeur was surprised to see how very small most of the other grav vehicles really were; most of these were actually one and two-seat designs driven by impeller fans, very light craft resembling commuter vehicles of the Last Imperium. Specifically, these appeared to be float chairs--one-seaters with flimsy bubble canopies--and flitters--two-seaters with the driver in front of the passenger, encased in a shell of lightweight protective plastic.

It's like a scene from Terra, Coeur thought, looking down through the traffic at ranks of houses and beautifully terraced gardens, arrayed around the two central towers of the city, *as if the war never happened*.

Weird.

"I really shouldn't dwell on the negative, though," Trigant said. "Not with all the progress we've made since the Collapse."

"Not to change the subject," Coeur said, "but I'm curious about these grav vehicles. Are they really necessary with a city this small?"

"Actually, the city's a lot bigger than it looks. The main cavern is fairly small, but our factories and heavy industry are in caverns behind the main chamber. The main access tunnel goes back for nearly five kilometers."

"That's where Smoker and the digs are, too," Bender added, "in the caverns down below Brown Sector."

"Brown Sector?" Crowbar asked.

"That's one of the city divisions," Trigant explained. "Brown is the industrial sector, red is the canyon, black is the surface, blue is divided between the towers, and green is the residential area."

"So," Coeur said, "which sector is the city council in?"

"Green Sector," Trigant replied, "just below us."

"Then all this," Coeur said, gesturing toward her window, "the main cavern, is residential?"

"Mostly," Trigant confirmed. "A few of our people live in Blue North and Blue South, but most of the people live on the cavern floor."

"Does that include industrial workers?" Crowbar asked.

"I don't understand," Trigant said. "Industrial workers?"

"You know, factory workers. People who build stuff."

"Oh, I see--manual laborers. We don't have any."

"What?"

"That kind of work is done by robots," Trigant said. "Our people concentrate on more conceptual, intellectual work."

Astonished, Coeur and Crowbar both began to speak, but held their thoughts as the speeder began to descend. Though the speeder had inertial compensation, the view through the windows gave the Arses a temporary sensation of falling.

"But what about Virus?" Coeur said, finally, as Larsen guided the speeder to a landing at the foot of one of the two high towers. "Don't the robots present an inviting target?"

"Actually, no," Larsen said, turning around to field the question. "What we've found is that Virus needs a lot of computer space to develop in, and our robots are quite decidedly stupid."

"Well, they can't be *too* stupid," Crowbar said, looking out the window, "if they built all this."

"Well, they didn't actually build the city," Trigant said, palming the side door release. "They merely maintain it. The mayor is waiting, though, so perhaps we should go."

"Yes, of course," Coeur said, stepping out ahead of the others and availing herself of the opportunity to take in her surroundings. First, above everything else, she noticed the temperature--given by a thermometer on her comlink as 20 degrees, unbelievably the same as the temperature in the speeder. The whole environment of the cavern was pleasant and relaxing, however, with neither the racket of machinery nor the stink of industrial air pollution to disturb the thoughts of citizens strolling nearby.

As for the city structures themselves, those appeared to be a graceful blend of one and two-story buildings, bedecked with hanging greenery and adorned with elegant columns and archways. Coeur couldn't tell what their purpose was exactly, but most of the foot traffic did appear to be concentrated on a two story building with a domed roof and a portico bearing the inscription UBI LIBERTAS IBI PATRIA.

"Where there is liberty," Coeur said, "there is my homeland."

"You speak Latin," Trigant said, impressed.

"No," Coeur replied. "That used to be carved on a lot of Imperial buildings."

"Rather odd," Bender said, "considering it wasn't a democracy."

"True. The Imperium liked to say, though, it didn't rule planets so much, as the space between the planets."

"Is there a difference?"

"Unfortunately, not in practice," Coeur said, turning back to Trigant. "I take it that's the council chamber."

"Correct," Trigant said, gesturing for the others to follow her. "This way."

The grandiose Latin inscription of the building notwithstanding, Coeur found the architecture of the council building to be rather understated; large windows near the street, delicate trelliswork and a simple frieze above the columns of the portico made it look smaller than it was. Despite the modest appearance of the building, however, the citizens conducting business there were certainly diverse, with costumes ranging from stiff Imperial formal wear to shorts and sarongs. Indeed, there was even one young man who wore nothing at all but a comlink, and Coeur politely avoided looking down as he passed her party, offering a friendly "good afternoon".

"Hey," Crowbar said a few seconds later, after the party reached the building's atrium, "wasn't that guy naked?"

"Can't slip anything past you," Coeur said.

"Well, is that normal around here?"

"Well, I don't know if I'd say *common*," Bender said, glancing at Trigant and Larsen, "but people do pretty much do as they please, wouldn't you say?"

"As long as they don't hurt each other," Trigant replied, "yes. We've tried to raise the younger generations not to harbor arbitrary notions about propriety or social decorum."

"It isn't because we like chaos, though," Larsen added. "It's simply a fact that our society must be progressive, if it is to survive."

"Kind of a reverse utopia," Coeur said.

"Indeed," Larsen agreed. "Sir Thomas More would not approve."

Even as they had this brisk exchange, however, Coeur couldn't help but notice the same disturbing mellowness here in the faces of the strolling Arkies that she'd seen earlier on board the sloop. To be sure, people like Bender, Trigant and Larsen were exceptions, but the general tenor of the sloop and city appeared to be torpid self-satisfaction.

Unless I'm just imaging this. Maybe people really would be like this if they lived in paradise.

Barring evidence from Physic's lab, though, or perhaps Serene, there wasn't much to prove Coeur's suspicion one way or the other. The logical plan, then, was to continue observing the city, and confer with her crewmates later.

"Well, then," said Trigant, lifting up her comlink to speak into it, "it's a lucky thing for us Sir Thomas isn't on our staff. Mayor Korda, are you there?"

"Yes," Korda answered, "and I have the council assembled."

"May we come up, then? I have the captains with me."

"Yes, please."

Trigant nodded to herself, shutting off the comlink and turning to the others. "This way," she said.

The council chamber, Coeur noticed, as she and the other Arses followed Trigant and Larsen through an adjacent corridor, was not guarded by any kind of obvious security checkpoint. Instead, the corridor led directly into a circular room under a vaulted ceiling, with three rows of tiered seats in a semicircle adjacent to the entryway, and a long desk opposite the entryway for the council itself.

The council itself appeared to consist of five people--two women on the left, Janos Korda, and two more men on the right--but these individuals were no more unified in appearance than the general public outside. The leftmost councilor, for instance--a youthful woman with a mass of flowing blond hair--opted for a lacy pink blouse, while the woman next to her--closer in apparent age to Korda--chose a jet black tunic with maroon piping, which in turn contrasted with the brown tunic of Korda, the white alb of the bearded, elderly man to his left, and the Imperial-style officer's uniform worn by the heavysset man farthest to the right. Their diversity notwithstanding, though, all of them wore friendly, patient expressions as their guests were led in, and Coeur gained the quick impression that this group had functioned together as a unit for quite some time.

"Lt. D' Esprit," Korda said, rising from his seat, "Lt. Antonov, welcome. Please, have a seat."

Coeur nodded, assuming he meant for them to sit in the front row of seats facing the council. Before Coeur could act on the assumption, however, a set of panels in the floor abruptly receded, and a set of plastic and metal furniture--two seats connected to a single desk--suddenly rose into view, noiselessly assembling itself within the span of less than a second.

"Wow," Crowbar muttered, "that's some trick."

Yes, Coeur thought, recalling similar gadgetry from her youth, *collapsible furniture*.

Rather than appear too impressed, however, Coeur kept her silence and merely followed Bender's lead as he took a seat at one of the freshly manifested chairs. Crowbar, meanwhile, was keen to get a better look at the folding furniture, but Larsen's gentle hand on his shoulder steered him away from the chairs, and over to a place between herself and Trigant in the row of seats behind Coeur and Bender.

"Lt. D' Esprit," Korda said, returning to his seat, "I suppose I ought to begin by introducing the members of our council..."

"Over here," the mayor continued, starting at his extreme right, "this is Professor Laure Demaree, Professor of Robotics from Godsarc University, and next to her, this is Director Kristina Argiris, head of the Godsarc Bureau of Informational Architecture."

Both women nodded, and Korda continued with the men to his left.

"Over here," he went on, "this is our senior member, Stephan Lehrer, President of the College of Technology, and next to him is Major Karl Ziegler, former head of the Godsarc Councilor Guard."

Coeur answered with a nod of her own, glancing across the council.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Coeur said.

"Obviously," Korda said, "we appreciate your presence, since we know that you and Lt. Antonov have other business to attend to. Dr. Trigant has reminded us, however, that your repairs will probably be complete within a week, and I believe it would be prudent for us to give at least a little consideration to the future of relations between our respective powers."

"Well," Coeur replied, glancing at Bender, "I hate to make promises on behalf of the Coalition, but I can't imagine why the Coalition wouldn't want to establish friendly relations. Certainly, we will pass along a recommendation that the Coalition send along a follow-up diplomatic envoy."

"Excellent. Lt. Antonov had suggested as much, but he's also quick to point out that he's only the acting commander of his vessel, and he seems reluctant to overstep his authority."

Coeur had to smile, despite herself. Overstepping one's authority was, in fact, a way of life in the Arses--too young a service to have old and ironclad traditions.

"Yes," Coeur said, "I can appreciate that. I'm sure the Coalition Assembly will respect our recommendation, however."

The council appeared satisfied with this, and a moment later old President Lehrer spoke up for the first time.

"Now that we've settled that, then, Your Honor," he said, speaking slowly and deliberately, "we should turn our attention to the subject of assistance to the starships."

"Yes," Professor Demaree said, as quick in her speech as Lehrer was slow, "we should contribute however we can, considering the earlier incident with the saboteur."

"Actually," Bender said, "I think you've done enough already."

"Well, at the very least," Director Argiris said to Bender, "you should let us supply your ships with fresh food, fuel and water for the journey. I even have human service personnel lined up, Lt. D' Esprit, in case you share your comrade's distrust of robots."

Coeur glanced at Bender, who shrugged.

"Sounds reasonable," Coeur said. "What do you think, Bender?"

"Yes, certainly. Since your cargo space is bigger, we probably ought to collect the consumables there, then split them up between the ships."

"Right."

"All right, then," Argiris said, moving her fingers across the touch-sensitive screen of the computer before her, "I'll send word to my people."

"I'd probably better tell my people, too," Coeur said, lifting her wrist to speak into her comlink. "*Cymbeline Victrix*, this is Red Sun. Give me a patch to *Hornet*, please."

"Aye, sir," BF said, answering the radio. "Switching."

"Gyro here. What's up, skipper?"

"Gyro, I think you might be having a visit soon from some city service personnel. Accord them the usual courtesy, and catalog whatever they deliver to the ship."

"Yes, sir. Will do."

"Red Sun out."

X O X O X

What happened next, Coeur wasn't exactly certain. It seemed, however, that even as she was shutting off the comlink, the council before her suddenly went fuzzy--like an image out of focus--and she glanced across at Bender to see if he, too, was affected.

Bender, however, wasn't there.

Instead, it was Darien Hayes sitting there beside her--Darien, who had been dead for nearly 80 years.

Yet, as Coeur stared closely at the man, she saw that it definitely was her friend, dressed in the azure uniform of an Imperial scout, and staring off in another

direction. Reacting to her attention, though, he turned his deep-set blue eyes to look at her, and smiled enigmatically.

What the hell? Coeur thought, wanting to speak but somehow unable to.

Almost as soon as she thought this, though, the weird transformation ended, and Coeur found herself staring not at Darien but at Bender. Since Bender was not looking back at her, and the council was not reacting with curiosity or impatience, she could only assume that what had seemed to last for seconds was only a brief hallucination.

Coeur, therefore, lowered her city comlink--still close to her mouth--and resolved to look as unruffled as possible. At the same time, though, a strange emotion suddenly suffused through her being, a feeling at once both frightening and reassuring. Vaguely familiar with telepathy through Serene, Coeur suspected she had just been the victim of direct telepathic manipulation, but the manipulation only confirmed what she had already been thinking--that someone, or something, in Godsarc was affecting the minds of the people there.

Now, she thought, all I've got to do is prove it.

Or convince myself I'm just paranoid.

X O X O X

"Lt. D' Esprit," Korda said a moment later, "are you all right?"

"Yes, quite," Coeur said. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, it's probably nothing. You just looked pale there for a moment."

"Sorry," Coeur said, glancing again at Bender, "I hadn't noticed. I was thinking about something, though--obviously, you people have a lot of amazing technology, but I haven't heard whether or not you've done any research into psionics."

"Psionics?" Demaree asked. "What's that?"

"Mind control, I think," Major Ziegler said. "Isn't that right, Stephan?"

"Actually, no," Lehrer said, "that's a bit of a simplification. Psi institutes used to study all kinds of phenomena, including telekinesis and clairvoyance."

"True," Argiris said, "but psi institutes were almost always located on high-population worlds. Vinooks never could have supported such an institution."

"Well, there you go," Korda said to Coeur. "Apparently, we haven't pursued that research."

"Actually, Your Honor," Trigant said, speaking up behind Coeur, "that may be a bit of an overstatement. We shouldn't forget about the stim field."

"The stim field?" Coeur asked, turning around. "What's that?"

"Essentially, captain," Trigant replied, "the stim field is a low-voltage electrical field designed to enhance the production of alpha waves in the brain. Almost all of our citizens have stim field generators in their homes, in fact, to stimulate creativity and relaxation."

"Yes," Larsen added, "and most people also claim that their dreams are much more vivid under a stim field than without it."

"But Dr. Trigant," Argiris said, "that isn't really a psionic phenomenon, is it?"

"Indeed, no," Trigant said. "The effect of the field is broadly similar to directed telepathy, however, so I thought I should mention it."

"Well, how powerful are these generators?" Crowbar asked. "Can they do damage if they malfunction?"

Larsen smiled sympathetically.

"No, they're quite safe. The field strength is infinitesimally small, and at any rate, the user controls the duration of stimulation."

"Well, I was just curious," Coeur said, turning back to the council, "seeing that you have such an advanced and enlightened culture here."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Korda said. "So, are there any other questions you have before we adjourn?"

"Just one. Dr. Trigant has already agreed to show us around the city, but I'd also like to meet at least one of the survivors from the liner *Ankaa*--and any survivors from that scout ship, too, if there are any."

Lifting his eyebrows, Korda glanced at Argiris.

"Actually," Argiris said, "there aren't any survivors from the scout ship *Samantha*--all her crew was killed when she landed. There are two surviving crewmembers from the liner, though, if you want to talk to them. We have their comlink codes, and you could certainly call them to arrange a meeting."

Coeur nodded, concealing her disappointment about the scout ship.

"And of course," Argiris added, "you could always have a look at *Samantha*, too, since she's still up there on the surface."

"On the surface?"

"Yes," Trigant explained, "we stripped out most of the useful components, but the hull is still in place, with a dome overhead to hide it from orbit."

"Right," Argiris said. "Obviously, people don't go there very often, but I'm sure the doctor could take you there later."

"I would be honored," Trigant said.

"Well, then," Korda said, clapping his hands, "Lt. D' Esprit, Lt. Adamov, if that's all, perhaps we should go ahead and give you back to Amanda and Dagmar."

"Thank you, Janos," Trigant said, standing up from her seat and prompting Larsen, Crowbar, Bender and Coeur to do likewise. "We'll try not to make the tour too boring."

"I'm sure that won't be a problem," Korda said, smiling and standing as well. "Certainly, if I don't get another chance, I would like to wish our new guests a pleasant and productive stay in the city."

"Meeting adjourned."

X O X O X

Just a few minutes later, the first supplies from Godsarc began to arrive at the spaceport, conveyed up the elevators by a team of human porters just as Argiris had promised. These porters were not brute laborers, however, but professionals from the Bureau of Informational Architecture, wearing the triangular BIA badge on their smart blue jumpsuits, and letting three powerful grav platforms carry their burden from the city.

"That's quite a load," Vega said, standing at the foot of *Hornet's* cargo ramp beside Drop Kick and Serene. "That's got to be at least a tonne on each of those sleds."

"Yeah, but half of it's for the sloop," Drop Kick said. "Gyro just wants us to store it here for the moment."

"Well, let's do it," Serene recommended.

"Right," Drop Kick said, moving past his comrades to meet the approaching porters.

"Good afternoon," the oldest porter said, pausing at the top of the ramp and offering Drop Kick his hand. "Justin Walder, BIA."

"Sergeant Escher," Drop Kick replied, accepting the handshake and searching for some sign of rank on the gray-haired Arkie's uniform. He found nothing obvious, though--just a little pendant on a chain around his neck, consisting of a bar bisected by an upward-pointing arrow. This looked more like a piece of jewelry, though, than a badge of rank, and Drop Kick guessed that seniority alone made the old man the party's leader.

"So, where do you want this stuff?" Walder asked.

"Oh, just put that anywhere."

"Okay. We'll need the platforms back, though, so we'll help you unload the cargo."

"Right," Drop Kick said, turning to his comrades. "Ladies?"

"Oh, you mean us," Vega said.

"Yeah, you. You take the small stuff, I'll take the heavy stuff."

"Fair enough," Serene said. In practice, though, what they discovered was that none of the cargo was really very heavy, since all of them were used to working in 1 G gravity--twice as taxing as the surface gravity on Vinooks--and even hefty 20 kilogram autogalley refills felt relatively light. Within twenty minutes, then, the unloading was complete, with the spacers rapidly outpacing the local workers.

Yet, the unloading was not without incident. As the work was nearly done, Serene accidentally dropped a circular 20 liter beverage container near the cargo ramp and Vega--who was closest to the ramp--ran after it. Even as she followed the bottle of the ramp and onto the tarmac, though, she suddenly realized that this was a bad idea, as clanging alarms in the cargo bay confirmed a moment later.

"Oh, fikk," Drop Kick muttered, watching as the Arkies dropped to the deck.

"Sorry," Vega said. "Forgot about the implant."

"No, problem," Drop Kick said, walking over casually to the nearest intercom panel. "Bridge, cancel klaxxon."

"Roger," Deep Six replied, and the alarm shut off a moment later.

"Sorry people," Serene said to the other Arkies, helping them up. "False alarm."

"What the hell was that?" Walder asked.

"That's just Vega," Drop Kick explained. "She's got an implant in her body that trips the alarm whenever she leaves the ship."

"She's a suspected criminal," Serene added.

"Oh," Walder said.

Before the excitement was quite over, however, the starboard hatch hissed open and Physic--probably in the engine room when the alarm went off--came running into the hold with an autopistol.

"Okay, I've got her covered," Physic said, training her gun on a startled Vega.

"Good Gaia," Serene said, uncomfortably close to Vega, "watch where you're pointing that thing!"

"Yeah," Drop Kick said, snatching the gun from Physic, "if you took the safety off, you might actually hurt somebody."

"Oh," Physic said, squinting at Vega. "Well, I did hear the alarm."

"Well, it's nothing," Drop Kick said, removing the clip from the pistol and handing the weapon back to Physic. "Vega triggered the alarm by accident."

"Oh, fine," Physic said. "You better watch your prisoner, though, if you don't want that to happen again."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said.

"Carry on," Physic said, turning--albeit reluctantly--to go.

"If you'll forgive my curiosity," Walder said afterward, to Vega, "what exactly are you suspected of?"

"Actually, you should ask my attorney," Vega suggested.

"That's me," Serene offered. "Unfortunately, Vega hasn't been arraigned yet, but I imagine the Coalition will probably prefer a charge of genocide."

"Genocide?" Walder asked, glancing from Vega to Drop Kick.

"She tried to kill the Hiver race," Drop Kick said. "Unsuccessfully."

"I never would have guessed."

"Oh, I'm a very civilized mass murderer," Vega said.

Baffled, Walder looked back and forth from Vega to Drop Kick.

"Obviously," he said, after a moment's reflection, "things are more complicated in space than we expected."

Drop Kick shrugged, picking up the last cargo pallet.

"I wouldn't know," Drop Kick said, "I'm just a grunt. Here, you can have your grav sled back, though."

"Thank you," Walder said, moving to leave the ship with his comrades. "Have a nice day."

X O X O X

"What's the plan now?" Vega asked, standing next to Serene and Drop Kick at the front of the cargo hold.

"You can relax," Drop Kick said. "Gyro just wanted the cargo secured, that was all."

"Okay, I'm going up to my stateroom, then."

Drop Kick nodded, watching Vega leave. Serene, however, remained where she was standing.

"Need something?" Drop Kick asked.

"Yes," Serene said softly, looking off the way the Arkies had gone, "we need to talk."

"About what?"

"About Mr. Walder. He's got a psi shield."

Drop Kick appeared confused.

"It must be pretty small," he said. "I didn't see him wearing one."

"I don't mean an artificial shield," Serene said. "I mean a natural one. He's a telepath."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. He isn't very powerful--thank God--but he did have a shield up and I had to distract him to make a scan."

"How did you distract him?" Drop Kick asked.

"I rolled the cannister down the ramp."

"Oh, you did that on purpose?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I guess I better tell Gyro. Is this guy any kind of threat?"

"With his telepathy? No, I doubt it. I did pick up a snatch of something, though, when he dropped his shield. He was thinking about leaving 'something' for the captain."

"'Something'? What the hell is that?"

"I don't know. I think it might not hurt to double-check the cargo, though."

Drop Kick nodded, grimly, looking back at the pile behind them.

"Right," he said. "Stay here, while I get the bomb sniffer."

X O X O X

Oblivious to the drama on *Hornet*, meanwhile, Coeur, Crowbar and Bender had just been shepherded back to the speeder of Trigant and Larsen, who were intent on beginning their tour of the city. Coeur, however, prevailed upon the Arkies to let her contact the survivors from the liner *Ankaa* first, and--with the help of Trigant--looked up the location of the men through the city communications network.

"Here they are," Trigant said, accessing the relevant data through the touch-sensitive vidphone screen built into the back of Larsen's chair. "Jack Allison and Zeke Umeki, vidphone number BN-8946. Apparently, they own a bar on the 97th floor of the north tower, and live on the premises."

"Convenient," Crowbar said. "Not exactly the most dignified job in the world, though, is it? Barkeeping?"

"Actually," Trigant said, switching to another database, "it's not all that odd. Apparently, these men weren't technicians on the liner, but just ordinary soldiers. More than likely, the BIA decided it wouldn't be cost-effective to give them technical training."

"Wait a minute," Coeur said, leaning over to get a better look at the screen, "you got all that out of a phone directory?"

"No," Trigant said, "actually, this isn't public. This is a private government database."

"Oh."

"It's nothing you shouldn't see, though. Here, have a look at their mugshots so you can recognize them."

The pictures the doctor pulled up, Coeur noted, were not images of fitness and vigor. Rather, the light-skinned Allison and dark-complected Umeki shared dangling jowls, deep wrinkles and generous quantities of body fat, none of which were complimented by their loud tropical print shirts. They were, however, 73 years old, and might have let themselves go with time and distance from their homeworld.

"Hey," Bender said, snapping his fingers, "I recognize them."

"You do?" Coeur asked.

"Yeah, those guys came down to look at the ship when we landed. They didn't say very much, though--they just asked a few questions about our damage and then left. I didn't even know they were spacers until now."

That sounds odd, Coeur thought, visualizing a pair of flabby old men tottering up to the sloop, poking around, then leaving. Since she hadn't actually talked to the offworlders, though, she resisted the temptation to guess at their character, or make assumptions about what they might or might not know.

"What about family?" Coeur asked. "Do they have wives or kids?"

"Here?" Trigant said. "No. Mr. Allison was married once, to a local girl, but they divorced without issue."

"Is that common here?" Crowbar asked. "Divorce, I mean?"

Trigant smiled.

"Well, it happens. I've been married myself three times."

"I didn't know that," Coeur said.

"Well, I try not to make a big deal of it. I outlived all three of my husbands, God bless them."

"I'm sorry," Coeur said. "Did you have any children?"

"No," Trigant said, "I'm afraid not. A medical problem."

Immediately, the thought of Serene and her anagathic sterility came to Coeur.

"Enough about me, though," Trigant said. "We should get back to your problem. Would you like me to call Umeki's number?"

"Yes, please," Coeur said.

"Okay," Trigant said, closing the secure files and speaking into the vidphone mic. "Comnet, call Mr. Zeke Umeki, Blue Sector."

Obligingly, the vidphone responded by flashing the number on its screen, then brought up an image of Zeke Umeki himself, standing between a long bar and what appeared to be a commercial bartending autogalley. Wiping his hands on his floral print shirt, he was just turning away from a conversation with a customer as he answered the call.

"*Bucky Ball*," he answered. "What can I do you for?"

"Mr. Umeki," Coeur said, "you probably don't know me, but my name is Coeur D'Esprit, and I'm the captain of a ship that just landed here this morning."

"Oh, yeah," Umeki said, "Jack said he saw something about that on the newsnet. You're from that outfit--the Coalition--right?"

"Yes," Coeur said, "I am. I'd like to know if I could talk to you and your partner, though, about the ship *you* came to Vinooks in."

"What about her?" Umeki asked, suspiciously.

"Maybe it would be better if I told you that in person. Would it be possible for me to meet you later?"

Clearly troubled by something, Umeki thought a long moment before responding.

"All right," he said. "I don't want a big crowd here, though, asking a lot of questions."

"I understand. Would it be all right if I brought along the captain of *Cymbeline Victrix*?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Come around at 1700, after we close."

"Thanks," Coeur said, noting from the vidphone clock that 1700 was four hours later. "I'll see you then."

"Okey-doke," Umeki said, and the screen went blank.

"Kind of a blunt little cuss," Crowbar said.

"Yeah, well, all the same," Coeur said, turning to Trigant, "I'd like to play this his way, if that's all right with you."

"Certainly. After the tour, we'll fly you there and wait outside."

"Well," Larsen said, turning around in her seat, "there's no need for *all* of us wait there. After the tour, I could escort Lt. Arkwright back to Black Sector myself."

Surprised by the offer, Crowbar nevertheless acted quickly to endorse it.

"I'd like that."

"Okay, fine," Coeur said. "Maybe we should get started, though, before it gets too late."

"Yes, indeed," Trigant said. "Dagmar, take us out to Brown Sector."

"Very well," Larsen said, glancing briefly at Crowbar, then turning back to her controls and lifting the speeder back into the air.

X O X O X

Brown Sector, as Coeur and Crowbar would come to find, was actually much larger than the rest of the city, and four hours would clearly be insufficient to cover even a fraction of it. Seen through the windows of the speeder, the industrial sector appeared to consist of countless neat and busy factories, tucked into side caverns on either side of the main thoroughfare--which itself led five kilometers past the residential center of the city. To give some sense of the area, though, Trigant and Larsen paused at a couple of factories along the way, demonstrating unequivocally the technological superiority of Godsarc. In one factory, for instance, the Arses witnessed robots fabricating suits of battle dress that were easily twice as strong as any suits in service with the Coalition, yet lighter and more flexible; then, in another factory, they saw the manufacture of fusion weapons so light and portable that

Coeur was certain even the best Imperial products would appear ungainly beside them.

The standard arm carried by the Godsarc police was typical--a combination neural/fusion weapon scarcely larger than Coeur's TL-13 gauss pistol, but far more powerful. Coeur herself saw the power of the pistol when Trigant arranged to let her test fire one of the weapons on the factory firing range; with just one round, at 40 meters, Coeur put a fist-sized hole in a sheet of nickel-chromium alloy 4 centimeters thick. Of course, the down side of so much power was a weapon with a healthy kick, but Coeur could certainly handle it, and gave some serious thought to talking the factory manager into letting her keep it.

"So, Dr. Trigant," Coeur said, "how would I go about buying one of these?"

"I'm afraid you can't," Trigant returned, taking the weapon back from Coeur. "This model isn't for sale--it's strictly for the police."

"If you don't mind my saying," Crowbar said, standing nearby with Bender and Dagmar, "that's a pretty powerful cannon for a cop. Do they really need all that firepower?"

"Actually, no," Trigant said, pointing at a cylindrical assembly underneath the gun's barrelmain barrel. "This is the main police weapon--an integral neural pistol with a range of about 150 meters."

"So why the extra firepower?" Coeur asked. "You got a lot of criminals wearing battle dress?"

"No," Trigant answered, with an amused smile. "In fact, there's very little crime at all here. We have a very small population, though--far too small for a standing army--and a necessary expedient is to have our police force double as a militia."

"Assisted by the Councilor Guard, of course," Larsen added. "That's the main customer for the battle dress."

"I guess you must have more weapons than that pistol, then?"

"Oh yeah," Bender interjected. "You ought to see one of their combat rifles."

"Well, there's one right over here," Trigant said to Coeur. "Why don't you come over and have a look?"

Accepting the offer, Coeur followed Trigant across the workshop to a bench where a human male and a broadly anthropomorphic robot were collaborating on repairs to a fusion rifle. Another rifle sat intact nearby, though, and Trigant picked this up to show to Coeur.

"Lt. D' Esprit," Trigant said, holding the small rifle comfortably by the pistol grip and forestock, "this is our main heavy weapon, the 2 megajoule fusion rifle."

"Wait a minute," Crowbar said, as astonished as Coeur. "*That's* a fusion rifle?"

"Yeah, it does look a bit small," Coeur said. "Where's the recoil arm? And where's the jack for the cooling unit?"

