

**JOVIAN UPRISING  
2315**

**BY MICHEL POULIN**

# **JOVIAN UPRISING - 2315**

**SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL**

**BY MICHEL POULIN**

**© 2012**

## **WARNING TO READERS**

**THIS NOVEL CONTAINS DESCRIPTIONS OF SCENES OF VIOLENCE, SEXUALITY AND CRUDE LANGUAGE AND IS NOT MEANT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN. THIS IS ALSO A WORK OF PURE FICTION AND ANY APPARENT SIMILARITIES WITH PERSONS OR EVENTS OF THE PRESENT ARE FORTUITOUS.**

## **FOREWORD**

THE AUTHOR, WHEN WRITING THIS NOVEL IN 2011, USED THE KNOWN INFORMATION AVAILABLE THEN ON THE MAKEUP OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM. HOWEVER, THE RAPID RATE OF ASTRONOMICAL DISCOVERIES MAY MAKE SOME DATA ON PLANETS, MOONS AND ASTEROIDS AS USED IN THIS NOVEL LOOK OUTDATED. FOR THIS, THE AUTHOR ASKS FOR THE INDULGENCE OF THE READERS.

**TABLE OF CONTENT**

CHAPTER 1 – INHERITANCE .....	4
CHAPTER 2 – CARGO RUN .....	15
CHAPTER 3 – PIRATES ON THE PROWL .....	45
CHAPTER 4 – REFIT AND SHORE LEAVE .....	59
CHAPTER 5 – A BRAND NEW SHIP.....	104
CHAPTER 6 – POWERPLAY.....	117
CHAPTER 7 – MARS EXPEDITION .....	136
CHAPTER 8 – BATTLE FOR MARS.....	174
CHAPTER 9 – COUP D'ÉTAT .....	202
CHAPTER 10 – NORTH AGAINST SOUTH .....	213
CHAPTER 11 – THE WAR IS OVER .....	247
M.S.S. KOSTROMA .....	263
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	264

## **CHAPTER 1 – INHERITANCE**

**09:18 (Universal time)**

**Thursday, February 4, 2315**

**Notary's office, city of Callisto Prime**

**Callisto (8<sup>th</sup> moon of Jupiter)**

**Jupiter System**



“...I hereby bequeath total and complete ownership of my ship, the MSS KOSTROMA, to my beloved niece, Tina Forster. This includes all the unattached spare modules, ground support equipment and stocks of spare parts, fuel and other supplies held in my name in the hangars and warehouses of the Jovian Shipping Lines at the Callisto Prime spaceport, plus the bank account linked to the MSS KOSTROMA.”

The tall, brown-haired young woman sitting in one of the chairs set facing the notary's desk opened her mouth under the combined shock and surprise of hearing this part of her uncle's last will. The MSS KOSTROMA, a multipurpose interplanetary cargo ship in which she held the positions of first pilot and temporary captain, was a behemoth with a mass when empty of 2,560,000 metric tons and an overall length of 1,260 meters. Even after nearly 26 years of plying the commercial space lanes, it was still worth over five billion credits! Then, the full realization of the demands and responsibilities this unexpected gift meant dawned on Tina. Even though interplanetary space travel was now routine, space commerce was still a risky, fiercely cut-throat business. Many negligent or incompetent ship owners had ended up bankrupt, buried under debts from bad contracts or catastrophic breakdowns resulting from negligent maintenance. One could not as well lay still and wait for contracts to show up, on pain of seeing the better deals snatched away by more savvy entrepreneurs. Even though she knew and understood well the rules of that game, Tina knew as well that she was no business shark or shipping magnate. Fortunately, she had as part of her crew someone who could take good care of the financial aspect of this gift from Uncle Bill.