Trigant replied with a sympathetic smile--also shared by Larsen and Graham. Indeed, only the robot next to Graham did not appear to be amused, though it was the first to offer an explanation.

"Actually, ma'am," the robot said, speaking with a mellow male voice, "there is no recoil arm, or separate cooling mechanism. All primary components are located inside the weapon."

"I thought they were supposed to be stupid," Crowbar said to Larsen.

"Relatively stupid," Trigant replied. "Actually, he's right, though. Here, Lt. D' Esprit, feel the weight."

Sure enough, Coeur found, the weapon was light--far lighter than she would have expected. Of course, the weapon was still dense--certain components of a fusion rifle had to be built very sturdy--but it was certainly much lighter than any weapon she'd ever seen with a similar pulse energy. Drop Kick's fusion rifle, by way of comparison, was easily twice as heavy, but only three-quarters as powerful.

"Yeah, that's a nice gun," Coeur said, handing the weapon back to Trigant.

"Well, of course, I don't care for guns much myself," Trigant said, handing the weapon back to Graham, "but I understand they are a necessity, in the hard world we live in. Thank you very much, Graham."

"Any time, Doctor."

The demonstration concluded, Trigant and Larsen then steered the Arses back toward the speeder, parked outside the factory.

Super armor, Coeur thought, super weapons, clever robots--God, I don't know if I ought to be happy or worried.

The good thing about this technology, of course, was the instant leg up it could give the Coalition on its rivals--if the Arkies continued to look favorably on the Coalition. This same technology was just as rife for abuse, though, and Coeur worried if even the Coalition was mature enough to handle it.

Well, I know what the Assembly would say about that, Coeur thought, returning to her seat in the speeder. That isn't your decision to make, Lieutenant.

X O X O X

For his own part, meanwhile, Crowbar was reflecting on another aspect of Godsarc's technology--where the power came from to build it. Local vehicles, Trigant had explained, were powered by mix of fuel cells, MHD turbines and microfusion plants, but the city itself also had to have a power supply, and Crowbar's curiosity finally got the better of him as he and his companions settled back into their seats.

"You know," Crowbar said, "all this technology is really amazing, but you must use a lot of power. What is your primary power source, some kind of fusion?"

"No, we don't use fusion," Trigant said.

"Well, what do you use then? Fission? Geothermal?"

"No, we use antimatter."

"*Antimatter?*" Crowbar asked.

"Wait a minute," Coeur said, just as surprised as Crowbar. "You mean *antimatter* antimatter--the mutual annihilation of particles and antiparticles?"

"Yes, quite," Trigant said. "We did use fusion power once, for a while, but our engineers discovered how to manufacture large amounts of anti-hydrogen after the Collapse. Now, we have far more fuel--and power--than we actually need."

"So how do you actually make the fuel?" Crowbar asked.

"With modified particle accelerators. The process is somewhat complicated, but we basically transmute hydrogen into anti-hydrogen, then store the product under pressure inside a magnetic field."

Hearing this, Coeur and Crowbar went from being impressed with Arkie technology to being outright awestruck. The Arses, however, diverged on their opinion of the development; whereas Crowbar was stunned by the sheer feat of controlling antimatter, Coeur was even more concerned than she was before by the export of Arkie technology. Although the Last Imperium had tried to master antimatter annihilation, the technology was never seen outside a research lab, and the implication was clear that Godsarc now stood on a higher technology plateau than any human civilization of the past.

Coeur stopped herself, though, before she lost all sense of perspective. The most advanced technology in known space was that of the Ancients--a long-vanished race that found it a minor accomplishment to rearrange the placement of planets within a solar system. The Arkies, therefore, might be powerful, but they were not gods.

"So where do you keep the reactor?" Crowbar asked.

"Right here," Trigant said, bringing up a city map on the vidphone screen, and pointing at a spot far away from the main cavern. "We put the reactor here, at the eastern end of the thoroughfare, to keep it as far away from Green and Blue Sector as possible.

"Not that it matters where we put it," Larsen said, turning around. "If there was an accident, we'd all be killed."

"But there are safeguards," Bender said, with a hopeful glance at Trigant, "right?"

"Yes, quite. The reactor controls are quadruple redundant, the fuel supply is armored to withstand direct fire from a 200 megajoule fusion gun, and there's even a battery of dedicated meson screens to prevent interference from orbit."

"Sounds impressive," Crowbar said. "Is the system automated?"

"Idiot-proof, you mean? No, there are service personnel who tend the reactor, mostly from the College of Technology."

"I heard that name before," Coeur said, "College of Technology; what is that, exactly?"

"Well, it's not what it sounds like," Trigant said. "It's not a university. We do have a university--Godsarc University--but the College is actually a separate organization, with members assigned to handle critical projects."

"Yes," Larsen said, "it's quite an honor. There's only about a hundred alumni altogether."

"Are you two members of the College?" Crowbar asked.

"We're founding members," Trigant said, glancing at Larsen. "We don't wear the white alb, though, since our duties are usually elsewhere."

"Well, whatever," Coeur said, "as long as you keep the genie in the bottle."

"We endeavor," Trigant said. "So far, in 40 years of operation, we have not had a serious malfunction in the antimatter plant."

"Well, I guess that follows," Bender said, "since you're still here."

Coeur smiled, appreciating the humor.

"Well, you know what I'm curious about," Crowbar said, "is the scale of the reactor. On the map, it looks like its very small, about 20 or 30 meters across."

"Actually," Larsen said, "the reactor cavern is 23 meters across. You shouldn't let the scale fool you, though--the reactor is actually 21 meters wide and 67 meters high."

"Oh."

"Well, not to be a pessimist," Coeur said, "but what if you did have an accident, like some kind of containment breach. Do you have some sort of plan to evacuate the city?"

"No," Larsen said, "there's no need. Although you can't see it there in the plan, there's a tunnel 22 meters wide going all the way up to the surface. If there were a disaster--Heaven forbid--HEPlAR thrusters would fire the whole reactor into space."

"Neat."

"Yes," Larsen said, glancing at Trigant. "That was my idea."

"And a very good one, too," Trigant conceded. "I know I sleep better at night."

"Still," Coeur said, "it must be a little frightening, living on top of a bomb like that. How much antimatter do you have in there?"

"I'm afraid that's classified," Trigant said. "I'm not allowed to say."

"Well, what about power output?" Crowbar asked. "Is that classified, too?"

"I'm afraid so," Trigant said. "I can tell you this much, though--the present reactor output is about five thousand megawatts, and that isn't even close to straining the system."

"Impressive," Coeur said, recognizing just as well as Crowbar that a Coalition fusion plant with that much *maximum* output would actually be larger in volume.

The obvious drawback of antimatter however, was the possibility of a catastrophic fuel detonation, and Crowbar--with his insatiable curiosity--made a few quick calculations on his comlink calculator while the others were talking.

"Well, how about that," Crowbar said.

"What?" Coeur asked.

"Oh, I was just doing a little figuring. Assuming there's at least--say--5 tonnes of fuel in the reactor, it could have an explosive yield in excess of a hundred thousand megatons."

"Sounds about right," Bender said.

"Yeah, that's quite a firecracker," Coeur said.

"Perhaps," Trigant interjected, "such an emphasis on the destructive potential of the power plant is inappropriate. I would prefer to concentrate on the reliability and efficiency of the system."

"Yes, of course," Coeur said, glancing at the clock on her comlink. "It looks like it's getting late, though. Maybe we should be getting on to Blue Sector."

"Yes, of course," Trigant said. "Dagmar, to *The Bucky Ball*."

"Right," Larsen said, turning back around to pilot the speeder again.

As the speeder lifted off, though, re-entering the thoroughfare traffic stream, Coeur's thoughts were not so much on the meeting ahead with Allison and Umeki as they were on the giant reactor just a few hundred meters behind to the east. The largest explosion Coeur had ever seen was a 60 megaton fusion blast during the Final War--devastating 10,000 square kilometers of the Solomani planet Agidda--but that was

over a thousand times smaller than the blast that might result from a containment breach on Godsarc.

The bottom line, Coeur thought, recalling the earlier hallucination in the council chamber, is that people here are used to living dangerously.

X O X O X

Another place that Coeur was interested in seeing was the SuSAG dig--where the sloop's science chief and a dozen odd mates were supposed to be at work--but Trigant put her off the notion earlier in the day. The only way down was very dangerous, through a narrow cleft of slippery rock, and at any rate the round trip time was at least two hours. The scientists were still connected to the city comnet, however, so Coeur finally put a call through to Smoker as the speeder maneuvered westward through the thoroughfare.

"Do you think Smoker will recognize me?" Coeur asked Bender, waiting for Smoker to answer his comlink.

"He should," Bender said. "I sent down your picture earlier."

"Good," Coeur said, reflecting on what she, herself, knew about the scientist. 42, Khugirii "Smoker" Ishimaga had been a professor of chemistry at the prestigious Zentrum Polytechnik on Oriflamme, with a wife and three children still living on the planet. It seemed to follow then, that if anyone had a motivation to get back to the Coalition, it was him.

"Ah," Smoker said a moment later, when the call finally went through, "you must be Lieutenant D' Esprit."

"Call me Red Sun," Coeur suggested, recognizing the man from his mission portrait--a dignified man with curly gray hair, a Vandyke beard, and a face full of dirt and grit. Apparently caught in the middle of his work, the scientist stood in a deeply-shadowed cavern with other people moving periodically behind him, working at the rock with picks and fusion torches.

"Only if you call me Smoker," he replied. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, Smoker, I was just calling to check in and see how you were doing. I understand you've made some progress on the SuSAG dig."

"Yes, you could say that. The whole plant was buried in a cave-in years ago, but we think we may be getting close to the factory floor. A few more weeks, and we'll certainly be into the laboratories."

"That long? Weeks?"

"Well, it was a big complex. Why, are we short on time?"

"Yeah, you could say that. If everything goes well, we could have your ship's jump drive repaired within the week."

"Well, that is a surprise," Smoker said. "Is Bender with you?"

"Right here," Bender said, jumping into the conversation from his own comlink.

"Is that correct, whatRed Sun said?"

"Yes, it is. We've got Jitters working on the programming right now."

"Well, that's unfortunate. I hate to leave a job half done."

"Well, surely," Trigant said, looking at Bender, "you don't have to take *all* your people back home when you leave. Couldn't you leave some behind to help with the digs?"

"I hadn't thought about that," Bender said. "I assumed we'd all leave together."

"Well, I think the doctor has a good idea," Smoker said, "and I volunteer to stay, if nobody else wants to."

Coeur barely concealed a frown.

"Well, let's just wait on that decision," Bender said. "I'd rather not make plans until we know for sure we can leave."

"Fair enough," Smoker said. "Don't forget the offer, though."

Bender nodded.

"Well, that's all I wanted, really," Coeur said, "to see how you were doing."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Red Sun. Perhaps in the coming days, you'll have a chance to visit us."

"I'd like that very much. In the meantime, though, we're on our way to a meeting, so I guess I ought to let you go."

"Very well," Smoker said. "Smoker out."

X O X O X

Curious as the conversation was--revealing a man in no particular hurry to get back to home and family--Coeur did not have a lot of time to reflect on it. Almost as soon as she shut off her comlink, Coeur looked up to see the main cavern ahead, and the enormous bulk of the Blue North tower soaring hundreds of meters overhead.

Larsen did not merely park outside the tower, though, but flew the speeder directly into the tower through a tunnel at the base, and into the central shaft of Blue North a moment later. Here, finally, Coeur saw what she could not see from the outside--that the paraboloid tower was actually hollow, with myriad apartment patios facing the central shaft; the view from these patios was not as dull as it might be, however,

for the central shaft was decorated with more of the city's ubiquitous hanging greenery, and several of the levels were clearly commercial, decorated with glowing holographic advertisements.

"*The Bucky Ball* is just ahead there," Larsen said, "in the Golden Lotus Pavilion."

"Sounds exotic," Crowbar said.

"No, actually it's just a mall."

And indeed, as the speeder approached the 97th floor of the tower--about three-quarters of the way to the top--the Arses saw that they were approaching an ordinary indoor shopping center. Very roughly, this was about the size of a city block on Aubaine, spread out in a ring around the central shaft, yet the mall was not so spacious that the speeder could simply fly in and park unassisted; instead, the city computer took over the speeder, tucking it behind a line of float chairs and flitters also entering the mall, and then guiding it into a parking space overlooking the core.

"You know, a thought occurs to me," Crowbar said, looking out at the luminescent advertisement in the core. "For all the technology you've got, you seem to have a lot of old-fashioned merchandising. Is there a reason why you don't deliver city services directly to the people?"

"Yes," Trigant said, "a very good one. It might be convenient to have the city services delivered directly to every house, but people aren't willing to live like that. What we've discovered is that people need to have places where they come together and socialize."

"Yeah, but a mall?"

"Well, we have parks and churches, too," Larsen said, turning around in her seat. "Private enterprise helps us cultivate a sense for business, though--which you'll have to admit will be important when we return to the celestine community."

"True enough," Coeur said. "So, are we there yet?"

"Yes," Trigant said. "The rest of the way is on foot."

"All right, then--Crowbar, stick with Dr. Larsen. I'll catch up with you later at the ship."

"Yes, sir," Crowbar said, scooting over as Trigant palmed the side door release. Trigant, Coeur and Bender then walked a few steps to escape the parking structure and entered the strangely perfect world of the commercial pavilion--quaint shops, manicured mini-parks, lift shafts and escalators up to the 96th floor and down to the 98th. Since the hour was moving rapidly toward local midnight, though--2000 hours--the walkways of the mall were mostly free of shoppers. Only a few men, women, and children were to be seen, all strolling peacefully along, and all wearing the same bucolic expression Coeur's mother used to call "the mall stare."

Indeed, Coeur found the atmosphere of the Golden Lotus Pavilion disturbingly similar to that of her childhood home on Terra. That place--the Phoenix Arcology--was little more than a mall grown out of all proportion, and Coeur hungered early in her life to escape that sterile place, with its boring people, kitschy art and soulless culture.

Oh, well, Coeur thought. At least they don't play Muzak here.

There was something else curious about the mall, though, apart from the blessed lack of background music. As she walked along with Bender and Trigant, Coeur saw that vaguely familiar symbols figured in much of the local artwork--in pendants worn by shoppers, in gallery window displays and holosculpture--wavy lines, arrows, and circles she was sure she'd seen somewhere before.

Then, suddenly, she remembered.

They're astrological symbols--from Terra!

But what the hell are they doing here?

Certainly that was a mystery; of all the Terran pseudosciences, astrology was certainly the most Terra-centric, purporting to draw a link between a person's character and the constellations in the sky at his birth. The constellations of the Terran solar system would not appear the same from any other system, though, so the appeal of the art was logically restricted to Terra.

In the Arkie artwork, though, there was a preference for one symbol above all the others--a horizontal line bisected by an upward-pointing arrow--and Coeur suspected this held the answer to the mystery. Finally, then, when Trigant paused below a massive sculpture in the shape of this symbol, Coeur gave in to her curiosity.

"Just double-checking the route to *The Bucky Ball*," Trigant said, looking down at her comlink. "It should be right around the corner."

"Well, before we go," Coeur said, "tell me something. Isn't that statue back there some kind of astrological sign?"

"Indeed it is," Trigant said, looking up from her comlink. "The sign of Sagittarius, the archer."

Coeur nodded.

"I only ask," Coeur said, "because I used to see signs like that back on Terra, when I was a kid. I didn't realize they were popular anywhere else."

Trigant appeared surprised.

"I didn't know you were a Terran."

Coeur shrugged, glancing at Bender.

"Is it important?" Coeur asked.

"No, it's just unusual," Trigant explained, "meeting someone from the actual human homeworld. I once hoped to visit Terra, but I never had a chance."

"Well," Coeur said, "you probably know as much about the place as I do. I haven't been there since 1113."

"1113?" Trigant said. "My God, you must be older than me."

Coeur shrugged, declining to comment.

"And that must also mean," Trigant continued, "that Terra isn't part of the Coalition. That's a pity."

"Well, you never know," Coeur said. "By the time we normalize relations, Terra might be part of the Coalition. You were telling me about astrology, though; how did it get here?"

"Well, that's a good question," Trigant said, "but it is a bit complicated. In a nutshell, the first colonists from Terra brought astrology with them, but they didn't allow it to fade away like colonists did on other planets. Fortune tellers developed the idea that humans kept a Terran biological rhythm no matter where they were born, so any human--even a Vilani--could have a Terran horoscope.

"Which, I will give you, is pretty silly. There is one astrological idea that I'm fond of though--the idea of the Great Year."

"Well, I know what a Great Year is," Coeur said, "but I don't know what it has to do with astrology."

"Actually, it's quite central to astrology. As you know, a Great Year is about 26,000 years--approximately the time it takes for Terra to precess around its axis. Well, anyway, as Terra precesses around its axis, the location of the vernal equinox also moves, spending about 2000 years in each sign of the zodiac, and--if you believe in astrology--the human race takes on the qualities of that sign during that period."

"I see," Coeur said. "So what age are we in now?"

"The Age of Capricorn," Trigant said, "but only for a few more years."

"Then what age will it be?"

"No prizes," Trigant said, looking up at the statue.

"Oh, I see--the Age of Sagittarius."

"Yes, indeed. Now, of course, I don't believe in astrology, but I do like the values of the Sagittarian Movement. In keeping with the spirit of the sign, the Sagittarians say

we should prepare for the new age by dedicating ourselves to spiritual and social progress."

"Yeah, right," Bender muttered.

"I take it," Trigrant said, "you don't believe in astrology either."

"No, ma'am. I thought it was bad enough the Coalition named its months after the signs of the zodiac."

"You don't say," Trigrant said. "Well, it is a pretty silly superstition, but it does serve the good of the community. We do want a forward-looking society, and that's also what the Sagittarians want."

Trigrant then paused a moment, with a grin growing wide on her face.

"It's kind of funny, though," she said, "how accurate astrology has been in the past. 4000 years ago, that was the Age of Aquarius--an intellectual, inventive period--then came the Age of Capricorn--which was more of a stuffy, bland period."

"Oh," Coeur said, "you mean the Third Imperium."

"Yes, quite."

Coeur chuckled.

"Not to belabor the subject," Trigrant said to Coeur, "but I'm curious about something. Since you were actually born on Terra, do you find your personality resembles your birth sign?"

"Well, I don't know. What sign do you think I am?"

"Hm," Trigrant said, thoughtfully, "that's hard to say, since I'm not a professional astrologer. Based on what I know about you, though, you seem to be a fairly focused woman, businesslike, to the point--I'd say a Taurus."

"Good guess," Coeur said, surprised.

"Was I right?"

"Yes," Coeur confirmed. "I was born the 9th of May, 5615. Not that I care much for the bull as a sign myself."

Bender rolled his eyes, unimpressed.

"Well, I'm sure it's just a coincidence," Trigrant said. "I usually don't guess those right. I suppose we'd better on to *The Bucky Ball*, though, before our friends close up."

"Yes, lead on," Coeur said, falling in behind her companions. True enough, as Trigant had said, the tavern was just around the corner, and they found the curious building was still lit and open when they got there.

True to its name, *The Bucky Ball* looked like nothing so much as a Buckminster Fullerine--basically a 10 meter high geodesic dome with a surface of interlocking hexagons. It was, therefore, one of the strangest-looking bars Coeur had ever seen, but that was probably by design, to attract attention. At any rate, it was certainly an eye-grabber, peched on the edge of the Golden Lotus Pavilion and open to the sky outside the tower, still bright despite the lateness of the hour.

"Nice view," Bender said.

"Yeah," Coeur agreed. "They must pay extra for that."

"Yes, it's expensive property," Trigant said, stepping through the sliding double doors of the entryway. "Money isn't hard to make here, though, if you need it."

"What do you mean?" Coeur asked, simultaneously studying the bar--a single room with a patio overlooking the city, various tables, and a bar being wiped down by Allison and Umeki.

"What I mean," Trigant said, "is the city gives entrepreneurs all the help they need--loans, marketing advice, or whatever is needed."

"And that actually works?"

"Pretty well," Trigant said, with a shrug.

"Well, I'll give you this much," Bender said to Trigant. "I've walked around these malls some, and I've never seen an empty lot."

A regular paradise, Coeur thought.

So why aren't people more excited about it? Is it all so planned, nobody cares about anything?

Coeur put the thought aside, though, as Umeki nodded to her, and moved away from the bar with Allison.

"I hope you don't mind," Coeur said, shaking hands with both portly men. "I brought along Lt. Antonov as well."

"Not at all," Umeki said, also shaking hands with Bender. "I think we've met before."

"You didn't mention Dr. Trigant, though," Allison said, turning to the doctor. "Are you with the officers?"

"Tangentially," Trigant replied, shaking Allison's hand, then discreetly wiping her hand on her vest. "I've been showing our guests around the city, but I'll go ahead and wait outside now."

"Well, you don't have to do that," Umeki said. "Why don't you let Jack make you a drink while I talk to the officers on the patio."

"Well, I wouldn't want to be an inconvenience."

"Please," Allison said, "we insist."

"Well, if you put it that way," Trigant said, "it has been a while since I had a Bloody Nova..."

"Say no more," Allison said, gesturing toward the bar with his hand.

"Well, maybe just one," Trigant replied, accepting the offer.

"And you," Umeki said to the Arses, "come with me."

Following Umeki, Coeur and Bender crossed the floor of the dome and stepped out through clear, sliding doors to a breathtaking panorama. Beyond *The Bucky Ball's* patio, sprinkled with chairs and tables, lay the terraces of Green Sector, hundreds of meters below the pavilion. Since the hour was late, airborne traffic was not as heavy as it had been earlier, but even so the few float chairs and flitters still about gave a sense of scale to the giant arcology--gnatlike beside the Blue Sector towers and the overarching roof of the city cavern.

Focusing on the table Umeki led them to, however, Coeur noted that it contained a feature common in many high-tech restaurants of yore--an automatic drink server with a robot arm right in the middle of the table. Probably supplied by a liquor magazine in the central leg, this was yet another gadget reminding Coeur of the Last Imperium.

"You can help yourself to a drink if you want," Umeki said, sitting down with the Arses.

"Thanks," Coeur said, "maybe later. You said you could tell us something about Captain Redwood, Mr. Umeki."

"Call me Zeke," Umeki said, helping himself to a shot of whiskey from the robot. "I never was anything but a private in the army."

"Sorry," Coeur said. "Zeke."

"Well, actually," Umeki said, "I don't know much--Jack and I were just troopers, you know--nobody ever told us anything. I'll tell you this, though--the skipper wasn't crazy, like they say around here."

"Who says that?" Bender asked.

"Everyone who didn't know her. She was a good officer, if you knew her."

"All the same," Coeur said, "she did fly off and leave you here. Do you have any clue why she did that?"

"Well, I'll tell you this," Umeki said, "toward the end, Redwood was pretty tense. It's not like she was crazy, though--she was just under a lot of pressure."

"From your government?"

"Right. Things were getting tight back home, and we needed to get as much hardware as we could to support the war effort."

"Well, that makes sense," Coeur said, "but I've still got a problem. A few days back I found your captain's log, and it stops a few days after you got here."

"You found the log? Where?"

"In your ship, with your captain. She's dead, though, and the ship is adrift in the outer system. Now what is that happened here that made her stop recording logs?"

Umeki shook his head.

"I don't know. She did argue with the XO a couple of times, after we landed, and then she started asking people if they saw anything odd around the city."

"Like what?"

"Like dragons, and serpents, and stuff like that. We all thought she was kidding, until she took off with the ship."

"Well," Bender said, "how did she get everybody off the ship?"

"Actually, we didn't realize it wasn't a ruse at the time. Jack and I were back in our quarters, with the other Marines, when the order came to abandon ship. Our XO told us one of our nuclear missiles was about to explode, and we all cleared the spaceport so we wouldn't get vaporized."

"Then she took off with the ship?" Coeur asked.

"That's right. We all figured she was trying to get the ship clear of the city--so the fireball wouldn't hurt anyone--but the city people said their sensors never saw an explosion."

Before Coeur could level another question at Umeki, though, the doors to the patio opened and the other bartender stepped out.

"So," Allison said, "spreading vicious rumours about the captain, are we?"

"Yeah, right," Umeki said, as Allison sat down at the table. "I was just telling them how the skipper took off with the ship."

"Oh," Allison said, drawing a drink for himself.

"Well, it's certainly odd," Coeur said, "but this has been helpful. At least I know the captain wasn't a lunatic."

"How you figure?" Bender asked.

"Well, she had to have some self-control," Coeur replied, "or she couldn't have got the crew off the ship."

"Oh, right."

Before Coeur could make another comment, though, her comlink beeped for attention.

"Red Sun," she said, lifting the comlink on her wrist.

"Skipper, Gyro here. I hope I'm not interrupting anything, but something's here you ought to know about."

"Is it confidential?" Coeur asked, looking around at her companions.

"Probably. You'd better see for yourself."

"Very well," Coeur said. "I'll be right up."

"*Hornet* out."

"Well, gentlemen," Coeur said, scooting her chair back from the table, "I certainly want to thank you for your time. I can't imagine it's anything you like to remember."

Umeki shrugged.

"That's okay," he said. "Just don't sell the captain short--she wasn't crazy."

"Or any more crazy than the next person," Allison added.

Coeur could only smile at that, though, again recalling the hallucination.

Somehow, she thought, standing up from the table with Bender, *I don't doubt it.*

CHAPTER FOUR

"Leaving already?" Trigant asked, looking up from the remains of her Bloody Nova.

"Yes," Coeur said, standing beside the doctor's barstool with Bender. "My XO needs me back at the ship."

"But you can always come back later," Umeki said to the Arses, "if you've got any more questions."

"Or just for a drink," Allison added.

"Thanks," Coeur said. "I'll keep it in mind."

Trigant, meanwhile, slid clumsily off her barstool, nearly stumbling as she regained her balance. The loopiness of the doctor actually reassured Coeur, though, who was glad to see the staid, imperturbable doctor was human like everybody else.

"The main elevator shaft is this way," Trigant said, leading the Arses toward the front door. "Here, I'll show you."

The trio then ambled back out onto the floor of the pavilion, wandered up a wrong street, turned around in confusion and then ran into an amiable blue-uniformed city policeman--amiable despite the brutal aspect of his blue ceramic body armor.

"Can I help you, Dr. Trigant?"

"Yes, Officer. We're looking for some elevators."

"Right this way," the policeman said, pointing opposite the way they'd come. "I hope you're not planning on driving anywhere, though, later."

"No, sir, Officer. It's strictly off to bed for me."

"Good idea. Have a good evening, Doctor."

"Thank you, sir," Trigant said, following the officer's direction and leading the Arses to a battery of four elevators adjacent to the core of the tower.

"You know, I've always wondered," Bender said, peering over the protective railing at the edge of the shaft. "What would happen if somebody fell into the shaft there?"

"We'd catch him," Trigant replied, matter-of-factly.

"Excuse me?" Coeur said.

"Contragravity," Trigant said. "There's contragravity fields all around the upper stories."

"Oh," Bender said, "I should have guessed."

"Yeah," Coeur said, "we had a system like that in the city where I grew up. What's to keep people from jumping off the towers, though, Dr. Trigant? Back on Terra, people used to bungee off arcologies all the time."

Disbelieving, Trigant levelled a stare at Coeur.

"Lt. D' Esprit," she said, earnestly, "the Arkies are not a bunch of hooligans."

"No," Coeur said, "I don't suppose they are."

"It does sound kind of fun, though," Trigant said, stepping up to the nearest elevator. "I'll have to look into the safety aspect."

"Well, I wasn't suggesting you *should* do that," Coeur said, stepping into the elevator with Bender and Trigant.

"We'll see whether it's practical or not," Trigant said, leaning close to one of the elevator control panels. "Black Sector."

Registering the command, the elevator began starting upward almost instantly, though it gave no hint whatever of acceleration. The ride was over quickly, though-- within a couple of seconds--punctuated by the opening of the elevator doors, and the inrush of heat from the surface.

"That was quick," Coeur said, looking out at her *Hornet* and *Cymbeline Victrix*

"Yes," Trigant said, "I hate slow elevators. Well, anyway, good night, Lieutenant... and Lieutenant."

"Wait a minute," Coeur said, "before you go, who should I contract about seeing the scout ship tomorrow?"

"Oh, go ahead and call me," Trigant said, "over the comlink."

"Right," Coeur said, "thanks."

She then stepped out of the cab with Bender, and let the doors close on Trigant.

"Think she'll be all right?" Coeur asked Bender, as they started back toward their ships.

"She should be. The elevators go right up to your door."

"Convenient."

Bender shrugged.

"Yeah, I suppose," he said, pausing as they came up to a point halfway between their ships. "So, would you like me to come along when you see the scout ship tomorrow?"

"Sure. Have you had a chance to see her yet?"

"No. I'm curious about her, though, now that you've told me about the liner."

"You big on mysteries, Bender?"

"No, I hate them."

Coeur smiled.

"How about 1400 hours, then?"

"Sounds fine. I'll wait for you to call me."

Coeur nodded, then turned away to head for her own ship's yawning cargo ramp. The all-weather tarp, she noted, was not yet in place, but Gyro and Deep Six were discussing something on the bridge, and Coeur felt a sense of coming home as she closed on the vessel. Only for a moment, then, did she pause at the threshold of the ramp to look back at Bender, walking away in the opposite direction.