The few other witnesses invited to the reading of Bill Forster's last will, distant relatives and friends mostly, ended up on their part with minor but still valuable parts of

his estate. Bill Forster had been a widowed man and had few relatives left alive, with Tina being the closest in the remaining family tree. Tina herself had lost her parents and two siblings in a tragic space accident that had also cost the lives of 64 other people seven years ago, when the ship transporting them had been hit by a stray piece of space debris near Jupiter. As glamorous as life in space could appear, it was still way more dangerous than living on the old Earth, as polluted and depleted as it was now. Spacers, as they were called by Terrans, realized that but most would not even dream of returning to live permanently on Earth. The cradle of Humanity was in the year 2315 an overcrowded place, with its 8.2 billion inhabitants living on a world whose natural resources had been severely depleted, or even exhausted in certain cases. Herculean efforts had been made to clean up the worst of the pollution from centuries of neglect and abuse, but much of the past beauty of Earth was now gone forever.

The notary, his reading of the last will completed, then distributed the deeds, electronic checks and property titles that had constituted the estate of Bill Forster, making the recipients sign for them before shaking hands with them. On her part, Tina left the office with the ownership papers of the KOSTROMA and its various ground equipment and stores, plus the bank account linked to the KOSTROMA's space operations. That account by itself was worth 48.3 million credits. However, Tina knew that this seemingly huge sum would be needed as a financial buffer to pay the ship's operational expenses, like the personnel payroll and the fuel bills, until profits from future or ongoing contracts could refill that bank account. It would definitely not be smart to burn that money in a wild spending spree. At the age of 28, Tina was a responsible woman, made even more so by her thirteen years spent as a crewmember of the KOSTROMA.

Leaving the ten-storey building in which the notary's office was, Tina glanced up at the curved ceiling of the giant air and water-tight tube containing this section of the buried city of Callisto Prime. The tube itself had a diameter of 120 meters and was connected to a series of similar tubes forming a kilometer-long residential and commercial district, with its avenue lined on both sides with prefabricated buildings and parks. The ceiling was covered by a huge plasma screen that now showed a clear blue sky, with a few dispersed white clouds. That would progressively change to a star-filled night sky in the evening, to give the impression to the citizens of Callisto Prime that they

were living on some Earth city. That, and the Earth-like gravity provided by artificial gravity matting installed throughout the city, helped the inhabitants to feel at home on what was in reality an alien world, half water ice and half rock, with a tenuous, unbreathable atmosphere. Those who wanted to observe the real landscape of Callisto, with the huge orb of Jupiter in the black sky of space, had to go up from the city complex, situated forty meters under the ice crust of the moon's surface, to one of the observation domes emerging from the ice. Callisto Prime, with a population approaching two million people, was made up of hundreds of sections of tubes interconnected together and buried under the ice to provide protection against space radiations and meteorites. In this, Callisto Prime was very similar to the other cities of the Outer Solar System.

Jumping on the rolling sidewalk running the length of the avenue, Tina then jumped again, this time on the parallel high-speed sidewalk, and let herself be transported by the mobile rubberized carpet. If she wanted to go the other way, she would only need to get off the high-speed strip, step on a second low-speed sidewalk, then on a fixed walkway, before stepping again on the rolling sidewalks, which formed a long closed oval along the avenue. The whole system, using electric motors, was both pollution and noise-free, while permitting people to go around at speeds of up to ten kilometers per hour. For the handicapped without the minimal balance needed to use the rolling sidewalks, they could use small electric karts along the fixed walkway, which was also used by small delivery vehicles. After a fifteen minute trip, Tina arrived at her destination, a bank that held the account she had just inherited. There, armed with the papers received from the notary, she formally put the ownership of the account under her name.

To get to her next destination, the offices of the Jovian Space Administration, or JSA in short, Tina took the electric subway line running the length of the central spine tubes of the city, arriving in six minutes at the Callisto Prime Spaceport. The sprawling complex, situated for safety reasons four kilometers outside of the city limits, was also mostly under the surface ice of the moon, except for a dozen landing platforms on elevators that stuck out of the ice. Taking a deep breath before entering to control her growing excitement, Tina walked in the reception hall of the JSA and made her way to the third floor offices of the Space Registrar. The clerk that greeted her there with a big

smile was a young and handsome man of Asian descent, prompting Tina to smile warmly in return.

“Good day, mister! I am here to register the change of ownership of a ship, the MSS KOSTROMA.”

“Certainly, miss.” Said the clerk while typing quickly in his computer the name of the ship, calling up on his screen the ship’s file. “It is presently listed as being owned by a Bill Forster. Do you have documents to prove the change of ownership, miss?”