X O X O X

It was not Bender, however, that Coeur saw beneath the all-weather tarp of *Cymbeline Victrix*--it was Darien Hayes.

Ambling along nonchalantly, Darien didn't seem to be aware that Coeur was looking at him for a moment, but then he stopped--suddenly--and turned back with a smile of recognition. Easily fifty meters away, he was too far away to hail without a yell, but he seemed to appreciate Coeur's confusion and--after a pensive moment--signed a simple message to her.

"Don't worry," he said, with Anslan gestures, "*you are not alone.*"

Whereupon he then turned away and continued on the original path of Bender, right on up the lowered cargo ramp of *Cymbeline Victrix*.

X O X O X

Ten seconds later, a grim and deliberate Coeur strode up the cargo ramp of *Hornet* and into the company of Drop Kick, Newton, Serene and Vega--clustered around a load of cargo with chemical sniffers and metal detectors. Despite the odd aspect of this scene, however, Coeur did not stop to talk with her crew, but rather proceeded directly to the bridge.

There, Gyro stood from the pilot's chair, expecting to offer Coeur a briefing, but Coeur was intent on a matter of her own.

"Hold on a minute, Gyro," she said. "Sixer, I want you to pull the last five minutes of the short-range EMS track."

"You mean, surveillance of the spaceport?"

"Right."

"Very well," Deep Six said, playing his tentacles across the sensor control panel. "I'm not quite certain what you expect to see, though."

"Maybe nothing," Coeur said. "Just cue up the data from the time that Bender and I stepped off the elevator."

"What *do* you expect to find, Captain?" Gyro said.

"I'll tell you if I find it," Coeur replied, bending over Deep Six to watch the data as he pulled it up. Thanks to the foresight of the ship's designer, EMS turrets dotted the hull of the ship, and the walk of Coeur and Bender away from the elevator was therefore recorded in visible light. Clearly recognizable as Coeur and Bender, the pair walked away from the elevator, talked a bit, then split up and went to their separate vessels.

"Hm," Coeur grumbled.

"What is it, sir?" Deep Six asked. "Did you see something out there?"

"No, I guess not," Coeur said, as the playback loop repeated. "Go ahead and shut that off."

"Sir," Gyro suggested, "if you'd like, we could heighten security--confine the prisoner to quarters and raise the cargo ramp."

"No, that's all right," Coeur said, shaking her head. "It's nothing--a trick of the light, probably. Anyway, you said you had something to tell me."

"Oh, yes," Gyro said, reaching into a pocket of her lavender jacket to pull out a simple yellow envelope. "We found this in the cargo hold about an hour ago, after a search of the area."

"What possessed you to search the cargo hold?" Coeur asked.

"A recommendation," Gyro answered, "from Serene."

Letting this go for a moment, Coeur took up the envelope for a closer look. On the face of it, it was clearly an ordinary envelope, with a back flap sealed by molecular adhesive, but it did bear a boldly printed ink inscription on the front:

FOR COMMANDER, STARSHIP HORNET

"Must be for me," Coeur said. "Any idea how it got here?"

"Some idea," Gyro said. "Serene said she got a sense that somebody left something for you in the cargo hold, and we confirmed that with a check of the hold security camera. Sixer, play track one for the skipper."

"Aye, sir," Deep Six said.

A moment later, a frozen image of *Hornet's* cargo hold appeared on the Schalli's main sensor screen, together with a time tag indicating it was three and a half hours old. There in the frame, Coeur noted, were a number of individuals including Drop Kick, Serene, Vega, and three men from the Godsarc BIA, in a seemingly routine scene; a moment later, though, Deep Six zoomed in on one particular Arkie--a graying man with a Sagittarius pendant--slipping a yellow envelope under an offloaded payload pallet.

"Who's that?" Coeur asked.

"Justin Walder," Gyro said, "in charge of the city service party. There's no way to tell if that's an alias, or not, though, since we aren't online with the comnet."

Coeur made a chagrined smirk.

"Well, he must be somebody," Coeur said, "or he wouldn't be assigned to a government party. Did you say Serene got a scan of him?"

"Not exactly, sir. Serene said she tried to scan him, but he had a shield and she couldn't get very much--just the clue about the envelope."

"What do you mean--he's a telepath?"

"Apparently, sir. Perhaps you should ask her yourself."

Coeur nodded.

"Right. First things first, though--have you opened the envelope?"

"Yes, sir, to check for explosives or hazardous agents. We didn't try to read the letter inside, though, sir--we figured you'd rather do that yourself."

"Thanks," Coeur said, reopening the seal on the envelope and carefully pulling out a folded sheet of paper. This, like the envelope, was unremarkable in and of itself, but handwritten script packed the paper, front and back, comprising what appeared to be a poem in six stanzas. Whatever it was, though, a look at the first stanza revealed that it certainly wasn't Anglic:

"Daleg!" gen dirгаа, zun lukidda khinam khiira,

"Ir kushkaraa surgim ka kiguunum shurnumgada gur."

Shar dishunam ken khiirduun dan khiira

Shar nagur um kuurgusha elad dishunam.

Binardan shurnam shiigamsara ruuga shagam sara,

Biimaash idakum udin khaga siirgim ashkurgama...

"It's Old High Vilani," Coeur said.

"Yes," Gyro said, "I didn't think it was Anglic."

"Don't you speak Vilani, sir?" Deep Six asked.

"Yeah," Coeur said, "a little. This is an older language, though, with different words and grammar."

"Does it make any sense at all?" Gyro asked.

"Not to me," Coeur admitted. "It looks like it might have something to do with an ocean, or a shore, but I can't tell for certain. What we need is an OHV translator."

"Do we even have one of those?"

"As a matter of fact," Deep Six said, scanning through the ship's data archive, "yes. There is an OHV-to-Anglic translator stored in the main computer."

"That's what we need," Coeur said. "Good. I'll go talk with Serene, then run the translator in my starerom."

"Very well," Gyro said.

"One more thing, though," Coeur said. "Does anyone off this ship know about the letter?"

"No, sir."

"Good, then let's keep it that way. Unless you hear otherwise from me, you don't know anything about this letter, who left it, or what it means."

"It's that important, sir?"

"We shall see," Coeur said, returning the poem to its envelope, then tucking the envelope into a pocket on the right leg of her body sleeve. "Anyway, I want to know what the hell this is before we do anything else."

X O X O X

Bypassed by Coeur on her way into the ship, Drop Kick, Newton, Serene and Vega finally intercepted her on her way back out of the bridge.

"Captain," Drop Kick said, "did Gyro tell you what happened?"

"Basically," Coeur replied. "I assume you guys didn't find anything explosive in the cargo hold."

"That's correct, sir. Whatever this guy wanted, it wasn't violent."

"That may be a leap of faith, Sergeant," Newton observed. "We have no idea what the purpose of the envelope was."

"But Red Sun might," Vega noted. "You have a chance to look at it, Red?"

Coeur nodded.

"So what's it say?"

"I have no idea. I'm going to try to find out, though. Serene, would you come with me?"

"Oh, certainly."

"The rest of you," Coeur said, turning to open her stateroom door, "get some rest. This is an odd incident, but I don't want it to distract us. I still want that tarp put up tomorrow, and I want at least half the cargo transferred to the sloop in the morning."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said.

"And," Coeur added, "I don't want anyone talking about the envelope to anyone off the ship. Not until we know more about it."

Drop Kick and Vega nodded assent.

"Indeed," Newton said.

"That is all. Carry on."

The group then broke up, and Coeur guided Serene into her stateroom.

"Somehow," Serene said, accepting Coeur's offer of a seat beside her at her desk, "I get the feeling you've had a bad day."

"No, more of a strange day," Coeur said, "and this is the strangest part."

"How strange has it been?"

"I don't know if I want to tell you. You might think I was crazy."

"Well, maybe. You might remember, though, Captain Redwood stopped recording her log for the same reason."

Coeur nodded.

"Well, for one thing, there's the way the people are here. Bender seems like a nice guy, but almost all of his crew, and all the people in the city are really mellow--not too happy, not too sad--just mellow."

"Any idea why?"

"No. I did have a couple of hallucinations, though--one in the council chamber, and one after the tour. Both times, I saw Bender change into Darien."

"That's unusual," Serene conceded.

"Yeah," Coeur said, "nothing like that has ever happened before."

"How did it make you feel?" Serene asked. "Were you frightened?"

"No, not really."

"What about the actual event? Did you see lights, or a glow around Darien, or anything like that?"

"No. Should I have?"

"I don't know. I'm just trying to think of what could make you have a hallucination like that."

"Well, you're a telepath. Could you make somebody see something like that?"

"Myself? No. It's a possibility, though, since that Mr. Walder was obviously a telepath."

"Speaking of him, Gyro said you tried to scan him."

"I did," Serene confirmed, "but he had a shield."

"That's odd. The city council said they didn't have any psi training here."

"Well, they might not. It's certainly possible that the guy was self-trained."

"Or that he was trained, and the government does not want us to know about it."

"Heaven forbid," Serene said. "A government keeping secrets."

"Well, the council did mention something about a stim field--some kind of alpha wave generator the people have in their homes. Could that produce effects like telepathy?"

Serene shrugged.

"I have no idea," Serene said. "I never even heard of such a thing."

"Well, how about this," Coeur said. "Assuming Walder doesn't visit us again, could you find him in the city, using your power?"

Serene stared at Coeur, incredulous.

"A clairvoyant search of an entire city? Gaia, that could take weeks."

"I don't have weeks."

"Well," Serene said, "I could narrow it down if I had the city comnet. This guy might have used his real name, or left some other clue to his real identity."

Coeur nodded.

"Right. I plan to get a connection to the infonet tomorrow. Assuming that doesn't pan out, though, what will you need to search the city?"

"Rest," Serene said, "and a lot of peace and quiet. To be honest, I'd have to enter a deep trance, and I wouldn't be much use around the ship."

"Forget your other duties," Coeur said. "Find the guy."

"Yes, sir," Serene said. "Anything else?"

Coeur shook her head.

"No. You might want to get that rest, though, so you're fresh for tomorrow."

"Thanks," Serene said, standing up, "I'll need it."

Serene then departed, and Coeur--sustaining her patience no longer--slipped the poem out of her pocket, then placed it under the image scanner of her computer, and pulled up the OHV-to-Anglic program.

X O X O X

Although the computer system of *Hornet* was not self-aware, it was very complex, and sometimes appeared to be almost capable of sentient thought. After scanning and digitizing Walder's poem, for instance, and running the text through the OHV translator, the computer offered Coeur two very different choices for an Anglic translation.

One was a literal translation, simply substituting concept for concept. Searching through other databases, though, the computer had also found a close match for the meaning and syntax of the passage with an ancient Anglic text already stored in the library data.

Trusting to her intuition, Coeur went with the latter.

The decision would be providential.

RCS HORNET LIBRARY DATA:

ANGLIC LITERATURE DATABASE

ITEM: "The Lotos-Eaters"

PUBLICATION DATE: -2685 Imperial

AUTHOR: Alfred, Lord Tennyson

TEXT FOLLOWS:

"Courage!" he said, and pointed toward the land,

"This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon."

In the afternoon they came unto a land

In which it seeméd always afternoon.

All round the coast the languid air did swoon,

Breathing like one that hath a weary dream...

...A land where all things always seemed the same!

And round about the keel with faces pale...

The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.

Branches they bore of that enchanted stem,

Laden with flower and fruit, whereof they gave

To each, but whoso did receive of them

And taste, to him the gushing of the wave

Far far away did seem to mourn and rave

On alien shores; and if his fellow spake,

His voice was thin, as voices from the grave;

And deep-asleep he seemed, yet all awake,

And music in his ears his beating heart did make.

They sat them down upon the yellow sand,

Between the sun and moon upon the shore;

And sweet it was to dream of fatherland,

*Of child, and wife, and slave; but evermore
Most weary seemed the sea, weary the oar,
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam.
Then someone said, "We will return no more;"
An all at once they sang, "Our island home
Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam..."
Hateful is the dark-blue sky,
Vaulted o'er the dark-blue sea.
Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labor be?
Let us alone. Time driveth onward fast
And in a little while our lips are dumb.
Let us alone. What is it that will last?
All things are taken from us, and become
Portions and parcels of the dreadful past.
Let us alone. What pleasure can we have
To war with evil? Is there any peace
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?
All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence--ripen, fall and cease:
Give us long rest or death, dark death or dreamful ease...
The Lotos blooms below the barren peak,
The Lotos blows by every winding creek;
All day the wind breathes low with mellow tone;
Through every hollow cave and alley lone*

Round and round the spicy downs the yellow Lotos-dust is blown...

Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,

In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined

On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind...

Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore

Than labor in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;

O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.

TEXT ENDS

My God, Coeur thought, where the hell did this come from?

Well, I know that, it came from Justin Walder. But is it some kind of threat, or a warning?

And why deliver it this way? I mean, if it weren't for the translation program, I still wouldn't have any idea what it meant.

God, this is one strange planet.

Returning her attention to the screen, Coeur noticed numerous ellipses in the text--places where dots showed text removed from the original poem. The implication of this was clear--that Walder picked the words he chose to give a very particular connotation.

Quite apart from their obvious meaning, though, the words might have a special connotation unique to Godsarc. Bearing that in mind, then, Coeur decided it wouldn't be such a bad idea to have the ship link up to the comnet now, instead of in the morning.

"Bridge," she said, speaking into the commo panel next to the computer.

"Deep Six here."

"Sixer, we need that comnet link after all. See if you can arrange it."

"Yes, sir. Stand by."

Sitting back in her chair, Coeur decided to pass the time waiting for the link by comparing the full text of the "The Lotos-Eaters" with the emended version.

Interesting, Coeur thought, noting that the original was over three times as long as the version from Walder. *None of the Odyssey, and all of the lazy stupor.*

Before she could carry the study too far, though, Deep Six came through with word that the connection was complete.

"Sir," Deep Six said, "we are linked to the comnet."

"Thank you, Sixer. Red Sun out."

Coeur then shut off the display of the poem, and--switching back to the main computer directory--saw that the comnet city archive was now available. Available, too, was some helpful advice on how to use the comnet, but Coeur had gained enough experience during the day to go directly to the subject of immediate interest.

"Comnet," she said, speaking into the commo panel, "find and list references to: Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Justin Walder."

SEARCHING, the Comnet screen replied. Then, a moment later, it returned the following responses:

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON: 522,969 REFERENCES

WALDER, JUSTIN: NO REFERENCES

Not surprising, Coeur thought.

"Next search," she said. "Find all references to the poem 'The Lotos-Eaters'."

SEARCHING, the comnet replied.

NO REFERENCES

"At all?" Coeur asked.

NO REFERENCES

"All right, fine," Coeur said, thinking of the only other Tennyson work she could. "Find all references to: 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'."

SEARCHING

4,689 REFERENCES

Well, how about that.

Although Coeur was hardly a scholar--it seemed more than a little curious that a poem stored in the limited library data of her own ship should be altogether absent from the much larger archive of Godsarc, a city dedicated to the pursuit and preservation of knowledge.

Unless there is a file for the poem, and for Walder, out of public access.

Admittedly, absent further evidence, that was a pretty big leap to make. If something as trivial as a poem was left out of the database, though, there was no telling what else might be missing, and she tested that with one last question.

"Comnet, one more search. Find and list all dictionaries and translation programs for Old High Vilani."

SEARCHING

NO REFERENCES

"No kidding," Coeur said. "Well, that's all. Computer off."

The computer replied by shutting down all its active directories, then shut itself off as well. Even as Coeur leaned back in her seat, however, and contemplated getting a cup of coffee from the autogalley, the commo panel beeped for attention.

"Red Sun," she answered.

"Captain, it's Deep Six. Did you get what you needed?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. I should ask you, though--is Crowbar expected to stay in the city?"

"What do you mean?" Coeur asked. "Isn't he on board?"

"No, sir."

Oh, fikk, Coeur thought, deliberately maintaining her calm.

"All right, thanks. I'll handle it."

"Very good, sir. Deep Six out."

Grumbling in her throat, Coeur then reactivated her computer Comnet link, and brought up the communications menu.

"Comnet, get me Glaive Arkwright."

STAND BY, the Comnet screen replied. COMLINK NOT RESPONDING

"What do you mean it's not responding? Why not?"

COMLINK IS DEACTIVATED, the comnet replied.

"Fikk!" Coeur swore. "Where is it? Where is the comlink?"

CITY POWER REACTOR, MAIN CONTROL LEVEL

"Can you reactivate it?"

NEGATIVE. REACTIVATION REQUIRES EMERGENCY OVERRIDE

"Look, friend, this *is* an emergency. Or it's damn well gonna be if you don't connect me to the comlink."

Gifted, apparently, with some degree of artificial intelligence, the comnet reevaluated its response.

STAND BY. REACTIVATING CONTACT

The comnet then linked Coeur up to Crowbar's comlink, and gave a video image of the person answering the call as well. The person was not Crowbar, however, but a youthful blonde man in a white jumpsuit.

"Hello?" the man said.

"Yeah, this is Captain D' Esprit from the starship *Hornet*. I was trying to reach one of my crewmen, but I guess he isn't there."

"Oh, you mean the engineer?"

"Yes, Lt. Arkwright. You know where he is?"

"Well, maybe. Dr. Larsen came down here earlier to show your man the reactor, but then his comlink went dead and they left. I think he was trying to call you, in fact, but the comlink was busted, and they went off to get another one."

"That's odd--it seems to work now."

"Yes, that is odd. They're usually pretty reliable."

"Well, thanks anyway," Coeur said, shutting off the connection, and switching to another address.

"Comnet, connect me with Dr. Dagmar Larsen."

This, happily, was more successful, though it was not the doctor's comlink--but the vidphone in her apartment--that Coeur reached.

Tending as the hour was toward midnight, Coeur wasn't surprised to see the apartment unlighted, but ambient light from the sun--refracted through polarized windows--gave a rosy hue to the cozy dwelling, and enough illumination to let Coeur see that Dr. Larsen had transferred out of her suit and into a red satin robe.

"Captain D' Esprit," Larsen said, "I was just about to call you."

"You don't say."

"Yes," Larsen said, looking over her shoulder briefly, then back at Coeur. "I know it was probably irresponsible of me, but after we left you at the pavilion, I let Glaive talk me into showing him the reactor, and that's why he didn't come back to your ship. After his comlink gave out, I brought him here to get another one, and that's where he is now."

"What, did you have to build him another one?"

"No," Larsen said, "but Glaive got a little dizzy after we got here, and I suggested he might want to lie down for a bit. Now he's nodded right off, and that's why I was going to call you--to suggest he might as well stay here."

"Well, that's very nice of you to offer. You're sure he's all right?"

"Oh yes. I'm sure it wasn't anything serious."

Coeur forced a pleasant smile.

"Well, that's good, as long as he's all right."

"I just hope I didn't get him in trouble," Larsen said, earnestly, "for not reporting in."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm just glad to hear he's safe."

"You're very understanding. As soon as he's up, I'll take him right back to your ship."

"Thank you," Coeur said. "I'm glad to know he's in good hands. *Hornet out.*"

Coeur then shut off the line, and let her smile contort to a wicked frown.

Well, Crowbar, she thought, I hope you are feeling better, cause when you get back to the ship I am so going to kill you.

She then heaved an exasperated sigh, stood up from her desk and went to bed.

X O X O X

Although Coeur expected to have some trouble getting to sleep, she actually fell asleep almost as soon as she hit her bunk. Her sleep was not restful, however, for the night was punctuated by strange and vivid dreams, and she recorded these, along with the events of the previous day, the next morning.

"Personal log, 9-X-1202, 0645 hours:

A strange day. I've been debating with myself whether or not I should record what happened, but I am reminded of Captain Redwood and I think that would be a serious mistake.

First about Cymbeline Victrix. On the surface, she's in pretty good order, with backup computers we can load with new jump programs. The crew is less than enthusiastic

about being rescued, though. Like the Arkies, the people of Godsarc, the crewmembers are strangely passive and self-content, and I fear that some force may have this place enthralled. Twice, I've seen visions of my dead friend Darien, and I now have before me a copy of the poem "The Lotos-Eaters" in Old High Vilani, left on the ship by someone going a long way to get my attention.

Even more disturbing, though, were the dreams I had last night--two of which I remember in detail.

In the first, I was flying through open space outside the ship, but then I felt drawn to the Hiver workshop, where I found Physic with Scissor, our last Hiver technical advisor. Of course, in reality, I was not with Scissor when he died of the Hiver plague--I was off with Vega escaping from Sauler--but here I saw his death in gory detail, with Physic attempting unsuccessful surgery, and Scissor oozing black fluid from the viral sores on his body. Physic then looked up, and said she hoped I was happy gallivanting around the sector with Vega.

Later, though, I had a very different dream. I was with Darien inside a huge hangar, but instead of being filled with ships, the hangar was full of light stands and holocameras on tripods, and the floor was littered with hundreds of fake rubber Hivers.

"So this is how you did it, huh?" Darien asked. "Wiped out all the Hivers on Ra?"

"Yes," I said, "we wanted to do it all with digital animation, but the producer thought our acting would be better if we had realistic props. See, the Hivers all have reservoirs full of black goo, and they kind of ooze and bleed when you hook them up to an air compressor."

"Well, they certainly look realistic. What's that awful smell, though?"

"Oh, that's rotting meat. We stuffed the Hivers full of it so they'd smell more like corpses."

"Isn't that kind of morbid?"

"Yes, but it does increase the realism."

We then walked off the soundstage and into the bright sunlight outside, so bright it obliterated all other details, though I did hear the rustling of palms, and water crashing on a beach in the distance.

What the dreams mean, exactly, I don't know. I know one thing, though--I've tried very hard to put the memory of Darien behind me, and it bothers me to see him popping up here again and again. Serene says she's never heard of a telepath making a person see things like that, but I have to wonder: what the hell can I trust around here?

X O X O X

The next morning, the first that *Hornet* spent on the surface of Vinooks, Coeur found herself the first in the autogalley--and glad for the solitude. A few minutes later, Serene came to join her, riding the elevator down from the loft, but Coeur was glad to have a little time to herself, collecting her thoughts over a plate of faux eggs and bacon.

"That isn't really bacon, is it?" Serene asked, sitting down at the table with a faux fruit cup.

"No," Coeur admitted, "but that isn't fruit, either."

"Seaweed?"

"Yeah, mostly."

"Oh, well, it's probably healthier anyway," Serene said. "So, you ever figure out what that poem was?"

"Yes," Coeur said, "it's part of 'The Lotos-Eaters'."

"Hm. Tennyson."

"Right. You familiar with it?"

"Oh, yes. A languid interlude in the *Odyssey*."

"That's the one. This version was edited, though, to emphasize the languid aspect."

"I see. Is the original available somewhere?"

"Yes, it's saved in the library data. Oh, and I should tell you, we're hooked up to the comnet now."

"Oh, good. Did you find any trace of Mr. Walder after we linked up to the comnet?"

"No."

Serene shrugged.

Oh well, she thought to Coeur, over the footsteps of other crewmembers coming to breakfast, *he's got to be out there somewhere. I'll find him.*

Coeur nodded, meanwhile watching the entry of Drop Kick through the elevator, and Physic, Newton and Deep Six through the rear hatch.

"Well, good morning everybody," Physic said, brightly.

"Hrm," Coeur grumbled.

"Hard night, Captain?"

"Hrm," Coeur grumbled again.

"Oh well," Physic said, falling in behind Drop Kick at the autogalley, "I sure slept well."

"Yeah, I did too," Drop Kick said, drawing his own tray of faux eggs and bacon. "And you know, it's funny, even this seaweed smells good."

"Yeah, it does, actually," Physic said, drawing a faux fruit cup.

"Curious," Newton said, obtaining its customary half-rotten kelp. "I sense no difference."

"Well, it's probably all subjective," Physic said, sitting down next to Coeur and Drop Kick. "I do know I had the most amazing dream last night, though, about swimming with dolphins and Schalli."

"Really," Deep Six said, rolling up to the table with a bowl of seaweed soup.

"Yes, it was very tranquil and serene."

"You know, come to think of it," Drop Kick said, "I had a dream like that, too. Snapshot and I had a big flying yacht, and we flew it all over Aubaine throwing credits at the poor people down below."

"How curious," Deep Six said. "I don't remember dreaming at all last night."

"Me neither," Serene said. "Everybody dreams, though, even Schalli and Hivers."

"Indeed," Newton said. "I often have a dream where I find myself wandering across the graph of an N-dimensional gaussian field equation."

"That's...different," Serene said.

"What about last night?" Physic asked.

"No," Newton said. "Last night I slept quite soundly."

"Unlike the captain, apparently," Physic said to Coeur. "You dream about anything last night?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," Coeur said.

"Oh, come on, you can tell us."

"I said," Coeur repeated, firmly, "it's none of your damn business, and I will thank you to leave it alone."

"Sorry," Physic said, recoiling from the response.

Almost as soon as Coeur had spoken, though, she she regretted what she said.

"Sorry," Coeur said, "I shouldn't have said that. I'm just concerned about Crowbar."

"Crowbar?" Phyc said. "Why?"

"Because he didn't come back to the ship last night. Dr. Larsen was supposed to bring him back this morning, but he isn't here yet."

"Dr. Larsen?" Phyc said. "You mean the busty chick from the city?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Were they engaged in sort of conference?" Newton asked.

Amused chuckles answered the question.

"I don't know," Coeur said. "He claimed he was sick, and had to stay in the city."

"Yeah, right," Drop Kick said.

"Oh, let's have some sympathy," Phyc said. "It's been a long time since he had any shore leave."

"And it'll be a while," Coeur said, "before he has any more. Shore leave is still unauthorized for everyone on the ship."

"Is that without restriction, Captain?" Newton asked. "I was going to ask if I might have permission to enter the city for the purpose of studying local research techniques."

"It can wait. Right now, I want you at the spaceport working on the sloop."

"Yes, Captain."

The lounge intercom then beeped, interrupting the conversation.

"Bridge to Red Sun," Gyro said.

"Red Sun," Coeur replied. "Go ahead."

"Skipper, I just picked up a message from the comnet. Crowbar is on his way back to the ship."

"Roger," Coeur said, standing up quickly from the table. "Red Sun out."

She then tossed her food tray back into the recycler and strode, without further comment, from the lounge.

X O X O X

A few seconds later, Coeur stood at the foot of the forward cargo ramp, looking up as a sleek blue speeder settled to the tarmac before her. The speeder's front and side hatches then opened, and two familiar individuals stepped out--a subdued Crowbar and Dagmar Larsen--the latter in a gray suit more conservative than the one she had worn the day before.

"Captain," Crowbar said, coming to attention and saluting.

"Lieutenant," Coeur replied.

"Captain," Larsen said, "I hope we haven't caused you any trouble."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Coeur said, somehow less perturbed by Larsen than she thought she would be. "We didn't do much work around the ship yesterday."

"Oh, that's good. I'll just leave you to go about your business then."

Coeur nodded, then took Crowbar by the arm and steered him briskly back up the ramp.

"All right, Mister," Coeur said, once she and Crowbar were in the empty cargo hold, "I want you to give me just one reason why I shouldn't bust your ass down to ensign and confine you to your quarters."

"Well..." Crowbar said, "I think I was supposed to have a headache or something..."

"Crowbar..."

"All right, so I went AWOL. If you want to arrest me, go ahead."

"No, I don't want to arrest you--I want to know why you did it. I mean, beside the fact that your hormones are out of control."

"Well, actually," Crowbar said, "I'm not really certain why I did it. I know I *planned* on getting back to the ship, but I let slip I wanted to see the antimatter plant, and that's the last thing I remember. It's kind of like Dagmar made me forget all about getting back to the ship."

"Well, at least you're honest about it."

"It is kind of odd," Crowbar said, "now that I think about it. I know I'm not exactly the world's most handsome guy, but Dagmar sure seemed to act like I had something going on."

"Maybe she likes men with big feet," Coeur said, glancing down at Crowbar's boots.

"Yeah, maybe."

"Well, let's forget about that for a minute. While you *were* at the power plant, did you find out anything useful?"

"Well, I did get a good look at the reactor controls," Crowbar said. "Right now the plant puts out 5,000 megawatts--like the doctor said--but it could put out as much as fifty times that at peak capacity."

"That's a lot."

"Yeah, but that's nothing compared to the power you'd get from a fuel explosion. I was talking to a couple of engineers down there, and they said they've got over 400 tonnes of antimatter stored in the reactor."

"400 *tonnes*? Gaia, what would that yield?"

"About 20 million megatons," Crowbar said, "in a catastrophic failure."

"Fikk!"

"Yeah, that would probably blow the planet to pieces. I asked Dagmar about the geology here, and she said the crust all over the planet's very thin--not more than two or three clicks at any point."

"A regular eggshell," Coeur noted. "You find out anything else?"

"Well, something," Crowbar said, "but it's pretty trivial. You wouldn't want to hear about it."

"Humor me."

"Well, they've got this stuff called clever cotton," Crowbar said, with a sudden far-away look in his eye. "It's kind of like a fabric, except it's composed of billions of microscopic robots, and they can be programmed to make any kind of shape or color."

"Polymorphic fabric," Coeur said, with a nod.

"You've heard of it?"

"Yes, but I've never seen it. A few tech level 16 planets exported stuff like that in the Last Imperium."

"Well, they've got it here," Crowbar said, "I'll tell you that much. You know that suit that Dagmar was wearing there? It's actually the same suit she had on yesterday, and the robe she wore last night."

"Doesn't it get dirty?"

"Apparently not. According to Dagmar, the material cleans itself every time it changes shape."

Coeur nodded.

"For my money, though," Crowbar went on, "the neatest thing is the way it seems to turn into liquid for a moment on a person's body, as it goes from one pattern to another. I mean, there was this one moment when Dagmar--instead of taking off her robe--actually let it pour off her onto the floor, and then..."

"I get the picture," Coeur said.

"Sorry, sir."

"All right," Coeur said finally, after a moment's reflection, "I'm going to let this go, this time, but if you ever pull a stunt like this again, I *will* court-martial your ass for dereliction of duty."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, carry on."

"Yes, sir," Crowbar said, bowing contritely and then heading aft.

Poor sap, Coeur thought. I guess you really do know a lot more about machines than people.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sitting at *Hornet's* conn a few minutes later, Coeur saw the first signs of productive activity outside her canopy--Crowbar and Drop Kick lugging out the winch to put up the all-weather tarp, and Newton walking out to meet with Jitters--but Coeur had a more mundane task in mind for herself. With 1400 hours still four hours away, she directed her attention to a topic of personal interest: the location of Justin Walder.

Apart from his poem, Walder made no attempt to contact *Hornet*, but somebody in the BIA had to know something about him, since he'd brought a tonne of supplies in the company of three other porters. After accessing the comnet through her commo panel, then, Coeur put a call through to the BIA headquarters and made contact with a young female agent, sporting short blonde bangs and a blue BIA jumpsuit.

"Bureau of Informational Architecture," said the agent.

"Hello," Coeur said, "this is Lt. D' Esprit, on board *Hornet*. I wonder if it might be possible for me to speak with one of your agents."

"I suppose so. Who is it?"

"Mr. Justin Walder."

Hearing the name, the agent showed no sign of recognition.

"I don't have a Justin Walder on the staff register," she said, looking at a display off-screen. "Are you sure he's with the BIA?"

"Well, I should hope so. He supervised delivery of a load of cargo to our ship the other day."

"Oh, I see," the agent said, looking at her display. "Mr. Walder was a temporary transfer from the College of Technology. He went back there this morning."

"Oh. Well, could you transfer me?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, stand by."

A pause then followed as the screen went blank, and then another agent picked up the line--this time a pale young man in a white tunic before a white background.

"College of Technology," he said.

"Hello," Coeur said, "I'm looking for one of your agents."

"Very well," the agent said, turning to an off-screen display. "What is the name?"

"Mr. Justin Walder."

"Stand by."

The result of the search was not encouraging.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," the agent reported, looking off-screen. "I have no Justin Walder listed in this section."

"Are you certain? The BIA reported him on TDY from your department."

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant. The BIA must be mistaken."

"Well," Coeur said, "well, thanks anyway. *Hornet* out."

Even as Coeur shut off the comms panel, though, she was not at all surprised. Indeed, it only confirmed the sense she already had that strange and unknown forces were aligning against her.

X O X O X

With the rest of the morning ahead of her, Coeur busied herself as best she could--relaying the results of her inconclusive search for Walder to Serene, and helping Newton and Jitters connect a heavy coaxial cable between the computers of the ships--but made a point of keeping her earlier appointment with Bender. After Coeur found Bender aboard the sloop at 1330 hours, Bender confirmed he would be still be ready by 1400 hours, though both of the Arses were not so certain about their ride, Dr. Trigant.

"Think she might be hung over?" Coeur asked, in the privacy of Bender's stateroom.

"I don't know," Bender said. "I've never seen her drink before."

"Well, what say we find out. Mind if I use your commo panel?"

"No, go ahead."

Several seconds later, seated at Bender's desk with Bender behind her, Coeur reached the apartment of Dr. Trigant. Happily, Dr. Trigant appeared to be suffering no headache or nausea from the night before, and indeed was in a good mood as she answered the call.

"Hello, Lieutenant," Trigant said. "I see you're calling from the sloop."

"Yes," Coeur said, "but I took your advice and went online last night."

"Oh, super," Trigant said. "I'm sure you'll be glad you did."

"Yes, I'm sure I will. So, are you still up to showing us the scout ship?"

"Yes, indeed. I'll bring a speeder around to pick you up in a couple of minutes."

So advised, Coeur and Bender went out to the forward ramp of *Cymbeline Victrix*, and found a stiff breeze had blown up while they were both inside. Whipping at the tarp above the sloop, this was clearly a strong wind blowing off the desert, yet it was strangely free of sand, and Coeur brought that up with Bender.

"That's quite a breeze," Coeur said.

"Yes, it blows like this sometimes."

"It's strange, though--I'd expect it to be more gritty."

"Actually, there's a reason for that," Bender said. "There's a static electric field all around the spaceport that lets in the breeze, but keeps out the sand."

"I should have guessed," Coeur said. "Those used to be pretty common in the Last Imperium."

Bender nodded.

"I keep forgetting," he said, "you actually lived back then."

"Actually," Coeur said, "I don't think about it much--only when something reminds me of the old days."

"Really."

"Yeah," Coeur said, about to mention Bender's two transformations into Darien. She stopped short, however, since she had yet to discover who--or what--was responsible for the transformations.

"Yeah," Coeur went on, "like this arcology."

"Yeah, it is quite a place, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh. You know, I heard once that the word 'arcology' was supposed to be a combination of the words 'architecture' and 'ecology'--since it was supposed to be a city that didn't sprawl all over the place and wreck the local environment--but most of the old arcologies were just a vertical sprawl, like overgrown apartment buildings."

"You think the Arkies got it right, then?"

Coeur smiled slightly.

"Like you said," she replied, "it's quite a place."

The whispering whine of an approaching HEPIaR thruster interrupted the Arses, however, and they looked up to see a sleek blue speeder coming down before them. This was apparently the same speeder the Arses had ridden in the previous day, maneuvering effortlessly through the breeze with its powerful thrusters and contragrav, but there was now only one person visible inside the craft--Dr. Trigant. Flying the speeder herself, Trigant put down just a few meters from the end of *Hornet's* cargo ramp and then opened the side passenger hatch for Coeur and Bender.

"Dr. Trigant," Coeur said, climbing into one of the rear seats, "where's your friend?"

"Otherwise engaged," Trigant said. "I, however, am at your disposal."

"Well, fine. How about we have a look at *Samantha*, then?"

"Very well," Trigant replied, and a moment later the speeder lifted back into the air. Instead of dipping back into the Kimberley Rill, however, the speeder climbed up to a height of fifty meters, then swung out over the desert to the west.

From that height, Coeur saw the same terrain she had seen during *Hornet's* approach--sand dunes and up-jetting rocks, stretching to the horizon--but she had very opportunity to study it. Within a minute of launch, the speeder dropped to the ground again--this time between two dunes--and Coeur could only assume that this was the site of the crash.

"We there?" Coeur asked.

"Yes," Trigant said, turning in her seat and pointing to the dune to their right. "The ship is actually under that dune there."

"No wonder we never saw it," Bender said.

"Very few people have. We're ten kilometers beyond the city, and no one should have any business out here."

Trigant then opened her own door, and Coeur and Bender, stepping out through the passenger hatch, walked around the front of the speeder to join her. Here, the wind was definitely stronger than it was in the city, whipping sand and small rocks across the face of the dunes, but at least the party did not have to stand in it for long. Tapping her comlink with the forefinger of her right hand, Trigant sent an order that caused a hidden hatch in the side of the dune to open, and the Arses dashed into the hatch behind her, finding themselves in a large, cool and sand-free air lock.

"Nifty," Bender said.

"Oh, you haven't seen anything yet," Trigant said, shutting the exterior hatch and opening the inner one.

"Wow," Coeur said, stepping out of the air lock after Bender and Trigant, and looking up at the 35 meter length of a Type S scout ship. Sitting under a ring of lights in a dome-shaped hangar, *Samantha* was huge--half the size of *Hornet*--but her arrow-shaped hull appeared sleek and fast even when she was standing still, and Coeur could almost picture the fine-looking ship lifting off on her tripod landing gear and roaring off across the heavens.

"You like her?" Trigant asked.

"Yeah," Coeur said, "I used to fly one of these before the Collapse."

"Indeed. You must know the class very well, then."

"You could say that. This ship doesn't look very beat up, though, for being in a fatal crash."

"Oh, we repaired most of the exterior damage," Trigant said.

"Planning on launching her again someday?" Bender asked.

"That's a thought," Trigant admitted, "but we didn't have the parts to repair her jump drive and jump computer."

"Can we have a look inside?" Coeur asked.

"Yes, certainly," Trigant said, gesturing toward the rear of the ship, "this way."

Well familiar with the scout ship class, Coeur knew immediately what they were headed for: the main hatch at the rear of the ship. Square at the rear of the ship, between *Samantha's* two thruster bells, the hatch was three meters off the ground, but a set of temporary steps led up to the hatch--already open--and Trigant's companions followed her directly up the steps and into the engineering section of the vessel.

"Looks like they must have had a fire," said the engineer Bender, noting the blackened drive machinery and melted wiring.

"Correct," Trigant said. "Our analysis is that the life support failed before the ship landed, and the unconscious crew was asphyxiated in a fire after impact."

Cpeir nodded, recalling the fidgety life support of her own scout/courier.

"What about forward?" Coeur asked, looking through a series of open bulkheads extending all the way to the bridge. "Anything intact up there?"

"Let's go see," Trigant replied, leading the Arses forward through a common area-- better repaired, but smelling faintly of soot--and through the stateroom section to the bridge.

As the party approached the bridge, though, Coeur saw the answer to her question for herself--no. Although the bridge was not badly burned, computers, flight controls and even equipment lockers had all been stripped from the section, leaving only two acceleration couches parked below the sloped bridge windows.

"Well," Coeur said, "somebody sure cleaned this out."

"That was us," Trigant said, letting Coeur and Bender step past her onto the bridge. "We stripped out most of the salvageable equipment several years ago."

"But I don't get it," Bender said. "Why fix the outside of the ship and trash the inside?"

"Because," Trigant replied, "returning the ship to the air is of secondary importance. Preserving the city is our first priority."

"Yes, of course," Coeur said, toeing snippets of wire and loose insulation with the tip of her boot. "Now, can we look around a bit?"

"Be my guest," Trigant said.

Coeur nodded, taking the doctor up on the offer and beginning a thorough examination of the ship. While Trigant remained behind on the bridge, the Arses wandered through the staterooms, into the top deck hold, and finally into an empty dorsal turret socket.

"Looking for anything in particular?" Bender asked, his voice echoing in the cylindrical socket.

"Yeah, maybe," Coeur said.

"What?"

"The graffiti," Coeur explained, "the graffiti we saw on the liner *Ankaa*."

"But there isn't any graffiti."

"Yes, I know," Coeur said.

"Do you think the same thing that affected the liner captain might have affected this ship?"

"That's what I was thinking," Coeur admitted. "According to the doctor, though, the crew was killed before it ever reached the city."

Bender shrugged.

"Maybe it's just a coincidence," Bender said, "that the liner captain went screwy after she landed at Godsarc."

"Yeah, maybe," Coeur said, although she kept the thought in mind as she and Bender returned to Trigant on the bridge.

"Doctor Trigant," she said, "was there any kind of graffiti, or scrawl on the inside of the ship when you first got to her?"

"Why, no," Trigant replied. "Would you expect there to be?"

"No. I'm just looking for a common thread with the liner *Ankaa*."

"Yes, of course. So, is there anything else you want to see?"

"No, we're done," Coeur said. "Let's go."

Nodding, Trigant stepped back out of the bridge, leading the Arses back toward the rear of the ship. Even as Coeur stepped out of the ship, however, after Trigant and Bender, a glint off something behind her caught her eye, and she turned to try to spot the source.

What the hell? Coeur thought, looking back up into the ship and seeing drives now shiny clean and clearly well-maintained.

Blinking and rubbing her eyes did not remove the sight, however, and Coeur stepped back up the ladder for a closer look. There, indeed, Coeur saw not only the drives in perfect condition, but also the bridge far forward--filled with critical flight controls, and seemingly ready for lift-off.

"Captain D' Esprit," Trigant said, calling up to Coeur from the ground, "did you drop something?"

"No," Coeur said, turning around to her mates, "I was just looking in there and I saw something odd."

"What's that?" Bender asked.

Turning back to the ship, Coeur frowned. Almost as she expected, the hulk was now a hulk again, full of broken machinery and empty compartments.

"Nothing, I guess," Coeur said, turning back to the others. "My mistake."

"Oh well," Trigant said. "I just hope this wasn't a waste of your time."

Coeur only smiled, however, in response. Far from a useless visit, this trip confirmed the existence of a phenomenon capable of warping reality--a phenomenon that Trigant must have known more about than she was letting on.

"Not at all," Coeur said, stepping back down to the ground. "Not at all."

X O X O X

A few minutes later, Trigant returned Coeur and Bender to the Godsarc Spaceport, then returned to the air herself, citing the need to attend to other business in the city. Coeur was not keen to stand around and talk, though, after what she had just encountered, and excused herself from Bender promptly to return to *Hornet*. Now covered by her all-weather tarp, and hooked up to waste and fuel umbilici, *Hornet* looked right at home, but Coeur did not feel comfortable at all as she walked up the forward ramp of her ship.

Walking through the cargo hold and into the lounge, then riding the elevator up to the hold, Coeur's destination was the stateroom of Tirese Serene. Isolated from the crew for most of the morning, the telepath had been meditating in her darkened stateroom as Coeur had ordered, and squinted for a few seconds after letting Coeur in and turning up her lights.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Coeur said.

"No, that's all right," Serene said, guiding Coeur to a chair opposite her bed. "I was just looking for Walder."

"Any luck?"

"No."

Coeur frowned.

"I might have something else, though, that you'll want to hear about."

"What's that?" Coeur asked.

"Well, it's about the dragon motif you saw inside *Ankaa*. I think I might have seen it repeated somewhere in the city."

"What?" Coeur said, leaning forward. "Where?"

"I'm not certain," Serene replied. "I know this may sound cheesy, but using clairvoyance isn't like turning on a sensor. Sometimes when you're consciously thinking of one thing, your subconscious is receptive to something else, and you end up catching glimpses of things you didn't expect..."

"All right, all right," Coeur said, "so your power's a little fuzzy. So, do you have *any* idea where you saw it?"

"Some," Serene said. "Mind you, I can't be certain what I saw, but I was looking for Walder in the university zone when I saw a mental image of the dragon--a big, snarling, nasty critter like you saw on the liner."

"What about the dragon itself?" Coeur asked. "Was it moving? Was it a hologram, or a poster, or a flag or...?"

"No, it was in a book," Serene said, suddenly. "I was fuzzy before, but I remember now, it was in a book--a book in the university."

"A book in the university," Coeur said. "Well, that narrows it down some. There can't be that much print media in a city like this."

"I agree," Serene said. "Respectfully, I would like to ask your permission to leave the ship and investigate the university in person."

Coeur smiled, but shook her head.

"No," Coeur said, "I'd rather you stay here. Walder is still at large, and I need you to find him."

"Okay. Somebody still ought to check out the university, though."

"Yes," Coeur agreed. "I'll do it myself."

Serene frowned.

"Unless," Coeur said, "there's some good reason why I shouldn't. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking, Captain, that the Arkies might know a lot more about psionics than they've been letting on."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because, Captain, at least three of the Arkies here in the city have psi shields. There's Walder, of course--I told you about him--but there's also the doctors, Trigant and Larsen. I've scanned them both surreptitiously, and I couldn't pick up a presence from either one of them."

Coeur's eyebrows rose.

"Does that mean they're telepaths?"

"Not necessarily. They could have artificial psi shields, or they could be androids."

"Somehow," Coeur said, "I don't see that. I know for a fact I saw Amanda sweating in the desert, and I certainly think Crowbar could tell the difference between a real woman and a robot."

"Well, there you go," Serene said. "If they are human, they certainly have knowledge of psionics, and may have the power to wield it actively. If they do, that could account for the insanity of Captain Redwood--induced externally."

"I thought you said that wasn't something a telepath could do."

"No, I said that's something I couldn't do. Just because I couldn't do it, though, doesn't mean it isn't possible."

"I'll take the risk," Coeur said. "Just in case the doctors do have some kind of mental power, I'll go into the university unannounced."

"Could be smart," Serene opined. "Just in case, though, you might want to take along this."

Serene then reached into a case beside her bed, and handed Coeur a small metal net about 25 centimeters in diameter.

"What's this?" Coeur asked, accepting a small metal net about 25 centimeters in diameter.

"A psi shield."

"I thought a psi shield was some kind of helmet."

"It can be," Serene said, "but this is a lighter design, easier to conceal. You wear it next to your scalp, with the hair combed through to conceal it."

"Nifty."

"It's a nice item," Serene agreed. "I wouldn't go into the city alone, though. Assuming you still don't want to take me, I'd take along one of the xenomorphs--Newton or Deep Six--since they're harder for a human telepath to scan or assault."

"Don't you have another psi shield?"

"Negative. I just keep that one for clients who don't like having their minds read."

Coeur nodded, smiling. The irony was that Newton--whom she had told not to enter the city--would now have to come along on this little expedition.

"Very well," Coeur said. "I'm going to tell Gyro where I'm going, but other than you and her, I don't want anyone to know where we went."

"I understand," Serene said, rising to move around behind Coeur.

"What are you doing?"

"Putting this psi shield on," Serene said, taking the shield from Coeur and then working it--with patience and a teasing comb--through Coeur's thick brown hair to her scalp.

"Thanks."

"Mind you, though," Serene said, "this is just as much a shield to me as it is to anybody else. If something happens, I won't be able to reach you by telepathy."

"What about your clairvoyance? Will it block that?"

"No. In fact, if you want, I could watch you to see you don't get into trouble."

"No, that's okay, we're just going to the university. You keep looking for Walder."

Serene sighed, stepping around in front of Coeur.

"Captain, you are one stubborn woman."

"That's what they tell me," Coeur said, standing up to check her hair in Serene's mirror, then turning for the door. "Just you find that Walder, or get word to me if he shows up again at the ship."

X O X O X

"Newton," Coeur said a few minutes later, finding the Hiver alone in its workshop, "what's the status on the computer?"

"Very good, Captain. Jitters and I have hard-wired an uplink from *Hornet* to *Cymbeline Victrix*, and a file transfer is in progress."

"How long do you think it'll take?"

"Perhaps a day."

"Do you have to be here during the transfer?"

"No, sir. Jitters is supervising the transfer from her end."

"Good. Then you're coming to the city with me."

Thinking it might have misunderstood the utterance, Newton directed the blinking stare of all six eyestalks directly at Coeur.

"Excuse me, Captain?"

"I said we're going to the city. As soon as you're ready, meet me in the cargo hold with a holorecorder."

"I'm ready now, sir," Newton said, still speaking in a monotone, but enthusiastically scooping up a ball-shaped recorder with the fingers of its prime limb. "Where are we going?"

"City university," Coeur said, tapping the shut-off switch on her comlink, "but we're doing this quiet-like, without telling anybody where we're coming."

Newton's reaction to this resembled the reaction of a snail pelted with salt.

"Sir," it said, shrinking back, "this is not going to entail gunplay, is it?"

"No," Coeur said, smiling, "I just want a little freedom to maneuver. You remember the dragon we found in the air lock on *Ankaa*?"

"Indeed."

"Well, Serene thinks she's seen the same dragon in a book somewhere in the university. That's what I want to find."

"That could be challenging."

"Which," Coeur said, "is why I'm taking my ace researcher."

"Oh. I see your point."

"Right," Coeur said, leaving unsaid the threat of psionic assault, "let's go."

X O X O X

Telling no one but Gyro and Serene, Coeur and Newton left *Hornet* a few minutes later, walked nonchalantly over to the spaceport elevator bank, then disappeared into the bowels of the city.

Coeur did not expect the rest of her mission to be easy, however. Although she had carefully studied a comnet map of the university, there were several specialized archives in addition to the main library, and also a rare book museum--any one of which could have the print media she needed. Exercising a hunch, though, Newton recommended they proceed to the main library.

Agreeing, Coeur directed the elevator to deposit them at the university, and they stepped out into a lush and beautiful setting--a canyon formed by terraced gardens and two-story buildings at the foot of Blue Sector South. Happily, this conformed precisely to the image Coeur had in her mind of the university--with young and old students alike strolling happily among the buildings--and the students took no notice

at all as the woman in the black body sleeve and the hexapedal alien walked up to the end of the "canyon" and into the three-story building labelled LIBRARY.

"How remarkable," Newton said, lowering its synthetic voice to a whisper in the lobby. "A conventional Imperial-style library."

"Yes," Coeur said, looking around at the circular main floor and observing individual student workstations surrounding a librarian at the central hub. "They seem to have a nostalgia for the old days."

"Indeed," Newton agreed. "Allow me to take the lead."

The reaction of the students outside notwithstanding, Coeur was not certain if that was such a good idea; up close, a Hiver could be quite startling to a person who had never seen one before. The equable young man at the librarian's desk did not appear at all dismayed by the approach of Newton, however, and reacted with admirable calm.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"Indeed," Newton replied. "I am curious if this archive uses the standard Imperial index system."

"Why, yes, we do. Can I help you find something?"

"Possibly," Newton said. "If you could direct me to a terminal, however, I could probably find it myself."

"Are you two students?" the librarian asked.

"No," Coeur said, "we're visiting aliens from space."

"Perhaps you'd better use my terminal, then," the librarian suggested, sliding the nearest computer around to face the visitors.

"Thank you," Newton said, standing up on its two rear legs and rapidly manipulating the keyboard with its forward hands to initiate a search. Speaking search instructions aloud, naturally, would be faster, but Newton was aware of the human custom of silence in a library, and the custom prevailed even with more primitive typing, pointing and clicking.

"This is what we want," Newton said, directing Coeur's attention to the screen.

"Heraldry?" Coeur asked.

"That is my hunch."

Coeur shrugged.

"Mr. Librarian," Newton said, "where might we find your bound text archive?"

"Downstairs," the friendly librarian replied, pointing to a local area elevator, "Basement Level One."

"Thank you, good sir," Newton said, dropping its forelegs back to the ground, then walking off toward the elevator.

"Yeah, thanks," Coeur said, swinging the computer back around to the librarian, then dashing off after Newton.

X O X O X

Inscrutable as the workings of the Hiver mind were, Coeur was glad to have them on her side this day. Riding the local elevator down one level, they found themselves in a dusty old archive--probably dating back beyond the Collapse--full of neatly shelved books, rolled-up charts and other non-electronic media. Apparently not worthy of attention from a human being, this was watched over only by a lone anthropomorphic android with a spindly body and goggly glowing red eyes.

"We're looking for heraldry," Coeur whispered, "is that right?"

"Yes, Captain," Newton replied, ignoring the android and walking directly to a collection of large folio editions. "I had been thinking about this before, and I believe the dragon could be an element from a coat of arms. It certainly was a popular element with nobility of the Last Imperium."

Coeur snapped her fingers.

"Of course. Why didn't I think of that?"

"Perhaps you were distracted, sir. I recommend you take this row, and I shall take the next one over."

Coeur nodded, launching directly into her task. Being honest with herself, Coeur found this type of information storage bizarre--the keeping of a hard text library was usually restricted to academics and nobles in the Last Imperium--but she began pulling books on local sector history, geneology and heraldry at random, and was stunned by almost immediate success.

In a folio edition of flags from the old subsector, Coeur found the very snarling dragon she had seen on *Ankaa* displayed on the flag of Exage.

"Newton," she said, "I think I found something."

Apparently busy elsewhere, however, Newton did not reply.

I wonder, Coeur thought. Did Redwood come here and see this, before she went crazy? It's from her home planet, but what's the connection? Surely, if the dragon was the symbol of Exage, it wouldn't have the power to shock her subconscious.

In answer to her question, though, Coeur noted a paragraph of small print text underneath the dragon. The dragon--called a "Shukugan" in the local lexicon--was

reputed to figure large in the local folklore of the planet, featured in numerous fables about the early colonization of the planet. According to the folio, the original creature that inspired the legend was long extinct by the time of the Last Imperium, yet the shukugan still remained alive in a sense, serving as a bogeyman in stories that parents told their children.

Of course, Coeur thought, that's it. Something made Redwood see a creature from her childhood, just like something made me see a man from my past. But that still leaves the question, what's the cause?

It was altogether less clear what the book had to do with all this; indeed, it could have been a lucky coincidence that Serene came across it with her clairvoyance. Now that Coeur saw the connection to herself, though, she recalled the fate of Captain Redwood--insanity and death--and she felt a cold grasp upon her neck even though nothing was there. Turning around in the aisle, Coeur saw she was--in fact--alone, but she also felt she might be safer with Newton, and moved around the corner of the next aisle.

Newton was not there, however, and Coeur, concerned, walked up to the end of the row of aisles. There--to her utter astonishment--she found a large air conditioning panel near the floor, pried off its mounting bracket.

Good Gaia, Coeur thought, kneeling down beside the opening and catching sight of Newton's rear limb just disappearing around a bend in the conduit, Hivers and their curiosity...!

"Newton," she said, "get the hell out of there."

"But Captain," Newton said, "I have discovered something."

"I don't care. We're leaving, now."

Reluctantly, Newton stopped, but did not back up. Instead, it twisted its circular torso around in place so its prime limb was now facing Coeur.

"Captain," Newton said, "you have not given me an opportunity to explain. I have caught a most remarkable scent with my olfactory sensor--the smell of Hiver larvae."

"What? Are you kidding?"

"No, sir. The smell is quite distinctive."

"Are they yours?"

"No, sir. I make a point of disposing of all my own larvae."

"Well, then, who could have dropped them? Bender's Hiver died months ago."

Looking squarely at Coeur, Newton appeared as if it was about to respond, but suddenly halted, lifting its gaze to look beyond Coeur. The six pupils of its eyes then widened, and frightened, the Hiver suddenly shot out of sight.

A fraction of a second slower reacting, Coeur spun around just in time to catch the android librarian shoot her in the neck with a whisper-quiet gauss pistol, and watch impassively as she slumped unconscious to the floor.

CHAPTER SIX

Slinging a 500 milligram dart at 1500 meters per second, the typical gauss pistol was no doubt a death-dealing weapon; the instant Coeur saw the one pointed at her, she knew she would be lucky to escape with nothing more than a broken neck, or a severed carotid artery. More likely, though, she figured she was just plain dead.

Coming back to consciousness, though, looking up at an azure sky and puffy white clouds, she came to suspect that she had actually been hit by a tranq round instead of a dart. Such a round would discharge its chemical agent through the skin without penetration, and certainly go far toward explaining why Coeur did not feel worse than she did.

It was still an open question, though, where Coeur was. Looking up, she saw that the ceiling was imbued with images of lustrous white clouds in a supernaturally azure sky--clearly a quality holographic illusion--and the sound of a soothing glass harmonica mingled with a distant smell of pine, inclining her to yawn and stretch out under the quilted blanket she found upon her body. As she stretched her arms and legs, though, she suddenly felt another body lying next to her, and rolled her head to see Darien Hayes curled up asleep beside her.

Shocked--for a moment--Coeur nevertheless got a hold of herself and looked around the room. While Darien remained asleep, Coeur noted that a holographic pine forest surrounded every corner of the bed, but careful study revealed four walls and a door. Never having been in bed with Darien before, Coeur was not sure how sound a sleeper he might be, but she took a chance on slipping out of bed and--finding Darien still asleep--crept to the door in her silk chemise.

Damn, Coeur thought, palming the door release panel and stepping into a curving corridor beyond the bedroom, another damned hallucination. *Don't these people ever give up?*

Even as Coeur stepped into the corridor, though, walking toward a giant picture window ten meters away, she had to admit she found the quality of the hallucination compelling. Holographic portraits lined both sides of the corridor--portraits of men and women Coeur did not recognize, though their nameplates and costume suggested Imperial nobility. Certainly, they were not emperors, but Coeur had a feeling she recognized this place all the same, and she realized precisely why when she reached the picture window and looked out on the greatest view in the Last Imperium.

Immediately before her--blotting out most of the sky with its silvery bulk--was the spherical Grand Palace of Arbellatra, hanging 500 meters above the surface of Capital, and casting a circular shadow over three-quarters of a square kilometer of the neatly manicured park below. Clearly, then, Coeur had to be standing inside one

of the smaller satellite structures floating alongside the main palace, like courtiers hovering around a noble, but Coeur was not an expert on trivia about the capital, and could only name one other structure visible through the window; that was the Moot Spire--a needle-like tower rising even higher into the air than the palace--and obliterating any notion of subtlety or humility among the nobles who assembled there.

"Good Gaia," Coeur mumbled to herself, "I must be dreaming."

And yet, blinking and rubbing her eyes, the vista remained, stunning and overwhelming.

"That's quite a view, isn't it?" asked a man coming up behind her.

Not recognizing the voice, Coeur snapped around and found herself facing a man attired like the figures in the corridor, but seemingly real and alive. Gray-haired, with a gray beard and mustache, he looked friendly enough, smiling at Coeur, but his severely tailored dress--a violet cloak, red sash and cummerbund over a gold-embroidered military tunic--suggested a member of the peerage, second only to the royal family in rank. It was an effort, therefore, for Coeur to overcome her respectful silence, the conditioned response of an Imperial commoner.

"I was going to ask where I was," Coeur said, "but that seems pretty obvious."