“I certainly do, mister. My uncle, Bill Forster, recently died and he bequeathed me his ship and associated equipment and supplies in his last will. Here are the documents given to me by the notary.”

The young clerk took the documents handed over by Tina and examined them carefully, then made a number of computer searches to confirm their authenticity. While doing so he smiled apologetically to Tina.

“You will excuse me if I run a number of checks, miss: your new ship is a multi megaton-class cargo ship at full load and represents quite a large value. I will also have to have my supervisor verify himself your papers. There aren’t very many megaton-class cargo ships in the Jovian lists. In fact, there are only six such ships in the Jovian lists. Your KOSTROMA is the third biggest of the lot, miss. If we look at the whole Solar System, there is a total of just 22 megaton-class ships still in operation. Your ship is sixth in order of mass at full displacement in the Solar System. You have the right to be proud, miss.”

“The sixth biggest? I thought that it was only the seventh one.”

“They recently retired the old SIRIUS, miss. Apart of being over ninety years old, its technology was outdated and made it commercially inefficient on the interplanetary lanes.”

“The sixth biggest ship in the Solar System. Hot damn!” Exclaimed Tina, not a little proud. “Thanks for that info, mister.”

“You’re welcomed, miss.” Replied the smiling clerk, liking this very pretty client. “My own checks are completed. I will now transfer the dossier to my supervisor, who will do the final checks and approval.”

That took another nine minutes, at the end of which the clerk’s supervisor came to the reception counter to shake hands with Tina and congratulate her on her new ownership. He then promised her that all the customs and space authorities in the

Jovian System would be informed within the hour. Feeling like a queen, Tina left the JSA offices and then wondered what she would do next. Feeling her stomach grumble, she checked her wristwatch and saw that it was nearly noon, Universal Time. Seeing a good restaurant nearby, she decided to celebrate her newfound fortune with a good meal and a bottle of wine. She certainly had the financial means for that now!

The restaurant was actually a five-star establishment that catered to the rich, most notably to big industrial or shipping magnates and to high-level politicians and functionaries. The working-class jumpsuit of Tina got her a snobbish up and down look from the maitre d' but she still managed to get a small table in a far corner of the dining room. Mentally sending the maitre d' to a choice location, Tina took hold of the wine list first and nearly choked with indignation on seeing the prices. Even though she was now technically rich, she had always been rather frugal in her personal needs and tastes, like many of the spacers who lived often in minimalist conditions aboard their ships, which were effectively their home for them and their families. Most of the wine bottles in the list she was reviewing cost nearly as much as what a ship technician earned in a week! Being well aware of the costs for shipping cargo across the Solar System, Tina still found the prices outrageous, until she thought about the state of the food industry, and of the general economy, on Earth. With much of its resources depleted and burdened with 8.2 billion inhabitants, the planet barely managed to feed its masses with its own food products and had in turn to import from space many of the raw materials its industries needed to manufacture goods. Plastics, hydrocarbons and chemicals were in particularly short supply on Earth, with the planet's oil reserves having dried out in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century. Pollution and rising sea levels due to climate warming had in turn cut on the amount of arable land available for agriculture. With every possible arable surface now exploited, the production of such luxuries as wine and alcohol had been limited by the planetary authorities, for good reasons. This had caused the prices for those products to jump to the stratosphere. Grape production in hydroponic gardens had helped provide a source of relatively cheap wine, but at the cost of quality. The truly good wines, those who would not be spat out by expert wine tasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, were still being produced in places like Europe, South Africa and South America, but in limited quantities. Ironically, that put them out of reach of the pockets of most of the citizens of Earth, leaving only the few rich ones to enjoy them.