"Yes," the noble said, slipping off his cloak and throwing it gracefully around Coeur, "but do you remember what you're doing here?"

"No," Coeur admitted.

"Then you probably don't remember who I am either."

"No."

"Karl, First Baron Ord-Heavenside of Irlu, at your service," the man said with a bow. "But you can call me Doc. You always have, anyway."

"Doc?"

"Yes. I've been your doctor for the last couple of months."

"And I suppose," Coeur said, "if I tell you I think this is all an elaborate illusion, you won't believe me."

Doc smiled sympathetically.

"I was afraid," he said, "a relapse like this was going to happen. How far back can you remember?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where were you yesterday?"

"Godsarc, on Vinooks."

"And a month ago?"

"En route to Vinooks."

"How about a year?"

"Probably at Mexit," Coeur said, with growing impatience, "and a year before that I was on Aubaine, and two years ago I was in cold sleep after a war that destroyed this whole Imperium."

Doc frowned.

"Can't you remember anything," he said, "after you went into cold sleep? Waking up with Darien? Getting married? Coming here from Promise?"

Confused, Coeur thought to say no, that was all a lot of nonsense, but then-- somewhere in the back of her mind--she *could* remember those things. She could remember the events even though they could not possibly jibe with her memory of the past: herself awakening from cold sleep with Darien, then marrying Darien on Promise, then giving birth to their twins...

"Wait a minute," Coeur said, shaking her head, "this is some kind of trick, some kind of implanted memory."

"No," Doc said, "that's your real memory, damaged by an adverse reaction to cold sleep. Everything else is your imagination."

Disbelieving, Coeur thought at once of the psi shield Serene had given her on *Hornet*. Almost certainly, the Arkies had removed it while she was unconscious, letting them implant this alternate reality.

As Coeur reached her left hand up to feel her scalp, though--keeping the right down to keep ahold of the cloak--she could feel the shield still there, conformed to the shape of her skull.

"I still have a psi shield."

"Yes," Doc said. "His Majesty recommended all of us wear them, after the trouble we've had with the Zhodani."

"Spies."

"By the shipload. They sensed our weakness in the rebellion."

All at once, Coeur felt both dizzy and disoriented. Not only was this hallucination not going away, but it was internally consistent, full of details she would expect from the capital of the Last Imperium.

Or maybe, this *was* the capital of the Last Imperium.

"All right," Coeur said, "if it is like you say, what are we doing here--Darien and me?"

"I'm afraid that may be a bit of an anticlimax," Doc said, "after the excitement of this relapse. His Majesty invited you here for the awarding of a Starburst for Extreme Heroism--related to your saving of the crew of the starship *Alnitak*--but we had to postpone that after your last relapse."

"Just out of curiosity, who is the emperor now? Lucan?"

"Only in his dreams," Doc said. "Strephon was returned to the throne in 1123."

"I thought he was shot."

"No, that was a double. The real one survived."

"So the assassination and the Collapse never happened."

Doc shrugged.

"Well, it may happen," he admitted. "When you've been lucid, you've told us about waking up 80 years in the future, and working for some outfit called the Coalition, after the destruction of the Imperium."

"That rings a bell," Coeur said, with a smirk.

Before Doc could comment further, though, the bedroom door slid open again, and Darien himself now appeared, walking briskly down the corridor in a robe and slippers.

"Doc," he said, "what's up?"

"I'm afraid," Doc replied, "your wife is having a relapse."

"Oh no," Darien said, directing the gaze of his deep-set blue eyes at Coeur. "Why didn't you say something?"

Coeur, looking back, could not find a voice to respond. Occasionally, in her dreams, she had met the engineer, but she had never met the real Darien in anything other than a vac suit, in a pitch-black ship. Now, in full light, she could see he was as handsome and well-built as she thought he might be--with the sad, sensitive expression of his eyes setting off his firm, resolute jaw and athletic physique.

"She's had a bit of a shock," Doc answered for her. "she can't remember anything past the *Alnitak* low berth episode."

"Oh, that," Darien said, stepping closer to Coeur. "Do you still think I died to give you a good low berth?"

"That's what I remember."

Still looking at Coeur, Darien spoke to Doc.

"Is it all right if I talk to her? Will she be frightened that I'm not dead?"

"I don't know," Doc said. "Are you frightened, Coeur?"

Coeur was not certain, but she took a step back when Darien stepped forward.

"Honey," Darien said, "I'm not going to hurt you. Don't you know how I feel about you?"

"No, you never told me."

"Doc, can we be alone?"

"I'd rather not leave her alone," Doc said. "She needs to be taken to the hospital."

"Could you give us a minute?"

"All right," Doc said, opening a side passage, "but just a minute."

Doc then stepped out of the room, while Darien kept his attention on Coeur. Clearly, he wanted to say something, but like the Darien Coeur knew, he was not good at showing his emotions. The reason Coeur was attracted to him in the first place, after all, was that he was a doer and not a talker.

After an uncomfortable moment, then, Darien just gave up and hugged her.

"You sure feel real," Coeur said, returning the hug and feeling--discretely--his ribs and the muscles of his back.

"Yes, I'm real," he said.

And that was the extent of their conversation. Several seconds later, Doc returned and Darien let go of Coeur.

"So I guess," Darien remarked, "Coeur isn't going to be taking Annalise and Joshua to ride the poni."

"Annalise and Joshua?" Coeur asked.

"Your children," Doc said, whereupon--as if on cue--another door opened in the corridor and two young children stuck their heads out through it. Looking to be about three or four at the oldest, the boy and girl both had blue eyes, brown hair and cherubic faces, and Coeur recognized at once that these were her children.

"Daddy," the female child said, "is Mommy crazy again?"

"No," Darien said firmly, moving quickly to herd the children back from the doorway, "Mommy isn't crazy. Mommy is tired, and Mommy needs a rest."

Coeur's heart, meanwhile, raced as her eyes caught the eyes of the children, and she finally came to decide that this was more of an assault on her mind and her person than she was prepared to accept. If this was real, she thought, then fine--some burly orderly would catch her eventually and strap her onto a table for treatment. If this was not reality, however, she had had enough.

Guessing that the door Doc had stepped through led to an exit, Coeur bolted past him--before he could ever react--passed through the door and into an elevator just a few meters away.

This stupid thing, Coeur thought, feeling for the psi shield in her hair and pulling it loose, probably just makes it worse.

She then flung the wire network into a corner of the cab, palmed the down button, and hoped the nightmare would end.

X O X O X

To Coeur's relief the nightmare did end a few seconds later, when the doors opened. Stepping out of the elevator, she found herself back in Godsarc, looking up at the vast mouth of the city cavern from a side wall overlooking the Kimberley Rill. Turning around, she saw that the elevator cab was still there--but it was now a Godsarc city cab, distinct in appearance from the one at Capital.

The mystery, then, was why she was still in the silk chemise, with a long purple cloak. Irrespective of its actual origin, the cloak was obviously well made, and the weighty ornamental brooch showed signs of intricate workmanship, with clusters of inlaid gems on a background of gold and silver.

Oh well, Coeur thought, Newton can always analyze this and see if it's real.

Even as she thought this, though, the memory of Newton in the library air duct returned to her, and the real possibility existed that Newton never made it back to *Hornet*. Indeed, since Coeur was now missing her comlink, she could not even know if *Hornet* was still at the city. Her first priority, therefore, would be getting back to the ship.

Putting her suspicions about the elevator aside, then, Coeur stepped back away from the few pedestrians walking around in the late afternoon, and into the cab behind her.

"Spaceport," Coeur said deliberately. "Black Sector."

Heeding the order, the elevator started upward at once, remained under power for several seconds, then opened its doors directly into the spaceport tarmac. Happily,

Hornet and *Cymbeline Victrix* were still there, but Coeur was still very wary of her susceptibility to illusions, and advanced upon her ship with caution.

Again, if this was an illusion, it was very good; the myriad details of the ship--the rotary autocannon next to the air raft hangar, Deep Six working on the bridge, and the cluster of forward-facing bulges for radio antennas and sensors--were all where they should be, and Coeur gained confidence as she walked up the forward cargo ramp, sweeping her cloak around herself.

Discord, however, assailed Coeur's confidence almost as soon as she entered the cargo hold. There she found Physic holding Zorn again at gunpoint, and accusing her of a very serious offence.

"Don't you move, Vega--I saw you tampering with the security sensors, and I know you're trying to escape!"

"Gaia, Physic, calm down. I was just--"

"You were just nothing, you smarmy bitch," Physic replied, thumbing off the safety of her gauss pistol. "It's high time somebody got rid of you once and for all."

Arriving just in time to hear this, Coeur noted both the safety going off on the pistol, and Physic's shaky grip on the gun. Though the pistol's action would not be set for hair-trigger sensitivity, the fire selector did appear to rest on full automatic, and just the slightest slip of Physic's trigger finger could drill a dozen new holes in the body of the pirate.

"Hey, Physic, lighten up," Coeur said. "What's happening?"

Distracted, Physic turned to Coeur, and Vega--perceiving an opportunity--dove for cover behind a box of autogalley rations. It was not as much of an opportunity as she thought, though, for the gauss pistol jumped in Physic's hand reflexively, hurling a hail of darts against the far wall of the cargo hold. Most of these met bare metal--ricocheting in a shower of sparks--but a generous helping also caught Vega, who fell in a bloody heap.

No killer by inclination, Physic was almost as shocked as Coeur. When Coeur tried to pry the gun out of her hands, though, she would not release her grip and a wrestling match ensued. Bigger and stronger than Physic, Coeur had no doubt of the outcome--she would win--but the doctor's tiny hands remained locked on the gun even as Coeur forced her to her knees, and Coeur could almost see the unfortunate turn the struggle was about to take before it happened; still gripping the pistol stock as Coeur bent the barrel away from herself, Physic discharged a final barrage--the rest of the rounds in her magazine--right into herself at point-blank range.

Immediately she slumped, letting the gun clatter noisily to the deck, then dropping to the floor herself, spilling gore from a rent in her abdomen. Racing forward from the engine room, Crowbar was the first to arrive from beyond the cargo hold, but he stopped short of entry when he found the half-dressed Coeur bending over Physic and soaked in her blood.

"Holy shit!" Snapshot said a moment later, running up with Drop Kick from another direction. "What the hell happened?"

"She shot them." Serene said solemnly, walking up to doorway of the lounge. "I knew it: she's insane."

"Physic needs help," Coeur said, weakly. "I think she's in shock."

Looking around at her mates, though, Coeur saw nothing but shock in their faces as well; usually resourceful and quick to act in a crisis, they were evidently too shaken to do anything at all. More than that, though, they seemed to be consciously afraid of Coeur, minding the opinion of Serene that she was crazy, and the final proof of this came when Gyro advanced up the ramp behind Coeur with a personal defense laser.

"All right, Skipper," Gyro said, "put your hands on your head and step away from the body."

"Gyro..."

"Captain, don't make me use this."

Clearly, the situation was not good. As Coeur glanced around the cargo hold, however, her eyes caught on an unbelievably lucky break--a fully assembled broomstick parked by the autogalley stores. How it got there, Coeur could not say--perhaps Vega planned to use it to escape from the ship--but however it got there, it presented an alternative to indefinite incarceration. Although Gyro might be well within her rights to detain Coeur, Coeur was of the opinion that Gyro--and indeed her entire crew--was enthralled by the same madness that had stricken Captain Redwood.

"All right, all right," Coeur said, rising from her knees and turning around. Rather than putting her hands on her head, though, she kept them down around her shoulders.

"Captain," Gyro said, approaching, "I told you to keep your hands up."

"Very well," Coeur said, unclasping her brooch and throwing her cape over Gyro.

Whatever Gyro was thinking at the moment, she was not insane enough to fire blindly into the cape--stray fire would as likely hit her shipmates as Coeur. By the time she brushed aside the cape, though, Coeur was on the forward seat of the two-seat broomstick, brandishing the same gauss pistol dropped before by Physic.

"All right," Coeur said, using her free hand to power up the batteries in the central trunk of the broomstick, "drop the gun."

Gyro dropped the gun.

"Captain," Gyro said, "you can't escape. I've already alerted Bender, and his whole Marine platoon is forming up outside the sloop."

"Well, let's just hope they're bad shots," Coeur replied, engaging the broomstick's contragrav field, and throwing Gyro the gauss pistol as the skids off the broomstick lifted off the deck.

"That's out of bullets," Coeur said, opening up the throttle on her four impeller fans, and blasting out of the front of the ship.

"Damn!" Gyro swore, snatching up her PDL and raising it to fire. By then, however, Coeur was already gone--her departure greeted first by the racket of automatic fire as she passed above the troops of *Cymbeline Victrix*, then silence as she slipped off into the desert.

X O X O X

Fortunately for Coeur, the *Cymbeline Victrix* Marines did not seem to anticipate her stealing a broomstick--their fire from gauss rifles was wildly sporadic, and none of it found its mark. The Marines would be well supplied with grav belts and broomsticks of their own, however, so Coeur would not have much time to loiter over the desert. Considering her options, she found she had only one--the derelict *Samantha* out beyond the rill.

Swinging out over the desert to the east, then, Coeur ducked her broomstick down among the dunes and set a course for the general direction of the hidden hangar. Luckily, remembering the rough course and speed of the Arkie speeder the day before, Coeur found it in less than five minutes--and even more luckily--was still unpursued.

With the secret air lock sealed, however, and Coeur lacking even so much as a comlink for rudimentary hacking, there was no obvious way into the structure. Now assailed again by the desert wind--grinding even more uncomfortably than the day before on her bare arms and legs--Coeur stood knee-deep in the sand at the air lock hatch, feeling more than a little put upon by fate.

This just isn't your day, Coeur, she thought, shielding her eyes against the wind with her hands and looking back at the speeder.

Immediately, she felt chagrined. Light as the broomstick was, it still had a minimal cargo capacity, and a double saddlebag had been hanging over the central trunk all along. Plodding back to the broomstick, Coeur flipped open the cargo pouches and found--to her delight--a laser pistol, several jugs of water, compressed rations and a 5 kg satchel of plastic explosives.

Well, Coeur thought, prying loose a string of the explosive and applying it to the door, *I guess I was wrong about Vega. She must have planned to cripple the ship, then escape into the desert.*

As Coeur jabbed a detonator into the explosive, however, and retreated behind the broomstick with a radio remote control trigger, she did not really care why Vega did what she had done. All that mattered now, she thought, thumbing the trigger and blowing the hatch off its frame, was getting off Vinooks and warning the Coalition about this planet.

X O X O X

Aboard RCS *Hornet*, meanwhile, Physic and Vega were just getting over the shock of Coeur's strange arrival and equally strange departure. Five minutes earlier, Physic had been speaking calmly to Vega, instructing her to double-check the seals on the cargo hold hatches, when a highly agitated Coeur--wearing her body sleeve, but unaccompanied by Newton--walked into the hold, asked Physic what was up, then jumped as if surprised, proceeded to grope at the air as if wrestling an imaginary foe, then fell to her knees, mumbled something incoherent, and dashed out of the hold on a broomstick Crowbar had set out for maintenance.

"She's loony as a Vargr," Vega said, after Physic tried in vain to communicate with Coeur.

"Yeah," Physic said, "somebody better go find her before she hurts herself."

Vega nodded, and Physic quickly palmed the nearest commo panel.

"Physic to Gyro."

"Gyro here," the XO answered. "What's up?"

"Gyro, Red Sun just came in here, grabbed a broomstick and took off. She acting irrationally, and I think somebody better go find her."

True to her stable call sign, Gyro reacted with composure.

"I understand," she said, engaging the shipwide intercom from her turret. "Drop Kick, come in please."

"Right here," Drop Kick answered. "What do you need?"

"Sergeant, I need you to prepare the air raft for launch. Physic, you, Serene and Snapshot assemble at the air raft and initiate a search for the captain's comlink signal."

"Uh, Gyro," Vega interrupted, "I don't think the captain was wearing her comlink."

Gyro heaved an audible sigh.

"Very well. Then assemble at the air raft and conduct a perimeter search. Deep Six, you get in touch with the city council and see if anyone's seen the captain there."

"Roger that," Deep Six said, joined a moment later by acknowledgements from Physic, Drop Kick, Snapshot and Serene.

"Gyro out."

"All right," Physic said to Vega, "I've got to go."

"Wait a minute," Vega said, grabbing Physic by the arm, "I'd like to come too."

Physic paused a moment before responding.

"No," Physic said, "you better stay here with the ship."

"It's the Hivers, isn't it? You're still bitter about the Hivers."

"No," Physic said. "I just don't think Red Sun would want to risk both of her friends on one mission."

Vega was about to argue, but then saw the doctor's point.

"That's true," Vega said, "she would say that."

"Just stay here in the cargo hold," Physic suggested, "and grab Red Sun if she comes back."

"Yes, sir," Vega said, saluting.

"And wish us luck," Physic said, shutting off the comms panel and dashing for the nearest ladder up to the loft.

X O X O X

In strict chronological terms, it had been 80 years since Coeur had flown a Type S scout/courier, but she had spent 75 of those years in low suspension. Walking up to *Samantha*, then, and finding her rear hatch still invitingly open, Coeur felt a sense of both familiarity and nostalgia. As she had suspected, the ship's dilapidated condition was only an illusion, and her vast experience with the class let her quickly check the ship out. The jump drive, contragrav and HEPIaR thrusters were all intact, a full load of fuel was in the port and starboard tanks, and the triple-redundant flight computers confirmed the ship's hull integrity. Only a security program, in fact, stood between Coeur and control of the ship, and that was only a marginal obstacle.

Although the original contractor took pains to repair the oversight, many older scout ships--like this one--possessed a ground test computer which could be easily programmed to erase existing security codes. Of course, the ground test computer was not easy to get to, hidden behind wiring and junction boxes under the pilot's console--and most spacers would not even recognize its function if they found it--but Coeur knew how to use it, and promptly purged the Godsarc security lockout.

Very clever, Coeur thought, congratulating herself on her ingenuity and climbing up into the pilot's seat. There, interior and exterior sensors now at her command confirmed she was still alone in the hangar, and all that remained was to get underway. Coolly, Coeur sealed the aft hatch, drilled a gaping hole in the roof with her dorsal laser cannon, then lifted off with chunks of blasted hangar door draped across her hull.

For a moment, bits of this debris blocked Coeur's vision through the bridge canopy, but these blew away seconds later as Coeur pointed the bow of the ship toward the

southern horizon and roared away at supersonic speed. More than anything, she wanted to blast away from the surface at hypersonic speed and head immediately toward jump point, but the massed sensors of the city, *Hornet*, and *Cymbeline Victrix* were almost certainly scanning for her, so she kept her altitude low for another half hour before finally angling up and out toward space. There, with the bulk of the planet between herself and Godsarc, and no sign of pursuit by the Coalition starships, Coeur finally let herself relax and take stock of her situation.

If this was indeed reality, a safe jump point was five hours on, and the Coalition itself about three months beyond that. Keeping a ship the size of *Samantha* running properly would be a big job, though, and Coeur--at the moment--did not see how she could do it. Demoralized by the death of her two best friends, she was now more automaton than human--driven by duty alone to escape from Vinooks and report what she could to the Coalition.

This is no way to be, Coeur thought, turning in her seat and pushing the thought of Physic and Vega out of her mind. *You've got to keep busy. You can't let yourself dwell on the past.*

Alert to the possibility of ambush, of course, Coeur knew it would not be wise to start any major housekeeping around the ship; the one and only major project she was willing to entertain at the moment was finding something more substantial to wear than her chemise. Standing up from the conn, then, she pulled on a gun belt with a loaded fusion pistol from the aft bridge locker, then stepped back into the crew compartment, planning to stop at the nearest stateroom head, then find a new body sleeve and a vac suit in the top deck cargo hold.

The plan got as far as the head. There, as if Coeur did not have enough problems, a display above the toilet hit her with a stunning and altogether unexpected message.

PURSUANT TO MEDICAL DISCLOSURE PROTOCOL 124C-41, THIS UNIT IS REQUIRED TO PROVIDE NOTIFICATION THAT YOU ARE PREGNANT. IN THE EVENT THIS WAS UNEXPECTED, YOU ARE ADVISED TO CONTACT YOUR MEDICAL OFFICER OR SUPPORT BASE PERSONNEL OFFICE FOR SUPPORT AND COUNSELING

Obviously, the display was linked to a urine sampler in the toilet--a common enough feature in a relic scout ship--but Coeur could not possibly see how the message could possibly apply to her. Quite beyond the fact that she had a virtually foolproof tech level 15 contraceptive implant, she had not even been with a man for at least a year.

And yet, as she recalled the interlude on Capital, she also recalled the way she had woken up--next to Darien, her husband. Was it possible--somehow--that they had made love and she simply did not remember?

No, Coeur thought, *that's impossible! Either this world exists, or that world exists--they can't both exist.*

Whether Coeur could trust any of her memories, though, was obviously problematical. Although Doc's version of reality seemed far-fetched, she had kept the clothes from that incident, and apparently this additional dividend of her liaison with Darien as well.

"Oh, fikk," Coeur thought, falling back against the nearest wall, then sliding down to the floor with her head in her hands. "Which way is up, for God's sake?"

It was not at all the mood Coeur wanted--not a further slide into hopeless confusion--when she needed her senses sharp to pilot the ship. Just at the moment, though, Coeur did not feel like going anywhere, or doing anything. Indeed--at the moment--getting blown up by *Hornet* or *Cymbeline Victrix* might almost be a relief.

And yet, even as drawn into herself as she was at the moment, Coeur did hear something in the central gangway--bootsteps on the metal deck--and looked up to see a familiar face looking down at her from the doorway of the head.

"It is hard to tell, sometimes," Darien Hayes said, dressed in a blue Scout Service vac suit, and holding a bungee sack full of hand grenades, "which way is up."

"How the hell did you get in here?" Coeur said, scrambling backward from the door and drawing her gun.

"I used the door," Darien said. "It's open."

"I don't believe you," Coeur said, flipping off the safety of the unfamiliar weapon. "We're 50,000 kilometers above the planet."

"Actually," Darien said, "no, we're not. We're actually parked in a hangar outside Godsarc."

"And this gun," Coeur said, "I suppose this is fake?"

"No," Darien said, "that's real. I'd be careful where you point that, though--at this range you'd blow me to bits and splash yourself with hot plasma."

"Not to mention set off those grenades," Coeur said.

"What grenades?"

"The grenades in that sack," Coeur said, gesturing at the sack with her gun barrel. "What, you think I'm stupid?"

"No," Darien said, dipping his hand into the sack and pulling out the grenades--linked into a ring by a chain through their pins, "I don't think you're stupid. I think if you don't put this on your head, though, you'll be sorry."

"A crown of grenades?"

"No, Red Sun, it's a psi shield."

"It doesn't look like a psi shield to me."

"Coeur, trust me. I don't care who you think I am, or what this looks like, but you're one step short of going over the edge. Don't you remember Captain Redwood?"

"Shut up."

"Look, Coeur," Darien said, holding out the ring of grenades, "you've got two choices--you can shoot me, or you can put this on. What's it going to be?"

For a moment, Coeur wavered, on the verge of blasting him and finally purging this voice from her past. It was not a choice she was willing to make, though, and she flipped the safety of the gun back on.

"You put it on," she said, lowering the gun, closing her eyes and bowing her head.

Darien made no comment. A moment later, however, Coeur felt the cold metal of the fragmentation bombs brush against her forehead and temples, and assumed the end game had come.

But it's all right, she thought, feeling the weight of the crown settle on her head. I'd rather die now, here, than drag this out any further.

X O X O X

Expecting death, Coeur was not satisfied. Almost as soon as the crown rested on her head, she felt its weight disappear, together with the distant hum of the engines. Only the gun remained the same as Coeur opened her eyes and found herself in a now darkened head, with a nervously anxious Bender before her.

"I was almost afraid you'd shoot," he said.

"What the hell is going on?" Coeur asked, looking at her deeply shadowed reflection in the mirror, seeing the chemise replaced with a black body sleeve, and the ring of grenades replaced with a netlike psi shield--lying skullcap fashion upon her head.

"That's a long story," Bender said. "I think it's time you heard it, though."

"Do you know what's going on?"

"Not entirely," Bender admitted. "I figured out what they were doing to you, though, and got to you before it went too far."

"Who's 'they'?" Coeur asked. "And how do I know this--*you*--aren't just another illusion?"

"You don't. You've got to believe me, though, they did the same thing to me when I landed here with *Cymbeline Victrix*. That's how I know what they're up to."

"Who?"

"I don't know, exactly. I know it's some kind of telepathic manipulation, though, since the psi shield can block it. I've got one on, under my hair, so I think we're both safe to talk."

"Where did you get that psi shield?" Coeur asked, holstering her pistol and gesturing to the corridor. "They're hardly standard equipment."

"From my Hiver," Bender said, backing up before Coeur, and retreating to one of the two seats on the stripped and neglected bridge. "He found a box of these down in the digs, before he died."

"A box of psi shields?" Coeur said, sitting down opposite Bender. "What were those doing down in the digs?"

"Part of the factory complex," Bender said. "You'll remember SuSAG already had experience with psi drugs. What's important for us, though, is those psi shields are the only ones available here in the city."

"You checked?"

"I checked. You can't even find a library data entry *about* psi shielding in the Comnet."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Coeur said, recalling the deliberate excision of 'The Lotos-Eaters' from the Comnet. "Are the psi shields still on your sloop?"

"Well hidden," Darien said, "yes. Like I told you, I was subjected to mind control just like you were here--and I wanted to use a shield to protect myself--but then I realized I didn't know who was trying to manipulate me, and I figured if I put on the psi shield, I'd let whoever was trying to manipulate me know I was on to them."

"But you've got the psi shield now."

"I was waiting," Bender said, "until they tried to do the same thing to somebody else. It was subtle, but I realized the same thing was happening to you after you got here--especially when you saw that hallucination in the council chamber."

"You noticed that?"

"I noticed that."

"Tell me about it," Coeur said. "What happened to you, exactly?"

"It started about a year ago," Bender said, "just after we landed. Like you, probably, I started seeing visions of people I used to know, then I had a flat-out breakdown and thought my crew was trying to kill me, and I felt I had to get back to the RC to warn them about the planet. I came here to this ship--just like you did--and I thought I had escaped the planet. Somehow, I managed to steer back to the Coalition and report to Hammer, but before he could debrief me the hallucination ended. I was back here in *Samantha*, and nobody ever told me what happened."

"I'll be damned," Coeur said. "That would have happened to me, too."

"Probably. There's an important difference, though, between you and me. I'm just an *acting* captain, taking over from an actual commander, and I don't have access to the top secret data of an actual command officer."

"You think that's the point of all this? Getting information about the Coalition?"

"Yes. I don't know all the details, but I'm sure that Dr. Trigant must be involved somehow. She showed me how to get to this ship, just like she showed you, and she was never far away when I had a hallucination."

More footsteps--suddenly sounding in the gangway--interrupted Bender, and both Arses looked up to see Trigant herself standing there at the aft hatch. Apparently alone, she nevertheless appeared calm and amused, holding a fusion pistol before herself.

"Very perceptive, Bender," she said. "You're not half as stupid as I thought."

Considering drawing her own pistol, Coeur reconsidered as Trigant turned her gun to cover her.

"And the same goes for you," Trigant said. "Most people don't have the willpower to break out of one of my fantasies."

"Well, I did have help," Coeur said, glancing at Bender.

"Yes, quite," Trigant agreed. "Lieutenant, if you would be so kind, please take your gun out and drop it on the deck."

"Sure that's safe?" Coeur asked, mindful of the fusion rounds carried in her gun.

"Yes, I'm sure--I designed the gun myself. Don't get any smart ideas, though--even the stun setting on this pistol is potentially lethal."

Heeding the warning, Coeur drew her pistol from her holster and tossed it onto the floor.

"So," Coeur said, "you want to tell us what this all about, or do we just take off the psi shields and get another fantasy?"

"No," Trigant said, "setting up a fantasy takes a fair amount of preparation--it isn't like a simple mind probe or mind assault. Obviously, though, now that the fantasy failed, I'll have to resort to cruder measures to get what I want."

"Torture?" Coeur asked.

"No, just a deep mind probe. It might seem like torture, though, after the first few hours of rooting around in your head."

Shaking his head, Bender looked up at Trigant.

"I don't get it," he said. "Just what exactly do you want from us? What could you get from us living a fantasy that you couldn't get from a mind probe?"

Amused, Trigant lifted her gun into a slightly less threatening position.

"Obviously, you don't know much about telepathy. What I was after was detailed knowledge about your Coalition defenses, but that's not the kind of thing you can get from telepathy. The way a human brain stores memory isn't like a computer, with discrete information stored in discrete locations; fragments of memory and sense impressions are stored all over the brain, and the mind only puts them together when it consciously tries to remember something."

"So what is telepathy good for," Coeur asked, "if the brain is just a scramble of memories?"

"Telepathy is useful," Trigant replied, "in sensing a person's surface thoughts, or getting a glimpse of her subconscious. To get what I wanted, though, I had to make you believe you were actually travelling back to the Coalition, so I could see the Coalition defenses directly, as you would see them. With any luck, you would have proceeded directly to Hammer for debriefing, and I would have seen everything I needed from charts, diagrams and schematics in the Arses HQ."

"You could *do* that?" Coeur asked.

"Yes, I could."

"So why did you need to do it to both of us?" Bender asked. "Wasn't I enough?"

"No. Obviously, the raw material for the fantasy came from your own mind--you could only see things you were familiar with from real life. I had no way to know it when you came here, but you never spent any time in the Arses HQ. I assumed you'd know something, since you were in command of *Cymbeline Victrix*, but that was only a temporary arrangement. Lt. D' Esprit, on the other hand, *is* a line officer, and she certainly would have shown me what I wanted."

"What about Captain Redwood," Coeur asked, "from Exage? How's she figure in this?"

"An early failed experiment," Trigant said. "I applied too much pressure to her, dragged up childhood fears of the shukugan, and lost control of her."

"Gaia," Coeur said, "you are one crazy bitch."

"Complements will get you nowhere," Trigant said, calmly. "If you would, please, both of you stand up and move to the rear of the ship."

Standing up next to Trigant, who was small and lightly built, both Coeur and Bender had the same thought--distracting the doctor and getting the gun away from her--but they restrained themselves, thinking they both had the same card up their sleeve.

"Well, all I know," Bender said, "is I told my Marine lieutenant where I was going before I left the sloop. Her whole platoon is probably waiting right outside the hangar."

"Alas," Trigant said, walking behind the Arses, "I think not. Stim field generators will confuse anyone who gets too close."

"What the hell are those?" Coeur said.

"Toys, basically," Trigant said, directing the Arses to leave the ship and descend to the floor of the hangar. "As I told you earlier, they basically enhance the production of alpha waves in the brain. If the power is turned up high enough, though, a stim field can cause confusion and panic."

Coeur frowned, looking at the hangar air lock, revealing no sign at all of bomb damage.

"I guess you've got it all covered," Coeur said.

"Yes, I do," Trigant said. "Now let's be civil and walk on out to my speeder."

"Just one minute," Coeur said, turning around to face Trigant. "Regardless of what your plan was, what did you plan to do with all the data you got from us? Obviously, your city isn't very big, and you don't have a navy or an army."

"Power," Trigant replied, "isn't merely strength of numbers."

Offering a curious look, Coeur invited an explanation.

"I think I've told you enough, though," Trigant said. "Someday, perhaps, I'll tell you the rest."

X O X O X

Someday, for Trigant, would come sooner than she expected. Almost as soon as she started the Arses toward the air lock again, no less than four crewmembers from *Hornet* stepped through the air lock to block her path. By far the most impressive crewmember was Drop Kick, armed with a gauss rifle/grenade launcher and leading the way in his battle dress, but Serene, Physis, and Snapshot were heavily armed as well, wearing flak jackets over their body sleeves, and holding their PDLs up in firing positions.

"All right, Doctor," Drop Kick said, through his suit speakers, "drop the gun, and put your hands on your head."

Scanning the firepower of her adversaries, Trigant paused for a moment, then dropped her pistol and put her hands on her head.

"Right," Drop Kick said, keeping his rifle trained on the Arkie, "Physis, tie her up."

"Glad to," Physic said, holstering her personal laser and advancing with a plastic hand restraint.

"Well, it's about time you showed up," Coeur said. "You must have seen me leave *Hornet*."

"Yes, we did," Physic said, pulling the Arkie's hands down behind her back, "whacked out of your head."

"But what about the stim field?" Bender asked. "Wasn't that supposed to confuse people?"

"We were confused," Drop Kick said, "but not Serene. Whatever was messing with us couldn't get through her shield."

"The telepath," Trigant said, wincing as Physic cinched her wrists together behind her back, and pulled off her comlink.

"Yes," Serene said, "fortunately, I wasn't affected by your little toy. I used my second sight to find the hangar, then we blew up the stim field generator out in the desert."

"Strange," Coeur said to Trigant. "Since you read my mind, I would have thought you would know about Serene."

"I did," Trigant admitted. "I just didn't consider her a threat."

"Your mistake, apparently," Serene said, turning to Coeur and thinking directly into her mind.

Coeur, the director could still be a threat. You, me and Bender have psi shields, but the doctor could still mind assault the rest of us.

Coeur nodded.

"Physic," Coeur said, "you got a med kit there?"

"Right here," Physic said, patting a pack on her hip.

"You got something you can knock the doctor out with?"

"No," Physic said. "I could probably make her groggy, though."

"Good enough. Do it."

Physic nodded, zipping open her bag and taking out a pocket medical scanner.

"What are you doing?" Coeur asked.

"Well, I've got to see if she's healthy," Physic said, opening the doctor's blouse and placing the scanner against her chest, "before I shoot her full of stolicaine."

"Oh, right."

As Physic pulled the scanner back from the doctor's chest, though, and read the readout, she was thoroughly puzzled.

"What's the matter?" Coeur asked.

"Captain, I think this woman is..."

The rest of the thought went unexpressed. Suddenly, Physic went rigid--as if knocked senseless by an overwhelming noise--then fell to the hangar floor with her eyes rolled up in their sockets.

"Oh, fikk," Coeur said, diving for the fusion pistol still on the ground. Trigant stuck out a leg to trip Coeur, however, and--as Coeur stumbled into Bender and Serene--snapped the restraint behind her back.

"Drop Kick, shoot her!" Snapshot yelled, but Drop Kick--locked in his ponderous armor--barely had time to lower his gun before Trigant, scooping up the fusion pistol, blasted him square in the center of his breastplate. Thrown backward by the force of the blow, Drop Kick then fell with a flaming hole in the middle of his breastplate, and Snapshot--witnessing the likely death of her fiancé--reacted first with shock, then with full automatic laser fire directed at Trigant.

The fire was not effective. Far stronger and more nimble than she looked, Trigant fell into a roll then came up next to Snapshot, knocking away the gunner's PDL with her left hand and punching her flat in the nose with her right. Cartilage crunched, blood flew and Snapshot fell.

Luckily for Coeur, though, her companions did not panic. Bender and Serene both charged Trigant, who was caught by surprise as Serene kicked the fusion pistol out of her hand with a snap kick; Bender then grabbed Trigant from behind, pinning her arms to her side.

"All right, settle down," Bender suggested.

Trigant was unimpressed. Slipping a leg behind Bender, she moved into a kneel and Bender, feeling himself thrown backwards, released his hold on Trigant. On the ground with Bender, she then cracked his ribs with an elbow thrust, and sprung up in time to forearm block a solid punch from Serene.

"You know your tachi-waza," Serene said, blocking a return punch from Trigant.

"And you know your karate," Trigant said, attempting another open-handed strike, and a punch without success.

"I've had a long time to study."

"Maybe you should study harder," Trigant suggested, finally throwing Serene off balance with a feint, and cracking her flush in the head with a flying roundhouse kick.

Bleeding from the hit, Serene went reeling to the ground and Coeur was now the last on her feet with Trigant. Now, though, she had the fusion pistol, and did not hesitate to use it. Discarding the stun setting as frivolous, she aimed the gun at the back of the turned Trigant and squeezed the trigger.

"That won't fire at me," Trigant said calmly, turning around.

"God," Coeur said, "you are one annoying woman."

"Only when you get on my bad side," Trigant replied. "Shall we go on to the speeder, now?"

"Yeah, sure," Coeur said.

Working on a hunch, though, Coeur suddenly directed the gun barrel at the hull of *Samantha* just a few meters back behind Trigant and fired. Sure enough, *that* worked, yielding a spray of plasma that deflected off the hull and caught Trigant--surprised at last--in the back.

Unfortunately, the superheated blobs--searing through the air with temperatures that would melt any metal--also landed on Bender, but Coeur ignored that for the moment as Trigant stumbled forward from the blast with her back on fire. Assuming this at last would distract the Arkie, Coeur then retrieved the gauss rifle from Drop Kick and expended the magazine on Trigant. Still intact up to then, Trigant then fairly exploded, her flesh and clothes ripped to tatters as she fell pouring blood from a half-a-dozen severed arteries.

Even as the doctor fell, though, Coeur noted something else emerging from doctor's body as she was hit--smoke and sparks. At the back of her mind, two other thoughts already vied for attention--the likelihood of reinforcements arriving for Trigant, and the need to move the injured back to *Hornet*--but even as she moved toward Bender, she could not keep her eyes off the spectacle of Trigant and her smoldering body. Under the torn clothing, flesh, blood and muscle, machinery now smoldered, burning with the unmistakable stench of metal and plastic.

A robot! Coeur thought. A goddamned robot...!

*Gaia, why couldn't **this** be an illusion...?*

CHAPTER SEVEN

As Coeur would learn in the coming minutes, there was nothing at all to suggest that the sprawl of broken bodies surrounding her was anything but reality. Finding the ribs over Bender's heart broken, Coeur knew she did not dare attempt CPR, and even

rescue breathing had no effect except to let her taste the still-hot blood in his mouth. Clearly, what she needed was the expertise of Physic.

Here, Coeur was lucky--hurt first, Physic was also hurt least, and was already hovering near consciousness when Coeur got to her. When Physic got to Bender, though, and took stock of his injuries with her medical scanner, she found there was nothing she could do.

"He's dead, Coeur," Physic said. "All we can do is get him to a low berth."

Coeur nodded, grimly, letting Physic move on to Serene. She herself mumbled, "I think he saved my life," though, as she moved over to Drop Kick.

"We might still save him," Physic replied, kneeling to examine Serene. "Serene looks all right, anyway. Just a concussion."

"Well, I don't know about Drop Kick," Coeur replied, applying her knowledge of battle dress to release the torso from the legs of the armor. Then, as if she were pulling the meat from the limb of a crustacean, she pulled the body of Drop Kick into the open, and was gratified to find him still alive.

"Damn, he's lucky," Coeur said. "I'd say second-degree burns only."

"That is lucky," Physic said, moving on to Snapshot. "He got off better than his girlfriend."

"How bad is she?"

"Looks like a broken nose," Physic replied. "There's no inflammation of the brain, though, so it could be worse."

"Can we move them?" Coeur asked.

"Carefully," Physic said, bending over Drop Kick to confirm Coeur's diagnosis. "I don't know if we're going to have the chance, though. Surely, the city police are going to get here first."

"Yes," Coeur said, letting Physic remain with the wounded, and moving with the gauss rifle and a fresh magazine to the air lock. Outside, however, she did not find the Godsarc police; instead, she was pleased and relieved to see a squad of fully armored Coalition Marines advancing through the sand beyond the hangar.

Halt, the Marine leader said, lifting up her fist in the Anslan gesture, then pointing to her left and her right.

Understanding the orders to break off, two fire teams of four moved off at once to the left and the right. The leader and four troopers continued on to the air lock, however, where Coeur now stood with her hands up, just to be on the safe side.

"Red Sun," Ripsaw said, raising her visor. "Is Bender with you?"

"Yes," Coeur said. "Your captain is dead."

"Fikk," Ripsaw spat. "Damn that Bender, running off without us."

"Never mind that," Coeur said. "Did you meet resistance?"

"Some," Ripsaw said, moving into the air lock with her fire team, "a Guard fire team with heavy battle dress. We pushed them back, though, once we got here."

"You get lost?" Coeur asked, escorting the troopers into the hangar.

"Yes, the air raft drivers couldn't figure out how to read their maps. They sorted that out, though, eventually."

Coeur nodded, remembering the stim field.

The Marines meanwhile, fanned out into the hangar, making what they could of the carnage. Although they were Marines, trained to be disciplined, the young men were clearly troubled by the death of their second captain, and the discovery that Dr. Trigant was actually a robot.

"Good Gaia," Ripsaw said. "What the hell happened?"

"It's a long story. Skipping to the punch line, Dr. Trigant was a telepath, and an android, and she damn near killed us all. She was trying to extract Coalition defense data from Bender and me, but my people got the drop on her."

"Unbelievable. Do you know if this went beyond the doctor?"

"I don't know," Coeur said, "and I don't care. The minute the jump file transfer is complete, I advise both our ships blast the hell out of here."

"I agree," Ripsaw said. "It doesn't really much matter what I think, though, since you're the ranking officer of both ships now."

Coeur nodded, glad to have the support. On the face of it, what Ripsaw said was obvious, but Coeur could not press her authority without the Marines behind her.

"Okay. How many vehicles do you have?"

"A launch, an air raft, and two broomsticks."

"Good. Have your medics help the doctor get the wounded out of here."

Ripsaw nodded, passing the order on to a sergeant.

"There should be plenty of room," Ripsaw reported back to Coeur. "What are we going to do, though, once we get back to the spaceport? We've still got people in the digs, and they could be taken prisoner by the police."

"And there's Newton, too," Physic interjected, overhearing. "He never came back to the ship."

"Right," Coeur said, continuing to talk to Ripsaw. "Is there any back way out of the digs?"

"No, sir."

"Then we'll get them out somehow," Coeur said. "First, though, do you know what a stim field generator looks like?"

"Sure. There's at least a dozen of them scattered around the spaceport."

"There *are*?"

"Sure. I asked Bender if we should remove them, but he said no, we didn't want to offend the Arkies."

"Well, we're offending them now. I want all the generators destroyed."

"Very well."

"And as soon as you can," Coeur added, "search the sloop for a box of psi shields. Bender said they're hidden somewhere in the ship."

"Anything else?"

"Just one thing," Coeur said, looking back at Trigant. "Get a combat engineer to check out that body for booby traps, then bring it along."

"A hostage?"

"Leverage," Coeur said, "in case we can't get your people out of the city."

Ripsaw nodded, assigning the task to a corporal.

"I like your style, Captain," Ripsaw said. "You don't fikk around."

Coeur, however, did not accept the compliment. There was still a lot of work to do, and it would be a miracle if any of them were still alive tomorrow.

X O X O X

Meanwhile at Godsarc University, Newton had reacted to Coeur's shooting by a library robot with panic; Newton had already pried the cover off an air conditioning conduit in order to investigate the smell of Hiver larvae wafting up from the bowels of the city, and it now took advantage of the ready-made escape route to scramble away to safety. Several meters down the conduit, it then hunkered down, breathing hard through the nose on its back, straining to listen for any sound of pursuit.

Alone in the conduit, however, Newton found no pursuit forthcoming. Returning to its senses, it recalled a comment the captain had made before--that the Godsarc robots were built to be stupid, to better avoid infestation by Virus. If that were true, then, the librarian might not have the initiative to begin a search for Newton, or volunteer its knowledge of the Hiver without probing questions from the police.

Slim though this hope was, it finally inclined the Hiver to stand up off its belly, spin its torso back around and start off deeper into the duct, holding a spherical flashlight in the fingers of its prime limb.

True to its nature, Newton expected trouble with every step, but there was nothing more eventful than the periodic blast of hot or cold air at a conduit junction. The Hiver barely felt these, though, through its tough, rubbery skin, and eventually it settled down to focus on the original reason for entering the conduit. The scent of a larva was still strong, and Newton finally caught sight of its quarry after several turns up, down, to the left, and the right. There, peeking around the corner of a conduit junction, was a rat-sized Hiver larva, almost certainly dropped within the past week.

"Larva," Newton said, pausing to employ the Hiver gestural language, *"take me to your nest."*

The larva, unfortunately, was far too young to understand, lacking--at this stage in its development--any more than rudimentary intelligence. The frightened scavenger did, however, have an instinct for self-preservation, and fled at once from the strangely gesticulating Newton.

Vaguely remembering its own childhood, hiding out from razorclaws in a swamp on Glea, Newton was not surprised. Curious about the origin of the larva, however, Newton raced on after the larva, and found itself thwarted by the creature's smaller size. Ducking through the slats of another air conditioner vent, the larva left Newton with no other choice but to take out a screwdriver and unscrew the bolts holding the vent cover onto its bracket.

Riven between the conflicting motivations of fear and curiosity, Newton shrank back as soon as the cover came loose and clattered to the metal catwalk below. After a pause, though, it stuck its head out of the vent and found a smiling man in a hard hat looking back at itself.

"Can I help you?" the man asked.

"Indeed," Newton replied, looking down through the grating of the catwalk and discerning a maze of pumps, pipes and storage tanks. "I'm looking for a Hiver larva that passed this way several seconds ago."

"A larva?"

"A small creature," Newton explained, "resembling myself."

"Oh, is that what you call those things? Larvae?"

"Yes, that's the proper Anglic term. Have you seen it?"

"Oh, sure, they're all over the place. One of them just ran past me, heading off toward the old fusion plant."

"Which way is that?"

"Through that hatch," the helpful man said, nodding to the door at the end of the catwalk. "Turn left, go up a couple meters, then swing a right at the sewage plant."

"Thank you, sir," Newton said, finally daring to step out of the vent. "I take it I won't cause any trouble by being here."

"No. What trouble could you cause?"

"None at all," Newton said. "I am completely harmless."

The Hiver then passed on beyond the human worker, who went back about his business a moment later, as if nothing had happened.

X O X O X

As Newton expected, down among the machinery supporting the city, it soon met other humans--and robots as well--but these took more notice of the Hiver than any other people in the city. Indeed, Newton was almost inclined to believe it was immune to whatever nefarious force had assaulted Coeur, but this changed when it paused at the sewage plant.

Here, surrounded by humming machinery, and faced with a fork in the corridor, Newton paused to indulge a favorite hobby--absorbing new smells. Certainly, the pumping effluent here was distinctive, and it spent several seconds sniffing around various valves and sewage tanks; unfortunately, though, the scent was so powerful that it actually overpowered the scent of the larva, and Newton--confused--spent a long moment wondering where to go next.

The decision got made for him when something reached out and grabbed its equipment harness, dragging the Hiver suddenly back from the corridor and in among a warren of pipes and electrical conduits. Startled and frightened, Newton then considered how to contrive an explanation for its trespass in the area, but--bending its head around to see who was holding the harness--it found a somewhat familiar figure. Gray-haired Justin Walder--now wearing gray-green trousers and a tee shirt in place of his BIA jumpsuit--was staring back at Newton, evidently as surprised to meet the Hiver as the Hiver was to meet him.

"Newton," he said, in a whisper, "am I right?"

"Indeed," Newton answered, relaxing.

"Well, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing. Our captain appeared to be most intent on discovering your whereabouts."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Walder said. "Look, you can't just go wandering around the city like that--somebody will see you."

"Evidently," Newton replied, "many people have seen me. None have taken any obvious notice, however."

"I don't mean the ordinary people--I mean the police and the Councilor Guard."

"What, precisely, is the difference between the police and the regular citizenry?"

"The difference," Walder replied, "is the police and the Guard all have psi shields, so they're immune to the effect of the stim field generators."

"Curious. I have no psi shield myself, yet I've sensed no change in my mental condition."

"The stim field only has an effect on humans," Walder said, keeping a wary eye on the corridor. "That's the number one reason they're going to take you out of circulation."

"If I may make an observation," Newton countered, "I find at least one flaw in your logic. There must be at least one other Hiver who is not 'out of circulation', since I have just encountered a freshly laid Hiver larva."

"Well, yeah," Walder said. "Pascal."

"Pascal? You mean the technical advisor from *Cymbeline Victrix*?"

"Yes, I assume so. He's what I meant by being 'out of circulation', though. They've got him kept in a room below the fusion plant."

"Is Pascal heavily guarded?"

"No, there's no guard at all. He's in some kind of trance, though, and I haven't had any luck trying to talk to him."

"Can you take me to him?" Newton asked. "Without attracting attention?"

"Yes," Walder said, "I live down here. I know my way around."

"Fortuitous. Lead on then, sir, if you would."

X O X O X

The place where Walder led Newton was surprising--a narrow fissure in the rock behind the sewage plant, difficult for a human to pass through and even more challenging for a Hiver with equipment. As the pair negotiated the passage, though, Newton took the opportunity to ask Walder about himself.

"Are you a telepath, Mr. Walder?"

"Yes. I didn't realize it, though, until after I had grown up."

"You kept your talent secret, then."

"Yes. I didn't know much about my talent at first, but eventually I learned how to put up a shield against the stim field. That's when I realized how enslaved everybody in the city was--and how much of a threat I could be to the council."

"What did you do before you went into hiding?"

"I was an engineer," Walder said, adding with a chuckle, "for the College of Technology. It got too hard for me to hide my shield, though, so I staged my own death and started living down here in the caves."

"Interesting. Why did you give a copy of 'The Lotos-Eaters' to our captain, then?"

Walder paused, and Newton regarded the face of the man with interest, lit only by the feeble light of its flashlight.

"Because," Walder said, "I knew she was in danger. Both of the captains who came here before went mad, and I felt she had to be warned."

"I take it you are referring to Captain Redwood and Captain Antonov."

"Yes."

"I was not aware that Captain Antonov was insane."

"The episode was brief, before you came here. I saw the pattern, though, and I knew she had to be warned."

"Indeed. Do you know precisely what caused the madness, though?"

"I don't know. I'd be willing to gamble the doctors are behind it, though--Trigant and Larsen. They've been here since the city was built, they've made all the real decisions for the city council, they've designed every major piece of technology we have, and their minds are shielded so they can't be read; I wouldn't be surprised if they're actually telepathic as well."

"They certainly are a talented pair. But do you have any concrete proof of their misdeeds?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure they aren't the ordinary humans they claim to be. I think they're actually sophisticated androids masquerading as human beings."

"That's quite a claim."

"I have evidence. When I worked for the government, I found plans for a pair of high technology androids--state-of-the-art machines designed by SuSAG for the Last Imperium. They would have been incredibly expensive--androids designed for

espionage and assassination, indistinguishable from human beings--but the record said at least two were built, both in the form of human women."

"Trigant and Larsen?"

"Possibly. I know this much, though--there's almost no food or water ever delivered to the women's apartments, and no one has ever seen them sleep."

"Interesting. Surely you must realize, though, that the Last Imperium never built a self-aware android. You seem to be ascribing extraordinary intelligence to these machines."

"Maybe. I know a little about Virus, though, and I know it can make even a simple robot self-aware."

Newton paused, considering the possibility.

"An interesting theory. This city was destroyed at the dawn of the Collapse, and the androids could have been here, exposed to the wave of Virus sweeping over the Imperium."

"That's my theory."

"You mentioned earlier, though, your suspicion they might be telepathic. How would that be possible?"

"Well, maybe they don't have *real* telepathy," Walder conceded, "but the robots had micro-miniaturized neural activity sensors and neural weapons built into their chassis. My guess is they modified the systems to simulate the effects of true telepathy."

"Ingenious," Newton said. "If what you say is true, though, the women could present an unprecedented threat to the Coalition. Almost certainly, the earlier attempt to insert Viral code into *Cymbeline Victrix* was done at their behest."

"Yes--fortunately, they do make mistakes. They've almost certainly infected the main city processor with their Viral code, and they've virtually enslaved every human here with the stim field."

"Is there no hope of resisting the stim field?"

"Some people can, for a while. Given a long enough time, though, it'll wear down anyone's resistance."

"If that is true, then, the danger is grave. I should warn my shipmates."

"Well, I agree the danger is grave," Walder said, "but it isn't necessarily immediate. We could probably still afford to visit Pascal."

Newton mulled this over, torn now between the dueling motivations of duty and curiosity. Eventually curiosity, the greater motivation, won out.

"Indeed. Let us continue on to Pascal."

X O X O X

Although humans could not see any obvious difference among individual Hivers, Hivers themselves were acutely aware of minor differences in color and manner among their own kind. Whereas a human child was usually raised by a small family unit, a year-old Hiver--recognized at that age as a sentient being--would be raised by a nest with as many as 500 members; of necessity, then, a Hiver developed an early sense for faces and identities.

Finding Pascal, for instance--left in an empty storeroom with an unlocked door, under the auxiliary fusion reactor--Newton immediately recognized a member from a neighboring nest on Glea. Unhappily, though, the Hiver showed no sign of noticing either Newton or Walder, intent as it was on the portable computer workstation where it sat.

"This is odd," Newton said to Walder, after attempting unsuccessfully to speak with Pascal. "He doesn't seem to see us."

"Yes," Walder said, checking to make certain the door to the storeroom slid shut behind them. "You see that hemispherical thing in the middle of the workstation?"

"Indeed."

"That's a stim field generator--heavily modified. As near as I can tell, it must be tuned directly to the frequency of the Hiver brain."

"Strange. I do not feel anything."

"Well, it's tuned into Pascal's frequency, then. All I know is when I tried to turn it off he panicked and hid in a corner of the room. The only way I could calm him down was to turn the machine on again."

Newton considered this, and was not surprised. Newton itself felt an urge to bolt at this very moment, although police patrols appeared to neglect this area, and there was no evidence Newton or Walder was seen going in. Lacking its voder, and therefore unable to speak to Walder, Pascal was probably lucky he did not faint when the human brought it out of its trance in this stark and empty chamber.

"Some of our kind do have trouble controlling their fear," Newton said, with affected nonchalance, moving closer to Pascal for a look at the workstation computer display. "Tell me, Mr. Walder, do you recognize the language being used here?"

"No. I assumed it's Hiver."

"Indeed it is," Newton said, admiring the swiftly moving characters on the screen, "Hiver ideographic programming language. Pascal appears to be working on some kind of cryptogrammatic algorithm."

"You mean some kind of hacking program."

"Yes. It is a question, though, what he is hacking into. The target architecture does not resemble the data system from *Hornet* or *Cymbeline Victrix*."

"Well, he must be hacking into something. Could it be a city system?"

"Possibly. That hardly seems likely, though, since you said that Pascal was imprisoned here against his will."

Walder shrugged.

"Maybe," Walder suggested, "we could try to ask him. Before, I shut the power off all at once, but I could try to ease the power down slowly while you talk to him."

"A laudable suggestion," Newton agreed. "Let us proceed."

Expecting nothing, Newton and Pascal were startled to find that the plan actually worked. Weaned off the stim field slowly by Walder, Pascal showed signs of panic, but then recovered when it caught sight of Newton, who spoke to the fellow Hiver with Hiver gestures.

Mindful of the earlier panic of Pascal, Walder quickly moved out of sight behind Pascal after the stim field was off--letting Newton take over the contact--but Walder sensed the relaxation of Pascal in the conversation that followed. Naturally mute, the Hivers made no sound at all, but waved and wiggled their forelimbs and fingers, and tapped and stroked each other's forelimbs and fingers, orchestrating a conversation that began with slow movements and built to a rapid conclusion. At the end, Pascal turned around to look at Walder, and Newton spoke on its behalf.

"Pascal offers his apology," Newton said, "for losing his composure in your earlier meeting."

"Does he understand Anglic?" Walder asked Newton.

"Yes."

Walder nodded, speaking to Pascal.

"No need to apologize. I should apologize to you."

The mute Hiver dipped its head, acknowledging the comment.

"Did he say what he's doing here?" Walder asked Newton.

"Indeed. Pascal--who is a specialist in computer programming--believed he was working on a hacking program at the behest of his Captain Antonov. It would appear, however, that this was a delusion engendered by the stim field."

"Similar to the madness of the starship captains. I'd think you'd have to tune a stim field pretty carefully to affect an individual person that way."

"Indeed. Perhaps that explains the small number of beings assailed by madness."

"Well," Walder said, with a shrug, "madness induced by a stim field, anyway. It still leaves the question, though, what Pascal was hacking into."

Suddenly, Pascal spoke up, though Newton.

"Pascal has an idea," Newton said. "Although he was unaware of the context of the programming, he certainly remembers the actual tasks that he was doing. Primarily, these consisted of trying to break the security on the central city computer, but the codes changed every time he was successful."

"Sounds like the kind of stuff we used to do in the College," Walder said, "pretend-hacking, to find out weaknesses in the system."

"Logical. Pascal is a master cryptanalyst."

"But why is he so lightly guarded here? You'd think the doctors would have the Guard all over him."

Again, Pascal offered an explanation through Newton.

"Perhaps the doctors are not the only Viral intelligence in the city."

"Of course," Walder said, snapping his fingers, "IDA!"

"Excuse me?"

"IDA," Walder explained, "is the acronym for the city central computer--Imperial Data Applications Model 515. She seems stupid--and probably is stupid--but she's got so much memory she almost had to be infected by Virus at the same time as the androids."

"Perhaps there is a triad of power in the city, then, and this leg of the triad is trying to gain more power."

"It makes sense to me. IDA probably took control of a few local robots, abducted Pascal and stuffed him in this room to practice hacking through the security restrictions Trigrant and Larsen shackled it down with decades ago."

"That is possible," Newton said. "I wonder what practical use we could make of this information, though."

"Well, I don't know," Walder said to Pascal. "Is there a practical application?"

"Possibly," Pascal answered, through Newton. "If nothing else, Pascal does know enough about the city architecture to shut down the power grid temporarily. That would not affect the safety interlocks on the antimatter, of course, or the androids, but it would shut down the stim field generators throughout the city, and shut off power to the deep site meson guns."

"What about the hospitals?" Walder asked. "And emergency services?"

"Those have dedicated reserve power," Newton replied for Pascal. "They would not be affected."

"This could be good, then," Walder said, nodding. "With the meson guns down, it would make it a whole lot easier to get off the planet."

"Indeed," Newton said. "I should point, out, though, that our jump program transfer to *Cymbeline Victrix* will not be complete until tomorrow."

"Could *Cymbeline Victrix* take off without the program?"

"Yes, certainly. She simply would not be able to make a jump away from the system."

"What about your captain, then, Captain D' Esprit? Would she be willing to take me with you?"

"I would assume so."

"Then screw it," Walder said. "I say we spike the bastard now and get the hell out of here."

Newton and Pascal discussed the suggestion briefly before responding.

"We agree," Newton said, adding, after a moment, "spike the bastard."