Watched by an impassive waiter, who had noticed her shocked expression on seeing the prices, Tina finally chose a bottle of French red Bordeaux that cost the niggardly sum of 640 credits, or five days-worth of her past salary as a ship pilot. Next, she explored the menu, with its prices that would have made the wine list proud, and ordered a Kobe steak imported from Japan, followed by a platter of varied pieces of French cheese. When she was finally served, the meal proved a memorable experience to Tina. Standard ship food was healthy, balanced...and rather bland. Most spices were very expensive, while the meat and fish produced in space farms somewhat lacked the full taste of the original product. Chewing pieces of Kobe steak washed down with red Bordeaux wine made Tina close her eyes with delight. The platter of cheese, accompanied by the rest of her wine bottle, was nearly as good. She finally ended her meal with a shot of French cognac. With the maitre d' looking like he expected to have to get her arrested for grand theft, Tina asked for the bill. She actually managed to keep a straight face on reading the bill, which amounted to a whopping 2,185 credits. Making a show of patting her various pockets under the severe eyes of the maitre d', Tina finally took out her new personalized debit card, the one linked to her ship's account, and presented it to the maitre d'. The latter then paled on examining it: it had the black and silver color of the type of debit card good for withdrawals of more than one million credits at a time. Turning red with embarrassment, he ran the card in his electronic reader, offering the unit to Tina so she could add a tip and sign on it with her thumbprint. After a short hesitation, Tina decided not to be mean and left a 400 credits tip, getting the maitre d' to bow to her while proffering his thanks. Tina finally got up from her table and left the restaurant, feeling like a million credits. Once outside, she could not help break out laughing.

**15:49 (Universal Time)**

**Bridge of the MSS KOSTROMA**

**Docking Station number Four**

**Orbital terminal of the Callisto Prime Spaceport**

Patricia O'Neil, the sensors and communications technician on duty on the bridge of the KOSTROMA, raised her head long enough to speak to Frida Skarsgard, the second pilot of the ship.

“Frida, Tina’s runabout is on approach. She should be aboard in about four minutes.”

“Did she say anything about what is going to happen to the ship, now that Bill is dead?” Asked Frida, a beautiful young woman of 27 years with reddish-brown hair. Patricia, an Irish red-head with green eyes, shook her head. Since the sudden death of Bill Forster two weeks ago, the crew of the KOSTROMA had been worrying about its future, not knowing if the ship would be sold and, if yes, to whom. Bill Forster, apart from being a good man, had also been a fair, caring boss for the 123 women and 89 men of the crew. His space savvy had kept the ship intact through many tight spots and his business acumen and many contacts had kept the contracts coming. With him gone, it would be hard to find as good a boss and owner. A few minutes later, after the small craft piloted by Tina Forster had entered one of the secondary craft hangars of the ship, the voice of Tina came on the ship’s intercom.

“Attention all hands! Attention all hands! All crewmembers except those presently on cargo and passenger transfer operations, plus one bridge duty personnel, are to assemble in the main crew lounge immediately. I repeat: All crewmembers except those presently on cargo and passenger transfer operations, plus one bridge duty personnel, are to assemble in the main crew lounge immediately.”

“I will stay here, Frida.” Volunteered Patricia. “There is no real need for you here at docking stations.”

“Thanks, Pat!” Said the pilot, rising from her padded chair and heading quickly to one of the lifts. Calling a cabin and jumping in it as soon as the doors slid open, Frida Skarsgard pushed the button for the crew facilities’ level and waited impatiently as the cabin started going down. A few seconds later and four levels down, she exited the cabin and immediately met a number of other crewmembers that were pouring out of other lifts. None spoke, continuing instead on their way to the main crew lounge. More than one face reflected worry, which she could understand. To her disappointment, Tina Forster was nowhere in sight when she entered the lounge. She was still looking around when Tina finally appeared, coming from the elevators and with a large box in her hands. She seemed in good humor, something that reassured a bit Frida, and made her way to the center of the lounge.

“Please, sit down, all of you!”

After some shuffling around, Tina looked around at the close to two hundred persons now present, waiting to see if anybody else would show up. Finally, she spoke up in a strong but warm voice.

“You can relax, my friends: the ship is not going to be sold and you will all keep your present jobs. I went this morning to the reading of my uncle’s last will. There, I learned that Uncle Bill was bequeathing to me this ship and all its ground-based equipment and supplies, plus the bank account holding its operating funds. We will thus keep flying the KOSTROMA, with me as your captain and owner.”

A concert of cheers and happy screams greeted that announcement, cutting her off for a moment before she could speak again.