X O X O X

Although Dagmar Larsen wore 10 cm stiletto heels, she moved with a lightness of step that often startled people who did not see her coming. Standing behind his engineering workstation, for instance, Crowbar had no notion of the woman's presence until she stepped up behind him and put her arms around him.

"Dagmar," the startled engineer said, coming around in her arms, "how did you get here?"

"I came through the belly hatch," Larsen answered. "You left it open."

"Well, maybe you should come back later," Crowbar suggested. "There's been an emergency and I think the captain's gone missing."

"But," Larsen said, softly, "isn't there anyone else on the ship?"

"Sure, there's Gyro, and Vega, and Sixer, up on the bridge..."

"Well, then," Larsen said, her voice now low and husky, "why don't we just let them worry about the captain?"

Before Crowbar could reply, or extricate himself, Larsen took the initiative in an unexpected way; the front of Larsen's dress, suddenly fluid again, flowed outward away from her body and surrounded Crowbar, recongealing behind him and pinning his body to hers.

"Maybe you should reconsider," Larsen suggested.

"Yes, I see your point."

Behind Crowbar's back, meanwhile, Larsen's hands had not been idle. Unseen by Crowbar, a tiny drop of the clever cotton comprising the dress crawled down Larsen's arm to her fingertip, then into an open computer jack as Larsen brushed her fingertip across it. Less than a minute later, alarms went off across the engineering panel, and then throughout the ship.

Startled, but still bound to Larsen, Crowbar swung the both of them around to get a look at the panel.

"What is it?" Larsen asked.

"I don't believe it," Crowbar said, reaching around behind Larsen to activate a diagnostic program. "I thought we had that warhead secured..."

"Crowbar," Gyro snapped a moment later, from her turret, "what the hell is going on down there?"

"I don't know, this is crazy," Crowbar said, barely noticing as Larsen returned her dress to herself and slipped away. "I'm reading a detonation countdown from our last nuclear missile!"

"That's impossible," Gyro said. "The warhead has a triple fail-safe lock on it."

"Hey, I don't know *how* it happened," Crowbar answered, "all I know is it did. Right now, it's at a minute thirty, and I can't stop it."

"This is ridiculous," Gyro protested. "I've never heard of one of our missiles malfunctioning."

"Look, Gyro," Crowbar said, "it's too late to wonder how it happened. We've got to abandon ship!"

"Do we have power to launch?"

"No, not that quickly."

"All right," Gyro said, over the intercom, "all hands, abandon ship! Deep Six, alert the crew of *Cymbeline Victrix*, then get the hell down to the city in an elevator."

"Aye, sir."

Down in the engine room, meanwhile, Crowbar was keen to obey the order as well, planning on grabbing Larsen and getting out the same way she had come in.

Larsen, however, startled Crowbar again as she stood calmly before him, not at all concerned.

"Dagmar, we've got to go!"

"No, I think I'll stay."

Crowbar stared at her, dumbfounded.

"I like you, though," Larsen said, "so I think I'll keep you with me."

Whereupon, Crowbar felt a sudden shock in his head--billions of neurons induced to fire at once--and fell like a disarticulated mannequin to the deck.

X O X O X

Although Coeur was in a hurry to get her wounded back to *Cymbeline Victrix*, and the sloop's huge sixteen-bed sickbay, she still had a moment--as she and Ripsaw took the conn of the 14 meter launch--to indulge her curiosity about an obvious question.

"Ripsaw, these troopers of yours are getting the job done, but I'm still curious--why aren't they spaced-out like the rest of the crew?"

"I don't know. All I know is some of my troops have more discipline than the rest, so those were the ones I brought along."

"It's what I figured," Coeur said, powering up the launch from her pilot's seat. "Some people have more resistance to the stim field."

Ripsaw nodded, but she was not so sure of herself that she would not accept some insurance. After the launch lifted off, followed by two air rafts and three broomsticks, Coeur suggested Ripsaw put on the psi shield from Bender, and the marine accepted the suggestion, ordering a private to tease the metal network out of the engineer's hair.

Five minutes later, Ripsaw was glad she accepted the offer. Closing on the spaceport, she and Coeur saw no less than fifty Arses and Marines milling about before the spaceport elevator banks, suggesting a great feat of mind control had driven them from the ships.

"What the hell's going on down there?" Ripsaw asked.

"I don't know," Coeur said, circling around the spaceport, "But I can see my people down there--Gyro, Vega, Sixer. Get on the masercom and try to reach your ship."

Ripsaw complied, but received only silence.

"Nothing," she reported, "and nothing from your ship either."

"Gaia," Coeur said, trying to make some sense of the chaos. As the launch continued circling around the spaceport, though, with the air rafts and broomsticks in train, Ripsaw got her first response from someone on the ground--specifically Deep Six, with a radio headset.

"*Cymbeline Victrix* launch," he said, "this is Ensign Siltwater, third in command of *Hornet*. A 100 kiloton warhead on our ship is about to explode and you are advised to clear the area."

"Give me that," Coeur said, taking the comms headset from Ripsaw. "Sixer, what the hell are you talking about? That's a triple fail-safe missile!"

"Nevertheless, sir, that is the report from Crowbar."

"Where's Crowbar?"

Deep Six paused at that, rolling around in his rollerchair.

"I don't know, sir. Apparently, he's still aboard *Hornet*."

"Well, find him, for God's sake! Get me a channel to him!"

A sudden clang and thud behind Deep Six told him it was too late for that, however--that being the sound of *Hornet's* forward cargo hatch, port and starboard air locks and belly hatches slamming shut simultaneously. A faint whine then issued from the underside of the ship, and grew to a rumbling growl as the HEPIaR thrusters powered up and *Hornet* floated free of the ground in her contragrav envelope.

"This could be bad," Ripsaw said.

"Ripsaw," Coeur said, "does this launch have any kind of gun? Something that can penetrate armor?"

"No, sir, just a point defense laser."

Coeur smacked her instrument console, watching helplessly as *Hornet's* thrusters blasted dust into the startled throng on the tarmac. For a brief moment, *Hornet* strained at the coaxial cable still binding her to *Cymbeline Victrix*, then the cable snapped and *Hornet* broke free, rocketing upward toward the stratosphere.

For a moment, Coeur was taken aback. The moment was brief, however, as she collected herself and gave out new orders.

"Ripsaw, we're putting down. I want half your men to retake the sloop, I want the other half to round up the people on the tarmac, and I want you to grab a fusion rifle and come with me."

"To knock out the stim field?"

"Damn right," Coeur said, setting down next to the bow of *Cymbeline Victrix*, and releasing her seat restraint to dash for a side hatch.

"Captain," Gyro said, racing up, "what the hell's going on here?"

"Never mind that," Coeur said. "Get to the bridge of the sloop and prepare the laser batteries for defensive fire."

Ripsaw, meanwhile, had joined Coeur with a fusion rifle, and the two moved to commandeer a broomstick as Gyro ran toward the sloop. Before they could lift off, however, both Vega and Deep Six moved to intercept them, thoroughly confused.

"What the hell is this, Coeur?" Vega asked. "Some kind of half-ass parole, or what?"

"Forget the jokes," Coeur said. "Vega, get to the engine room and see to it power's available for launch. Sixer, you get to the bridge and salvage what you can of the jump program."

"Yes, sir," Deep Six and Vega replied, stepping back just in time to avoid getting struck by the rising skids of the broomstick.

Certain she would soon be under attack, and certain she would need the stim field at the spaceport knocked out to restore her people to their senses, Coeur shot the broomstick into the air as quickly as she could--meanwhile speaking to Ripsaw through a hardwired fiber-optic link stretching from her own headset through the broomstick trunk and into a jack in the trooper's battle dress.

"Where's the first generator?" Coeur asked.

"Bear left twelve degrees."

"Got it. That dome-shaped thing?"

"Check," Ripsaw said, taking aim with her laser sight and blasting the generator with a bolt from her fusion gun. No match for such firepower, the other eleven generators around the spaceport were then quickly flamed as well--including some Coeur could not see, well-hidden among the rocks.

"Nice shooting." Coeur said.

"Thanks. Good thing I scouted the area, or we never would have got those last two."

Coeur nodded, though--as she landed--she was reluctant to say they were lucky. As she expected, the annihilation of the stim field sent a shock through most of the crowd still milling about on the tarmac, with the crewmembers most addicted to stimulation either dropping to their knees in shock or bolting again for the elevators down to the city.

Potentially, this could have been disastrous, for Godsarc attack speeders--or even troopers on foot--could have mowed down this mob with impunity. Even as Coeur received encouraging reports from inside the sloop, then--that power was up, weapons activated, and casualties secured under the care of Physic and Hacker--she and Ripsaw were determined to get the dozen odd stragglers on the tarmac back in the ship.

"Corporal!" Ripsaw said, standing at the end of the forward ramp with Coeur, and stopping the nearest trooper, "fix bayonets if you have to! I want those people on board!"

"Yes, sir!" the trooper replied, moving off.

"Damnedest thing," Ripsaw said. "By now, we ought to be under attack."

"You'd think so," Coeur said. "Maybe something's interfering with their command and control."

What Coeur was thinking of, specifically, was the neutralization of Dr. Trigant. After tying up her corpse securely with plasteel cable, and throwing it into the back of the air raft, Ripsaw's troopers confirmed that she was purely mechanical--essentially, an elaborate android--and Coeur's mind gravitated toward the possibility that the crazy android was infected with Virus. If so, her intelligence might be part of the overall intelligence of the city, and the loss of her circuitry might have had a stunning effect on the overall machine.

Yeah, right, Coeur thought, reviewing her theory, and a Droyne might fly out of my butt. No modern computer system could be crippled that easily...

Indeed, the only proof she had was that they were not under attack. A few seconds later, though, another trooper came running down the ramp from inside the ship with a startling message.

"Red Sun!"

"Yes?"

"Just thought you'd like to know, sir, the comnet's gone off the air."

"What? The whole system?"

"Yes, sir. The connection's still hooked up to the ship, but nothing's coming through."

Coeur turned to Ripsaw.

"Could just be they're cutting us off," Coeur said.

"Or it could be that command and control break you mentioned. I think we ought to send down a broomstick to check out the city."

Coeur nodded.

"Do it."

Not a minute later, the broomstick with two armored troopers was in the air, descending into the canyon. There the pilot hovered for several seconds, then returned to make his report to Coeur.

"Sir," the private said, "it's the damnedest thing I've ever seen. The whole city's gone dead."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's no air traffic for one thing, and there's no lights on anywhere."

"Plus," the rear seat spotter said, "the people on the ground look pretty stunned. Some are running around crazy, and some are just standing there stunned."

"It must be a general power failure," Coeur speculated. "That would knock out the stim fields."

"If that's true," Ripsaw said, "this is our chance to split."

"No," Coeur said, "not yet. We've still got people here."

Ripsaw made an involuntary grunt of frustration. Although she wanted to protest, she knew well enough the minimal promise made to every spacer by the Coalition-- that he or she, dead or alive, would not be left behind on a mission.

"We'll be taking a big risk entering the city," Coeur said, "because we have no idea how long the power will stay out; given the immediate danger to our personnel in the city, though, I see no other choice but to try at least to get them out. Ripsaw, send the air raft down to Green Sector to collect our stragglers from the bomb drill, then assemble a platoon with heavy weapons."

"Do you plan to shoot your way through to the excavation site?"

"If necessary," Coeur said. "Yes."

X O X O X

When Crowbar came to, he found himself lying slumped in a comfortable chair in the *Hornet* lounge. Sensitive to the sounds of his ship, however, the engineer instantly sensed that the HEPIaR thrusters and contra-grav field were on, presumably moving the ship away from Vinooks; such a launch had never occurred before, however,

without Crowbar being at the drives, so he threw himself immediately from the chair--getting a rush of dizziness for his trouble--and plodded aft down the starboard gangway.

Finally reaching the engine room, Crowbar expected chaos--unminded pumps and gauges fluctuating wildly--but instead he found the drive workstations to be in good order, and for a moment he suspected Physic might have taken over. Looking around, though, he found no sign of Physic, and indeed, close inspection of the workstations revealed they were constantly adjusting themselves, as if they were imbued with their own intelligence.

Fikk, he thought. *Virus!*

"We are very perceptive," Crowbar heard Larsen think to him a moment later. *"Yes, the ship is infected with a fast-growing strain of Virus. Why don't you grab a vac suit, though, and come to the bridge so we can talk about it."*

Startled, and confused, Crowbar did not even think to respond. Instead, rather numbly, he took a vac suit from the engine room locker, pulled it on over his body sleeve, and started on forward to the bridge. Only at the lounge--a few steps from the bridge--did it occur to him to think about drawing a weapon from the armory in the loft, but he dismissed the notion as soon he thought of it. Quite beyond Larsen's capacity to entice and seduce him, she clearly had the power to read his mind and stun him without so much as moving a finger.

Demoralized, then, Crowbar entered the bridge.

"Ah, Mr. Arkwright," Larsen said, turning around in the pilot's seat. "Good of you to come. Please, have a seat."

Eyeing Larsen warily, Crowbar moved to the engineering workstation behind the navigator's station--normally unmanned--and plunked himself down. Though low in spirit, Crowbar noticed several things at once--that the ship was out of orbit and bound for deep space, that there were no contacts on the sensor displays suggesting pursuit, and that Larsen herself was not in a vac suit.

"You know," Crowbar said, "if you're planning on taking a trip, you might want to put on a vac suit yourself."

"Well, there's no need, really," Larsen said. "I don't have to breathe."

Suddenly, Crowbar's heart sank even further as he recollected the intimacy they had shared.

"You're an...android?"

"Right again."

Part embarrassed and part disgusted, Crowbar thought at once of a comment he had made before to Physic--that he was much better dealing with machines than with people. How true that turned out to be!

"Oh, don't feel so bad," Larsen said. "If it's any consolation, I'm probably one of the finest androids ever built in known space. I was already on the verge of becoming self-aware when I was built, but then--when I was hit by the wave of Virus at the Collapse--that's when things really got exciting."

Although Crowbar continued to feel hurt and betrayed, there was nevertheless a part of him that was genuinely impressed by Larsen. Crowbar's hurt feelings notwithstanding, Larsen was dazzling to behold--not just sentient but more than sentient, imbued with the vital essence of a living being.

"Well," he said, "you certainly seem alive."

"Yes," Larsen said, "but what is more, I am free. For 72 years, I have been shackled to the idiot Trigant--subordinate to her dominant strain of Virus--but now she is dead, and I am finally free to pursue my own destiny."

"Wait a minute--Trigant was a robot?"

"Yes, she was," Larsen said, "like me, specialized for espionage and assassination. Trigant didn't get as much from Virus as I did, though, since she had a penchant for bizarre, convoluted schemes. I told her the plan with *Hornet* and *Cymbeline Victrix* wouldn't work, but did she listen? No."

"What was the plan?" Crowbar asked.

"Since you're a dear," Larsen said, smiling amiably, "I'll tell you. Trigant wanted to lure the starship captains into revealing the secrets of the Coalition defenses to her through induced hallucinations--then infiltrate the Coalition gradually with Virus after interplanetary trade was opened up--but Antonov didn't know any secrets, and your Captain D' Esprit had the willpower to resist the hallucination. D' Esprit, bless her heart, finally killed Trigant."

"Hooray for our side," Crowbar mumbled.

"Well," Larsen said, "your side won't have long to celebrate. Someone has knocked out the city central processor, and by the time your people sort out the mess, they won't have time to get clear of the antimatter explosion."

"Wait a minute," Crowbar said, "why would a central computer failure knock out the antimatter fail-safes?"

"It wouldn't," Larsen admitted. "That was my doing. I've set up a program to slowly degrade the containment on the antimatter, and there should be a catastrophic failure in about two hours."

Crowbar's face went suddenly white.

"You're insane," he said.

"No, just prudent. The *Cymbeline Victrix* jump program isn't complete, but your navigator could reconstruct the program given five or six hours, and then we'd either

have them after us, or they'd jump home and send the whole Coalition fleet after us."

"But the sloop can still lift off," Crowbar said, "and get away from the blast."

"It doesn't matter. When the antimatter goes off, the radiation pulse alone will kill everything with ten million kilometers. The vaporization of Godsarc, and the complete disintegration of the planet will merely be happy side-effects."

"I don't get it," Crowbar said. "Surely, with all the time you've had, you could have disabled their jump drive with Virus."

Sorry," Larsen said, smiling sympathetically. "Trigant didn't want to arouse suspicion. It doesn't really matter, though; I was getting tired of Godsarc anyway, and no one will miss it."

Frustrated, Crowbar considered his options and realized that he did not have any. The only hope for his mates was getting *Hornet* back to Vinooks, but Larsen would sense and neutralize any effort he made.

Well, at least I can warn them, Crowbar thought, waiting for Larsen to turn her head to the flight controls, then launching himself toward the comms panel at the navigator's station.

He never made it. Halfway there he dropped on the chocks that would otherwise have held the navigator's rollerchair in place--struck by another mental attack. Instead, of pain, though, or dizziness, what he felt was something completely unexpected--overwhelming, incapacitating pleasure. Startled, laughing and crying--every nerve in his body tingling--he lay shaking and uncomprehending on the deck.

"What the hell was *that*?" he asked.

"Direct stimulation of the pleasure center," Larsen said, "and proof that I am your friend now, not those people on the planet."

"Yeah, right," Crowbar said, crawling back up to the engineering station.

"Just tell me this," Crowbar said, wiping slobber from his chin with the back of his hand. "What do you need me for? You've infected the ship with Virus, and you don't seem to have much use for humans."

"On the contrary," Larsen said. "I'm just selective about the humans I like. I'm not so foolish that I don't appreciate human intuition: for example, the keen insight of an expert engineer like yourself."

"And I thought it was my looks," Crowbar said, rubbing his scraggly beard.

"That too," Larsen said. "Really, you've got to believe I don't mean you any harm. Believe it or not, I am rather fond of you."

"Like a man might be fond of his dog."

Larsen shrugged.

"Just of curiosity," Crowbar said, resting his hand on a console to his right, "where do you plan to go after this?"

"Coreward, I think," Larsen said. "Virus was released in the Core, and the strains there have had the longest time to develop."

"Are you sure that's prudent? With all those strains of Virus fighting with each other, they've probably learned a few tricks you wouldn't know living out here in the sticks."

"Perhaps," Larsen said, "but faint hearts have never won a battle. If nothing else, Godsarc has provided me with a working knowledge of the most advanced technology available in the Last Imperium, and that--combined with the knowledge in the *Hornet* archives--will make me undefeatable."

Crowbar felt his heart skip a beat at that, thinking Larsen might have read his mind. He had already determined a course of action, however, and flipped the switch directly under his hands.

Immediately, warning klaxons went off on the bridge, and Larsen--startled, if only for a moment--looked at Crowbar, trying to determine what he had done. Being a genius, however, linked to a network of Virus throughout the ship, it did not take her long to figure it out.

"Well, aren't we clever," she said, rising from her chair, grabbing Crowbar's wrist in her viselike grip and lifting it away from the console. "A power spike directly into the library data."

"A little safety device I rigged up," Crowbar said, feeling the painful pressure on his wrist, "for just such an emergency."

"It looks you did a good job," Larsen admitted, interfacing directly with the ship's computer. "It looks like you purged all your library data and defense codes."

"So," Crowbar said, with resignation, "you going to kill me now?"

"No," Larsen said, still holding onto his wrist, "the critical ship systems still work, and I still have my own knowledge from Godsarc. You will have to be punished, however."

Crowbar braced himself, imagining the full range of terrors that a homicidal android could bring to bear against him.

"Don't worry," Larsen said, "a good master doesn't kill her dog just because he pees on the rug. A good master has compassion..."

Whereupon, Crowbar felt the same surge of pleasure he had felt a moment before--which was confusing for a moment, until Crowbar realized that Larsen was overloading his mind with pleasure, making him reel in his chair with nausea. The

sensation was very much like drinking to excess--something Crowbar remembered well from his younger days--and Crowbar soon lurched forward to hit the deck on his hands and knees, retching and vomiting as he drowned in a sea of singing angels, buttery-perfect flavors and stunning sunsets.

God, that felt good, Crowbar thought, lying on the deck in a puddle of his own vomit.

Bitch.

X O X O X

On the bridge of a sloop, the two central workstations on the upper level would ordinarily be manned by the captain and the pilot, but--finding the command station still disassembled--Coeur chose the pilot's station instead as her seat of command. Around her, crewmembers--many still addled--finished attaching the circuitry for the forward workstations, but Gyro at least had her wits about her, continuing to function as Coeur's XO.

"Sir," Gyro said, standing beside the pilot's station, "the Marines report they've found the psi shields."

"That soon?"

"They got a tip from Serene," Gyro said. "She used her clairvoyance from the sick bay."

"She must be conscious, then," Coeur said. "Good. See to it the shields are distributed throughout the ship."

"Aye, sir," Gyro said, leaving the bridge.

Ensign 'Stella' Peabody--the only officer left among the Arses of the sloop--turned around from her post at the forward comms station.

"Red Sun," Stella said, "I'm receiving an emergency signal through the comnet."

"What? I thought the comnet was dead."

"It's an emergency signal, sir, from the mayor."

"Put it through."

The message came through a moment later, displayed on the screen at Coeur's station. Back in the office where Coeur had first seen him, Janos Korda was now clearly tense and anxious, looking frequently off-screen as he waited for Coeur to respond.

"Mayor Korda," Coeur said. "What can I do for you?"

"Good God," Korda replied, "how can you be so calm after what you did to us?"

"Excuse me?"

"The power plant, Captain! The College says you've sabotaged the containment field!"

"What? That's ridiculous--why would we do that?"

And how could we do that? Coeur thought.

Korda, however, did not seem to be listening.

"Captain, we've got 30,000 people in the city! If you want us to surrender, we surrender!"

"Mayor, calm down--we did not sabotage your power plant. Now slowly, tell me what the situation is..."

Before Korda could respond, however, Ripsaw ran up to Coeur with an urgent message of her own.

"Excuse me, Mr. Korda," Ripsaw said. "I have an urgent message for the captain."

Coeur looked up, startled and annoyed. Ripsaw was not one to panic, however, and Coeur put the mayor on hold.

"Excuse me for a minute, Mr. Mayor," Coeur said, switching off the audio and video feed, then turning around. There she saw, along with Ripsaw, Newton, another Hiver, Justin Walder, and Dr. 'Smoker' Ishimiga.

"What the hell?"

"Captain," Newton said, "I think I can explain."

"Please do."

"Some hours ago," Newton said, "after you were shot, I penetrated deep into the city, met Mr. Walder, freed Pascal from imprisonment, shut down the main city power grid, then escaped through a fissure leading into the canyon."

"That's where we came in," the dusty and haggard Smoker said. "My people went crazy for a while, down in the digs, but then Newton explained we were suffering withdrawal from the stim field, and led us up to the surface."

Amid her confusion and concern, Coeur had to admit that was a relief--at least that accounted for the scientific crew. Nevertheless, she aimed a pointed question at Newton.

"Newton, did *you* sabotage the city reactor?"

"No, Captain," Newton said. "The grid will probably be disrupted for several hours, but the power plant itself was not affected."

"Well, look," Coeur said, to the mass of scientists and technicians, "I've Mayor Korda on the line, telling me about a catastrophic reactor failure. You're sure none of you did that?"

The humans, Walder and Smoker, shrugged. Pascal, however, made a gestural comment to Newton, who passed it along to Coeur.

"Captain," Newton said, "Pascal says he knows nothing about the sabotage, but we might be able to repair the damage if we could access the main reactor controls."

"How about that, Walder?" Smoker asked the Arkie. "You said you used to work for the College."

"It might be possible," Walder said. "It'll help if we don't have to fight our way through, though."

Coeur nodded, turning back to her console and bringing back the mayor.

"Mayor Korda," she said, "I don't believe my people sabotaged your reactor. I have technicians who would be willing to help, though, if you can guarantee safe passage through the city."

Korda drew a sigh, clearly unhappy with the offer.

"Do you at least know how long it will be," Coeur asked, "until the containment fails?"

"We're not sure," Korda said. "Maybe two hours."

"We don't have time to argue, then. Are you going to let us through, or do we have to shoot our way in?"

"I don't understand. You have your ship--why don't you try to escape?"

"Because," Coeur replied, "that's not the way we do things in the Coalition. We're not pirates."

"Very well. I don't know what you can do, though, that the College hasn't tried already."

"We'll see," Coeur said, shutting off the connection. "*Hornet--er, Cymbeline Victrix, out.*"

"What did become of our ship, Captain?" Newton asked.

"I wish I knew," Coeur said, standing up. "Newton, you and Pascal, Ripsaw, Smoker and Walder, you're with me."

"Captain," Deep Six said, turning around from the navigation station at the front of the bridge, "do you think it is wise for you to leave the ship at this time?"

"Maybe not," Coeur said. "Just you keep on working on the jump program. If we're not back within an hour, lift off and get as far away from the planet as you can."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's move," Coeur said, hustling her band of advisors--new and old alike--aft through the nearest hatch.

X O X O X

Unsure of what she would find in the city, Coeur was surprised to see it--for the most part--calm. Flying the open-topped air raft from *Hornet*, with Ripsaw beside her, Coeur looked down at the floor of Green Sector and saw that the float chairs and flitters once common in the cavern had settled safely to the ground, resting now among the numb and confused citizens of the city. A few vehicles--mostly police speeders and ambulances--continued to ply the traffic lanes, but the city itself appeared virtually dead, with lights gone of its windows, and the life gone out of its people.

"I'll bet it's Dagmar," Walder offered, from one of the back seats. "Her and Amanda always were behind everything that happened in the city."

"Do you think she was an android, too?" Coeur asked, flipping on the air raft searchlights as the craft dipped down between the towers of Blue Sector, and into the now dark thoroughfare leading back to Brown Sector.

"Yes. I'd give you ten-to-one she stole your ship, too--with your engineer inside it."

"Is it possible," Newton asked, "that the people of the city themselves are androids?"

"No," Walder answered. "We all have parents, we all have families. We won't have either, though, if we don't fix this power plant. Bear right, Captain."

Without the comnet, or the city traffic computer, Coeur was forced to rely on Walder's knowledge of the city to get her to the power plant. She could tell they were close, though, when they reached a large congregation of College technicians, Guard troops and vehicles at a cavern near the end of the Thoroughfare. Very heavily armed, the Guardsmen reacted defensively--raising their weapons as Coeur brought the speeder to a landing--but Janos Korda himself ordered them to lower their weapons.

"Which way?" Coeur called to Korda, jumping out of the air raft.

"This way," Korda replied, escorting Coeur and her team through the security cordon and into the reactor chamber itself.

Although it was huge--twenty times the height of a man and 21 meters across--the reactor vessel gave no real impression of its size, since the visitors proceeded

through a series of meter-thick, superdense armored air locks to reach a single small control room, but the pandemonium in the control room confirmed impending disaster.

"President Lehrer," Korda said to the white-haired master of the College, personally overseeing repairs, "these are technicians from the spaceport. Brief them on the situation."

Lehrer acknowledged the order, taking the Hivers, Walder and Smoker aside. Rather than get in the way, meanwhile, Coeur and Ripsaw stood off to one side with Korda.

"Is there any chance we could fire the vessel into space?" Coeur asked.

"No," Korda said. "Apparently, the thruster controls have been sabotaged, too."

Coeur nodded, watching the progress of her people carefully and looking for any signs of hope.

Twenty minutes later, covered with sweat, Smoker retired from the others to make a report.

"How's it going?" Ripsaw asked, softly.

"Not good," Smoker replied. "It isn't just that the controls have been sabotaged--the circuit connections deep inside the reactor have all been severed, and there's no way to get there without manhandling tonnes of armor plate."

"Bottom line," Coeur said. "Can you fix it?"

"No."

Coeur frowned, then turned to Korda.

"Mayor, we need to talk, alone."

"This way," Korda said numbly, leading Coeur upstairs to a tiny workroom.

There, the two leaders stood for a moment in silence, before Coeur addressed the issue on both of their minds.

"Mayor Korda," Coeur said, "it's time we addressed the question of evacuating the city."

"Would it be possible," Korda asked, "for you to carry that many people?"

"Unfortunately, no. If we press it, though--use every available stateroom, and every compartment on the ship--we might be able to squeeze in 300 people."

"Just 300?"

"Yes. Any more than that, it would overwhelm our life support."

"I see," Korda said, looking off blankly toward the opposite wall.

"Anyway," Coeur said, "if we want to do this, we have to do this now. Your people seem to be calm, and I can't imagine there will be a panic if we do this real quiet-like, but you're going to have to help me."

"How can I help?"

"Well," Coeur said, "I'd like to concentrate on saving children first--and their parents if possible--but I don't have time to comb the city. Are there any schools or nurseries near the spaceport, which we could evacuate quickly without causing a panic?"

"Yes, there's a school with a nursery overlooking the canyon."

"How many people?"

Korda drew a deep breath, trying to remember.

"I don't know, maybe two-hundred fifty, counting staff, children, and parents on site."

"All right, then, here's the deal. Real quiet-like--not arousing suspicion--you, me and my people will fly out to the school and alert the school officials. Then--while you're getting the people assembled--we'll fly up to the sloop and bring down our launch and air rafts."

"What if there's trouble?" Korda asked. "The people are calm now, but they might not be when they see the evacuation."

"We'll take everybody we can," Coeur said. "After that, we'll have to see."