“From what the notary told me, my uncle had no outstanding debts to his name, thus he was able to give me the KOSTROMA with a clean slate and some operating funds to continue our business. I thought that such an outcome deserved a proper toast. Winnie, get behind your bar and break out glasses for everyone! I have some good bottles with me to fill those glasses.”

Winnie Zambela, the black barmaid of the lounge who also acted as assistant purser, hurried behind her counter as Tina carried the box she had brought to the bar, putting it on the counter and opening it. Murmurs of surprise and wonderment went around when Tina took out of the box six bottles of fine French cognac that had to have cost a small fortune. She then went around the bar to go help Winnie pour shots of cognac, making sure that some of it would be left for those not present in the lounge. Once everybody was served, she raised her own glass high.

“To the memory of Bill Forster, a good man, a good boss and a good uncle. May he rest in peace!”

“MAY HE REST IN PEACE!” Replied the crowd in unison, before downing their shots of cognac. Tina shivered as the strong alcohol burned its way down her throat and exploded in her stomach, then looked at the crowd around her.

“That’s it for now, my friends. Return to your duties and pass the good words to those who could not come now. Piotr, I will want a word with you after this.”

The ship’s purser, commercial agent and finance officer stood still while the others left the lounge, then approached Tina. At the age of 49, Piotr Romanski had a receding hairline that left him half bald, but was otherwise a strong, solid man of medium height with a round, sympathetic face and a small goatee. Piotr took out of a pocket of his business suit an electronic tablet as he stopped in front of Tina.

"I believe that I know what you want to know from me, now that you are the new owner, Tina. While you were taking care of your uncle's affairs, I took the liberty of booking a few cargo deliveries for our next run."

Tina smiled gently at Piotr, thanking her good fortune at having such a good commercial agent as the ethnic Russian. Much of the KOSTROMA's good financial fortune was owed to the competence and dedication of Piotr Romanski...and to his numerous well-placed contacts.

"So, where are we heading next, Piotr?"

"Titan! We will first pick up here at Callisto Prime ten empty bulk liquid tanks that belong to the Titan Chemicals Corporation, plus a few passengers and a number of cargo containers. It will not bring us much but it will at least cover our trip's costs. Once in orbit around Titan, we will load up with twenty full bulk liquid tanks: eight of propane, six of acetylene, three of ammonia, one of liquid nitrogen and two of liquid air."

Tina nodded her head, pleased. Titan, the seat of the Saturn Governorate and the second biggest moon in the Solar System with a diameter of 5,151 kilometers, represented a fabulous reserve of hydrocarbons for the oil-depleted Earth. As such, the refining industries on Titan shipped regularly to Earth huge quantities of such hydrocarbons, destined to feed the various chemical and plastic industries there. That commerce was worth a fortune in terms of shipping fees, but only the largest cargo ships could handle such large quantities economically. Fortunately, the KOSTROMA was such a ship.

"So, we then do a straight run to Earth afterwards?"

"No!" Answered Piotr, surprising Tina. "Then, we go first to Vesta, to drop the tanks of liquid air and liquid nitrogen, along with some passengers and cargo containers. Once at Vesta, we will pick up more cargo containers and passengers, plus about 121,000 tons of metal ingots and powders."

"Uh, is it really worth it to do such a stop in the Asteroid Belt, Piotr? It would be a lot more economical in terms of fuel if we did a simple straight run to Earth."

Piotr smiled and turned his tablet, so that Tina could look at it.

"It is, when those 121,000 tons of metal are actually worth over 141 billion credits, Tina."

"ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY-ONE BILLION CREDITS?!" Nearly screamed Tina, stunned. "Are we picking up a mountain of gold, or what?"

“The next best things, actually.” Replied Piotr, proud of his little coup. “We are going to pick up thousands of tons of processed Iridium, platinum, tungsten, titanium and copper in ingots or powder, to be shipped to Earth. The shipping fee for those metals alone will be worth a bit over four billion credits to us.”

Tina made a wide grin at that last figure: the shipping fees for that metal alone represented closely the actual resale price she could ask for the KOSTROMA. After that cargo run, she would have more than enough funds in reserve to pay for a complete overhaul of her cargo ship while still being able to give a substantial bonus to her crew. The implications of transporting such valuable cargo then made her grin dissipate.