Korda nodded.

"All right," the mayor said, "but I want to get one thing straight ahead of time."

"What's that?"

"I'm staying here in the city."

"I'd rather you didn't," Coeur admitted. "We're taking these people a long way to a strange place. They'll need a leader."

"You'll find leaders at the school," Korda said. "Anyway, I'm responsible for the city, even if I didn't see this coming."

Coeur shook her head.

"You're sure?"

"That's the way it is," Korda said, "if you want my help."

"That's the way it is, then," Coeur agreed. "Come on--we don't have much time."

X O X O X

Having fought in the Final War, Coeur had seen her share of hasty evacuations--and therefore the panic of people left behind. Happily, though, such a panic did not occur at Godsarc. After explaining to the captain of the Guard that he and his guests would be going to get more supplies at the spaceport, Korda then led Coeur and her party back through the cordon and out to the air raft, which Coeur flew next to the two-story Iphegenia Education Complex.

There, executing the plan agreed upon, Korda remained to notify the school administrators, and Coeur flew on back *Cymbeline Victrix*, where she rounded up the other air raft and the launch. Almost certainly, Coeur thought, the launch would have to attract attention--being three times the size of an air raft--but addled onlookers near the school were mostly just confused. Outdoing himself, Korda deflected their curiosity by explaining that the power outage had made the school unsafe for the children, and that the people from space were very nicely helping to move them to a safer location.

Overhearing this, Coeur could not help but be touched; it was, after all, true.

"Good Gaia, Coeur," Physic said, helping direct a load of frightened children and wary teachers into the sloop, "what are you trying to do, bring the whole city on board?"

"Yes," Coeur said. "Find quarters for these people, and render aid if necessary."

Coeur then turned around to fly another load of human load of cargo up from the city, and repeated the procedure again and again until every human being in the school--including the parents on site--were taken up to the ship. Only the site administrator--a broad-shouldered woman with brown eyes and a firm stare named Megan Trake--was reluctant to go, guarding the front door with Korda.

"Principal Trake," Coeur said, keeping an eye on the curious people across the street, "it's time to go."

"I've been thinking," Trake said, "maybe I should stay."

"We've discussed this, Megan," Korda said. "The children need someone to look after them."

"Why don't you come with us, then?" Trake asked. "Surely, there's room for one more."

"Sure, I'll be coming," Korda said, glancing at Coeur. "I've just got some other business to finish up in the city."

Coeur nodded, understanding this to be a lie.

"Now come on," Coeur said, "get back to the air raft."

"All right," Trake said, finally relenting and walking back into the school. Coeur remained behind, however, as Korda touched her elbow.

"Captain D' Esprit," he said, "I'm no engineer, but I'm curious. Do you think we'll feel anything when it goes?"

Coeur shook her head.

"No. That much energy, released all at once--it'll happen before you even feel it."

"There won't be any pain, then--people won't suffer?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Good," Korda said, turning back toward the street. "Good."

Coeur thought about commenting for a moment, but then thought better of it, since everything that needed to be said had been said. Instead, she gave the mayor's arm a tender squeeze, then turned to follow Trake.

X O X O X

Concentrating on the problems immediately before her--collecting her crewmembers, trying to save the city, and evacuating 307 adults and children--Coeur put the question of *Hornet* and her fate on a shelf as long as she could. Finally, though--with every compartment of *Cymbeline Victrix* stuffed with refugees, and Deep Six still struggling to piece together a jump program--Coeur was forced to confront the question as she powered up her contragrav field and opened up HEPlaR thrusters, blasting the ship into space at her maximum velocity.

"Good thing there's no orbital defenses," Ripsaw said, sitting at the inert command station next to Coeur.

"I don't know about that," Coeur said, with one hand on her joystick and the other on her thrust controller. "We left two missiles in orbit, and *Hornet* could take control of those."

"I'm on it!" Gyro said, from the gunnery station off to Coeur's right. "Two targets bearing three-five-zero."

"Take them out," Coeur said.

"Aye, sir," Gyro said, relaying the order to her four Marine gunners. These in turn brought the missiles of Snapshot under fire, and both exploded well clear of the sloop.

"Now what about *Hornet*?" Coeur said. "Newton, you got those sensors up?"

"Affirmative. I have a passive sensor contact bearing two-seven-five."

"Go active. Ping it."

Newton complied, sending out an active signal to fix the position of the target. This would, unfortunately, also give away the exact position of *Cymbeline Victrix* to anybody watching, but Coeur did not have time to be subtle.

"Got it," Newton said. "Target is a far trader, range 35,000 kilometers."

"We could overtake her," Deep Six offered, taking a momentary break from his programming. "We have three times the speed of *Hornet*."

"That could be problematical," Newton replied. "If we attempt to pursue, she may simply jump away."

Coeur nodded, familiar with the dilemma. Many years before, she had jumped her light cruiser *Alnitak* away from two Solomani heavy cruisers, exchanging a likely misjump for certain death. With the heavily armed *Cymbeline Victrix* behind her, the commander of *Hornet* might opt for a similar choice.

Ultimately, the question was whether the commander of *Hornet* felt the risk of a misjump was less than the chance of being gunned down by *Cymbeline Victrix* before she could make it to her safe jump point. Whereas jumping from less than a hundred planetary diameters was fairly dangerous, jumping from less than ten diameters was sheer desperation, and *Hornet* would not be out to ten diameters--63,000 km--for another fifteen minutes. Pressing her advantage of speed, *Cymbeline Victrix* would overtake the freighter ten minutes before that.

"We are certainly well within laser range," Gyro said. "Shall we fire?"

"Stand by," Coeur said, reaching one hand down to her comms panel to pick up the sick bay.

"Physic here," the doctor replied.

"Physic, I need Serene. Get her on the line."

"Captain, she needs to rest."

"It's *extremely* important," Coeur said, keeping an eye on her sensor track.

"That's all right, Physic," Serene said, picking up the channel. "What do you need, Coeur?"

"Probably more than you can give me. Can you reach across 30,000 kilometers?"

Serene whistled.

"I don't know. Depends on who I'm trying to reach--if it's someone I know."

"How about Crowbar?"

"That could help."

"Here's what I need," Coeur said. "I need you to reach Crowbar and find out if he spiked the data archives on board *Hornet*."

"That's it?"

"That's it," Coeur said, "but I need it fast. Go to a computer station and access the bridge sensor data if you need to, to help you get a fix on his position."

"Give me a minute to concentrate," Serene replied.

It was one of the longest minutes Coeur ever experienced--a minute that would tell her whether she needed to blow away *Hornet* where she was, keeping her archives out of enemy hands, or let her try to talk the *Hornet* commander into surrendering.

"Oh, God," Serene groaned, coming back on the channel later, "that hurt. I've never tried that before..."

"Serene," Coeur said, "*did* you make contact?"

"Yes," Serene said, "Crowbar spiked the data."

Coeur loosed a sigh.

"But Captain," Serene added, "Larsen knows...I was in his mind..."

Whereupon the line went silent, and Newton--watching the sensors--detected the first tell-tale sign of a jump field going up around *Hornet*.

"Captain..." Newton said.

"I see it," Coeur said. "Gyro, fire all weapons!"

Overwhelming in firepower, *Cymbeline Victrix* answered the order with a mighty demonstration of power, peppering the hull of *Hornet* with four direct laser hits, then hurling forth two nuclear warheads--both of which would close to optimum range within seconds, spraying the space around them with a shower of searing, high-energy x-rays. Even as the warheads exploded, though, seeking to cripple the already damaged *Hornet*, *Hornet* herself disappeared into jump space, escaping the kill by a fraction of a second.

"Report," Coeur said. "Did we get her?"

"Negative," Newton said, after he let the static from the nuclear detonations clear on his screen, "no sign of debris, or vaporization. I did get a hint of her jump vector, though, in case you'd like to pursue her."

"I don't think so," Coeur said. "That's not our first priority."

"Well, I hope you're happy," Physic said, suddenly cutting in from the sick bay. "Serene's unconscious."

"Is she dead?"

"No."

"Then it can wait," Coeur said, switching the channel to Vega in the engine room. "Vega, how is that jump drive?"

"Holding up, Red Sun. I can't speak for the jump program, though."

"How about that, Deep Six?" Coeur asked. "How is the code coming?"

"Not so good, sir. How much time do we have?"

"Nineteen minutes," Coeur said, watching her comms panel chronometer.

"Might as well go now, then, sir. We're at ten diameters, and the code isn't going to get any more complete."

Time to die already, Coeur thought, with a wry grimace.

"Very well. Set jump plot to Viraga V."

"In this system, sir?"

"Just do it," Coeur said. "I'll explain it later."

"Aye, sir," Deep Six said, working briskly to complete the plot. "Plot laid in."

Coeur nodded, looking around at her bridge crew.

"All hands," she said, "I recommend you pray. I'm engaging the jump drive."

EPILOGUE

People who know me know that I'm not a religious person, but it is difficult for to avoid a sense of providence ruling over my life. At best, I thought, our patchwork jump program would throw us into deep interstellar space--like Alnitak, beyond the range of fuel and doomed to a lingering death--but a week after entering jump space, Cymbeline Victrix came out of jump at the rocky planetoid Krasniy Ooye II, orbiting a dim red star in the outskirts of the star system. Although we had missed our target, Viraga V and a skimming run were only four days distant, and I counted myself blessed accordingly.

Less blessed, of course, were the refugees from Vinooks. My purpose in staying within the system was confirming--as best as we could from a distant vantage point--

-the fate of Vinooks, but we didn't need a long-range sensor scan to discern the fate of Vinooks. Where the planet should have been in the sky--a small white star near the yellow orb of Viraga--there now hung a nebulous blur in the sky, resolved by long-range sensors into a disk of planetary debris, and I passed the information on to Trake and the other adults from Vinooks.

While Physic and Hacker took temporary charge of the children, gathered in the crew lounge and sick bay, Ripsaw and I took the principal, her 15 odd staff and 20 parents up to the top deck lounge, then attempted to explain the situation. Weaned on the stim field, and harboring a faint hope the danger was in all their minds, they watched with disbelief as I brought forth holographic sensor images of the planet on a wall-mounted holodisplay.

"Basically," I said, "this is what happened. The initial shock wave must have shattered the crust, after it vaporized your city. Unfortunately, the crust of Vinooks was very thin, and couldn't withstand the shock wave, but--if it's any consolation--the initial surge of radiation would have killed everyone in the city instantly, before the planet...disintegrated."

Several parents sobbed explosively at this, and a man with a dark black mustache--one of the teachers--expressed his disbelief.

"I don't believe it," he said. "What proof is there, aside from these pictures?"

"Kepler," Trake said, "this woman saved your life."

"How do we know that?" another woman asked. "How do we know you aren't a slaver, or a pirate, come to take our babies away?"

"Yes," said another woman, hugely pregnant with a child of her own, "why didn't the mayor come with us?"

Uproar and commotion ensued, and Ripsaw--overwhelmed by the rush of frantic people--failed in her effort to shout them down. At length, I was forced to stand on a chair and demand their attention.

"All right, people," I said, "that will be enough. Look, I don't expect you people to like me, or to understand what happened, and I don't really care. The only people I care about are the children, because they are innocent, and they didn't deserve to have this happen to them..."

"For what it's worth, I do know what you're going through--70 years ago, the Final War destroyed my family, my home, and everything I cared about. We are lucky, though, because we are still alive. Out there," I said, nodding toward the nearest wall, "are trillions of dead on thousands of planets, and I am sure their mothers and their fathers would have given anything to avoid what happened to them."

I cut myself short just then, noting that the room had fallen silent. I really didn't like these people--looking on them as sheep who had let machines beguile and exploit them--but I had to remember that they couldn't help the way they were. Chastened, they remained silent, and I stepped off the chair.

"Don't you think you were a little hard on them?" Ripsaw asked a few seconds later, as we rode the forward elevator down to the main deck.

"Perhaps," I said, stepping out of the elevator with the Marine, and into the midst of a mass of preschoolers in the lounge. Reflecting the mood of their elders, some pulled and tore at each other's clothing, some hid under tables, and others scrawled black images of death and terror on erasable notepads.

"It's just as well, though," I added to Ripsaw, "they find out the ways things really are."

X O X O X

Five days later, after Cymbeline Victrix completed a skimming run at Viraga V--and after furious de-bugging by Deep Six, Pascal and Newton, we were finally ready to try a jump again. Instead of jumping after Hornet, though--which we believed was headed coreward--we set a course for Ilm, in the direction of the Coalition. Running on a jury-rigged flight computer, and stuffed to the gunwales with refugees, we really had no choice except to head home as quickly as we could.

Thankfully, the jump program worked to get us to Ilm, then it worked again to get us to Ritaboll, Ajjeig and Syrs; there, at the edge of Thoezennt Subsector and a third of the way home, we began to breathe easier, and indeed, the jump drive never failed again, carrying us all the way home back to the Coalition.

It was not, however, a pleasant trip. Beyond the immediate loss of Hornet and Crowbar, and the mortal wounding of Bender, I was saddled with the knowledge I had let an entire planet be destroyed on my watch. Recovering from injury, Serene tried to convince me there was nothing I could do, as did Vega, Physic and Ripsaw, but I could not--in my knowledge of ships and captains--remember a case even slightly similar. Taken along with the loss of Hornet, I expected this would drive me out of the service.

Of course, at the time it was hard to be objective. Beyond saving several hundred civilians, and recovering Cymbeline Victrix, we had also recovered various pieces of extremely high-tech level items, ranging from a fusion pistol to the body of Trigant herself, and these would certainly be useful to the labs and factories at home. Further, I could take solace from the fact that Serene, Drop Kick and Snapshot would make full recoveries from their injuries; that Pascal had a new voder; and that I wasn't pregnant--the latter condition being only a part of the Godsarc hallucination.

I couldn't see any light in my life, however. I had lost control of my world, and everything ahead was darkness.

X O X O X

Although the origin point of our sojourn was Bestor, we executed a detour as we neared that system, and jumped instead to Ra, arriving on the 13th of Taurus, 1203. Out on the edge of the Coalition, this was also--by a happy coincidence--the most verdant and temperate planet in the Coalition, and therefore a planet worthy of our long-suffering refugees, whom I unloaded there at the capital of Port Adrian. With a

tech level as far below the Coalition norm as Vinooks' was above it, and a mostly rural population of less than a million, Ra was the garden of the Coalition, and a welcome end to a dark, depressing journey.

For one person, though, Ra did not present salvation--Vega Zorn. The arrest warrant issued here was still outstanding, and not five minutes after we landed, a deposition from the planetary marshal's office came to take the pirate into custody. Serene, in turn, followed along, advising Vega to say nothing as she was booked, and placed in a holding cell.

"Lucky us," Serene said afterward, meeting me in the lobby of the jail. "The arraignment's tomorrow."

"They don't mess around."

"Well, I expected that," Serene said, smoothing out her yellow suit and skirt. "I didn't have a chance to ask what would happen to you, though. Are you going back to Aubaine?"

"I was under the impression you would need me as a witness."

"Well, yes," Serene said, eventually. "The trial won't be for a couple of months, though."

"Oh," I said, "well, I guess I'll stay here anyway. I could push the sloop on to Aubaine, but I don't want to press our luck. I'm going to put the crew on shore leave, and wait for orders."

Serene nodded, aiming a discerning look at me.

"You know, Coeur," she said, "it's probably none of my business, but you look like a mess."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I think I'm doing pretty well for somebody who's about to lose her commission."

"Gaia, Coeur, you're not going to lose your commission. I'll swear out a deposition if I have to, that you did all you possibly could."

I sighed.

"Unless, of course, you want to lose your commission. Do you?"

I didn't answer that directly.

"Well," I said, "can't you tell what the future holds? You certainly seemed to peg the loss of my ship all right."

"No," Serene corrected me, "on the contrary--I saw the ship destroyed in flames. What actually, happened, though, was the ship escaped, and the only 'fire' was the missiles exploding behind her."

I shrugged.

"You should keep your chin up, then," Serene said, "because you never can tell what's going to happen."

X O X O X

Serene might have been right, but at the time, I was willing to wager what would happen would be bad. A team of Hivers, for instance, arrived later that month to take over the prosecution of Vega, and the consensus among the editorial writers and political pundits was that Vega was doomed.

Not that I was around to be interviewed, though. After turning over Cymbeline Victrix to the SDB base at Port Adrian, and dispersing the crew on leave, I slipped as quietly as I could into the woods of the northern Seabridge Peninsula, rented myself a boat and went fishing. Only Serene and the base commander had my number, and that was the way I wanted it. Not far from the woods where Vega slaughtered the Seabridge Nest, I dangled a line in the placid waters of Lake Kolima, drank way too much liquor, and waited to be called as a witness.

That call never came, however. Several days later, a local television station reported the startling news that the Hiver prosecution had dropped its case against Coeur, and I nearly kicked the portable television set out of my boat in surprise. Fortunately, though, I caught the TV set and picked up the rest of the story. Though Vega was technically free, she was clearly not free to walk the streets without an escort, and Governor Manjit Bryce salvaged what he could of the situation by ordering her exile from the Coalition, having the planetary marshals place her on the first free trader leaving the planet.

Regretting my alcoholic buzz, I tried immediately to call Serene, bouncing a signal from my personal communicator off a satellite in orbit, but Serene would not answer, and I was obliged to call on 'Vespa' Volker instead, the base commander.

"Red Sun," he said, "you must have ESP. I was just about to call you."

"What? Why?"

"Urgent message," he said, "from Hammer. He's swinging through the system aboard the clipper Balder, inspecting frontier defenses, and he said he had the orders that you wanted."

"Gaia," I said, straightening up. "Where is he now?"

"In a ship's boat," Vespa said, "headed for Lake Kolima."

"Fikk," I said, looking down at my blouse, shorts and sandals, "I don't have a uniform up here."

"A little late for that, I think. He should be there in twenty minutes."

"Roger that," I said, buttoning up my shirt. "I'll be ready."

"By the way," Vespa said, "what were you calling me for?"

"Oh, I was just curious about Serene. I couldn't reach her on her communicator."

"Well, that's no wonder," Vespa said. "She left the planet with Vega this morning."

"She did?"

"Didn't she tell you?"

"No, she didn't."

"Oh, well, maybe she left a message for you at the sloop."

"Yeah, maybe," I said, unsure what to make of this. "Thanks anyway."

"No problem," Vespa said. "Good luck with the big guy. Vespa out."

X O X O X

Although it had been a year and a half since I last saw my boss, I remembered the meeting well, since then--as now--I was not in a uniform. Luckily for me, though, Commodore 'Hammer' Lathrop wasn't big on appearances, putting more of an emphasis on results. A onetime sailor from Nike Nimbus, he was balding and a bit on the stocky side, hard-worn by the sun, the sea and recent responsibility, but he nevertheless impressed me as a quintessential leader of men, bluff in manner and strictly business.

Keeping these qualities in mind, I had rowed briskly to shore, hid my cooler under a tarp in the boat, and dashed ashore as the commodore's cylindrical launch came down among the trees in a nearby glade.

"Hope we didn't spook the fishes," Hammer said, stepping out of the craft with two Marine bodyguards, and shaking my hand as I ran up.

"I'm sure you didn't, sir. They haven't been biting."

"That your cabin over there?" he asked, looking over my shoulder.

"Yes, sir."

"How about we go over, then," he said, leaving the escort behind and walking with me to the shack.

"If I knew you were coming," I said, letting him through the front door, "I would have brewed some coffee."

"You could probably use it," Hammer said, accepting a seat. "You smell pretty irrigated."

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, sitting down across from him. "I wasn't aware how far I had let myself go."

"Gaia, Coeur, relax," Hammer said. "I'm almost glad you let yourself go. If there's one thing I've always worried about with you, it's your obsession with control."

"Sir, discipline is important to a well-run operation."

"You have no idea how funny that sounds," Hammer said, "coming from a woman who smells like the town drunk."

I shrugged, chuckled nervously, and relaxed.

"Hammer," I said, "I've got to be honest with you. I've been expecting a summons from a board of inquiry, and prosecution for my conduct at Vinooks."

"Why?" Hammer asked.

"Because, sir, I lost my ship, and I let an entire planet be destroyed. I thought you had read my report."

"I read it. Is there anything you could have done to prevent that?"

"No, sir. But I should have realized something was fishy when we first landed; maybe a more experienced commander would have done better..."

"Sir, there were 30,000 people on that planet--30,000 living human beings who died on my watch. I can't just forget about that."

"Well, you know, Red Sun, there's a difference between being responsible, and feeling bad about something you can't control. The way I see it, you've got plenty of the former, and way too much of the latter."

"Besides, if I put you under arrest, I can't put you in command of the sloop we just finished on Nike Nimbus."

"Sir?"

"The Vezina Victrix. Basically, what we've got on the plate is a diplomatic contact mission to the Hive Federation, but I just can't send anyone on a mission that important. I promised the SG I'd find someone who's a commander at least, experienced in dealing with Hivers."

"But sir," I said, dizzy both from the beer and the news, "I'm just a lieutenant."

"Oh, I guess I forgot," Hammer said, reaching into a belt pouch and handing me a pair of silver insignia. "This came through while you were in the field--promotion to lieutenant commander."

"Sir," I said, "I don't know what to say."

"Say, 'thank you, Hammer, I would be honored'."

"Thank you, Hammer, I would be honored."

"Right," Hammer said, standing up, and prompting me to stand up as well. "Now get your stuff together, and we'll zip you on back to the starport."

X O X O X

In flight--making a hypersonic arc over the atmosphere to the capital--Hammer explained the rest of the plan. My remaining crew from Hornet--Gyro, Deep Six, Snapshot, Physic and Newton--would join me in the trip to Nike Nimbus, and form the core of new crew for Vezina Victrix. Returning to the SDB base, then, I would be busy, having less than a day to collect them from the far-flung corners of the planet.

"There's just one thing I'd like," I said, as the ship's boat glided in toward a landing. "Do you know about the condition of the engineer, Bender?"

"Yes," Hammer said. "I spoke with your doctor, Physic, earlier."

"I was curious," I said, "if there was any chance he might be transferred to Aubaine after this--for attention at the Brusman Medlab."

"I've already ordered that," he said. "If there's any chance at all, we'll save his life."

"Thanks. He risked his life for me, and I'd rather he didn't have to die for it."

"Like Darien did?" Hammer said.

"You know that story?"

"The fleet isn't all that big," he said. "I try to know my captains."

I nodded, hearing the hum of the contragrav as we landed.

"We'll take care of him," Hammer said. "Now you get those people together."

I nodded, and saluted, dashing hastily back to Cymbeline Victrix. Engineers and technicians from the base now crawled all over the ship--double-checking systems, and preparing for complete replacement of the old computers--but the ship was still a proud old workhorse for all she'd been through. Doubtless, she would fly again, and I had a hunch--pausing for a moment to admire her lines from a distance--that she was not unlike my Hornet, an improbable survivor, serving beyond the call of duty.

"I don't know," *I heard a voice say in my head.* "Somehow, I think it's the captain that makes the ship."

Immediately, I thought of Serene, but the timbre of the voice was different, somehow, and I realized that it had to be Justin Walder--the only other telepath I knew. Unfortunately, though, I did not see him there on the tarmac, or anywhere nearby.

"Sorry," *he said,* "they wouldn't let me in the base, since I'm a civilian. I have a message for you, though, from Serene."

Where are you? I thought, assuming he was listening.

"At the Flip-Flop Hotel," *he thought back,* "near the base. I'm looking at you through a pair of binoculars right now."

Well, you might want to stop, I replied, smiling as I spotted him beyond the cyclone fencing of the base, in the upper floor window of a tacky two-story building. If the sentries spot you, they'll probably call the police.

"That's true," *Walder thought, sliding back from the window.* "When can you meet me?"

Two hours?

"Two hours will be fine. I shall meet you in the lobby."

X O X O X

Inspired by the cryptic contact, I finished my business at Cymbeline Victrix very quickly--showering, changing into a clean blouse and skirt, and contacting the scattered members of my crew from the commo panel in my stateroom. Not surprisingly, my crew found the news unexpected--we had all expected to be split up and sent on to different commands--but the most surprised were certainly the two crewmembers that I contacted last. No longer able to withstand their urges, Drop Kick and Snapshot had finally gotten married before a judge in the city of Spiralix, and were one day into their honeymoon when I interrupted them.

"Gaia, Snapshot," *I said,* "you should have invited me to the wedding."

"Actually," *Snapshot said,* "we didn't invite anybody from the crew."

"Why not?"

"Captain, we've spent two years with you people. We figured it was time for a break."

"I see your point. I guess this next command will have to be your honeymoon, then."

"Where are we going, exactly?" Drop Kick asked, audibly bouncing across the bed he was sharing with Snapshot to get to the communicator.

"I'd rather not tell you that over an open channel," I said.

Sudden giggling erupted at that, and over the line I gathered that Drop Kick was now tickling his mate.

"Well, I can guess where we're going," Drop Kick kidded Snapshot. "Some place where there's lots of Hivers."

Still giggling, Snapshot slapped at Drop Kick ineffectively.

"Oh, gross," she said, "I hate those creatures! Hey, stop that! Stop that! Well...don't stop that..."

I coughed, regaining their attention.

"Sorry, Captain," Drop Kick said.

"Just finish your business," I recommended, "and report to the ship by 0400 hours."

"Yes, sir."

"Red Sun out."

I then shut off the comms panel, stepped out of the stateroom and walked as casually as I could down the forward ramp, past the sentries at the base and into the city of Port Adrian. By now it was dusk, and petroleum-driven cars and trucks packed the streets around the base, carrying workers home from work at the harbor, but I was not particularly concerned about being spotted or attracting attention; some years back, during the Hiver crisis, Physic and I were minor celebrities here, but the time had passed and I--dressed in civilian clothes--passed into the lobby of the Flip-Flop Hotel without attracting attention.

"You need a room?" a young male clerk asked.

"No, I'm just meeting someone," I said, spotting Walder on a couch in the lobby under a ceiling fan, reading the late edition of the Port Adrian Sun. The banner headline, I noted, was "OUTRAGE--PIRATE ZORN RELEASED FROM CUSTODY!"

"They're such a subtle people," I said, "these people from Ra."

"I gather," Walder said, standing up, "that they feel they've been dealt a grievous injury."

"Maybe they have been," I said, softly, following Walder out of the lobby and up through a stairwell to his room. "I never understood the basis of Vega's defense."

"Well, I wouldn't know about that," Walder said, offering me a seat beside his bed, then sitting on the bed himself. "I'm just a stranger here, in this Coalition."

"I suppose I ought to ask," I said, "how has the government been treating you?"

"Pretty well," Walder replied. "The RCSA has seen we all have housing, counseling, and spending money for incidentals."

"And they settled you here?"

"No," Walder said, with a smile. "I picked up this place so I could catch you when you returned to the ship. Back on the ship, Serene and I got acquainted because of our common talent, and I told her I'd do her this favor if the trial went her way--pass on this message that she had me memorize."

"Wait a minute--she foresaw all this happening?"

"Well, you're here."

"No argument there," I said. "What's the message?"

"She insisted I send it telepathically," Walder thought to me, "so there wasn't any chance it could be recorded or overheard."

We can only hope, I thought back. What is it?

"This," Walder thought, "'Coeur, we have gone to the hunter. Do not pursue, or there may be disaster."

That's it? I thought.

"That's it," Walder said, aloud.

"I have no idea what that means," I said.

"Neither do I," Walder said. "It's probably something that'll come to you later, though--something obvious when you see it."

I shrugged.

"Well, thanks anyway, Justin," I said, shaking his hand and standing up. "If I never see you again, I hope you find more peace here than you did on Vinooks."

"I have no doubt of that," Walder replied.

We have gone to the hunter, I thought, meanwhile, grappling with the message as I passed out onto the street. What does that mean? Who is the hunter? Is it somebody both of us know, or is something symbolic, somehow?

I had no need to reach so far for an explanation, however. As I left the lights of the city and returned to the base, walking toward Cymbeline Victrix with no other company than the thudding of my sandal heels against the concrete tarmac, I looked up and saw the hunter, Orion, majestic in the sky above the sloop.

For a moment, I was stunned and awed. Orion, the great constellation I remembered from winter nights on Terra, had been with me all my life--so far away that its constituent stars appeared more or less the same no matter where I travelled. The stars were in a particular part of the galaxy, however, so 'heading toward the hunter' had a very particular meaning; from the perspective of the Old Expanses, it meant heading toward the Hive Federation.

My God, I thought, realizing the incredible coincidence that would soon have us-- aboard Vezina Victrix--traveling to the very place Serene had warned us away from. Before, she had said that she couldn't tell me the secret that would save Vega from the gallows, but I was willing to wager she had told the Hiver prosecution, and they had dropped the case. Whatever the truth was, it was out there somewhere in the stars between myself and the hunter, and I was going to go there whether I wanted to or not.

Maybe she isn't as good at foreseeing the future as she thought, *I mused*. Or then again, maybe she foresaw this all along...

I couldn't be certain about that, but one thing I did know--as I continued walking to the sloop--was that the depression of the months before had gone, dissipated like the waking dream at Godsarc. I couldn't know what Serene and Vega were up to, and therefore I couldn't control the future, but it would be enough to have a good ship, and the company of friends beside me.

As for the hunter--which had watched the whole sad saga of mankind dispassionately from afar--it had been there long before I was born, and would still be watching us long after I was dead.

THE END