“Uh, I hope that not too many people are knowledgeable about that transportation contract, Piotr. A number of ships have disappeared without a trace in the Asteroid Belt during the last few years.”

“Do not worry, Tina: this contract was not publicly tendered and the Vesta Consortium has severely restricted the number of people in the know about this shipment. You do not believe these wild stories about supposed pirate ships roaming the Asteroid Belt, do you?”

Tina was silent for a moment, processing a number of old pieces of news in her head. She finally answered in a sober, cautious tone.

“Piotr, one of the ships that disappeared without a trace in the Asteroid Belt was the RISING STAR, which was under the command of another uncle of mine, Peter Forster. Uncle Peter was an old space dog and knew all the navigation hazards in and around the Asteroid Belt, while his ship was meticulously maintained. Yet, the RISING STAR disappeared without a trace two years ago, without sending even a single distress signal. Subsequent searches couldn’t find a single piece of debris or a life pod and none of its crewmembers were ever seen again.”

“So? It could have collided with a large asteroid and evaporated on impact.”

“I don’t think so, Piotr. First, Uncle Peter was not the type to go around zipping at full acceleration in the middle of an asteroid field. Second, barely a few weeks after the disappearance of the RISING STAR, a large quantity of powdered iridium similar to part of its last cargo list was sold through a series of shady intermediaries to a metal foundry on Earth. The origin of that powdered iridium was never determined with certainty but I personally believe that pirates boarded my uncle’s ship and stole its cargo.”

“And the ship and its crew?” Asked Piotr, still not believing these pirates stories.

"I am afraid that those pirates would not let any witnesses of their crimes live, Piotr. As long as their existence is not proven, the Terran Customs ships will not actively search for those pirates. As for the RISING STAR itself, it was probably resold on the black market. You know how many ships roam the Asteroid Belt, some with rather flimsy identities."

Piotr nodded slowly his head, seeing her point. Literally thousands of ships of widely varying sizes and types went around the Asteroid Belt, a rich source of minerals of all kinds.

"Should I cancel that metals transportation contract, then?"

"No! It will be risky business, but we cannot afford to take only safe contracts. We will just have to be extra careful."

"And if pirates do actually try to board us, what then? The KOSTROMA is totally unarmed, apart from the light hand weapons of our ship's security guards."

"I don't know, Piotr. I will have to think of something, I suppose. Anyway, good job with those contracts, Piotr. We will leave for Saturn in two days, after loading those empty bulk liquid tanks."

## **CHAPTER 2 – CARGO RUN**

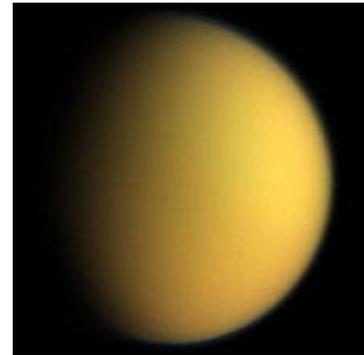
**14:03 (Universal Time)**

**Friday, February 19, 2315**

**M.S.S. KOSTROMA**

**Orbital terminal of Titan Magnus Spaceport**

**Low orbit of Titan (10<sup>th</sup> moon of Saturn)**



“Tina, Denise reports that the loading of bulk liquids will be completed in about two hours. The loading of cargo containers and crates is already completed.”

“Thanks, Ingrid.” Replied Tina to the sensors and communications specialist. She then punched a button on one of the controls pads attached to her pilot’s chair, calling the ship’s hostess, Natalia Vasilyeva.

“Natalia, how is the passengers embarkation going?”

The clear voice of the tall, sculptural blonde, answered from the level of the Promenade Deck, where the passengers entered the ship from the spaceport terminal through ship airlocks and boarding tubes.

“We have up to now greeted and led to their cabins a total of 306 passengers, Tina. We were told by terminal personnel to expect another 120 passengers due to arrive soon by shuttle from Enceladus and Dione.”

“Good! On my part, I expect to be able to undock and depart for Vesta at 18:00. We will retract the boarding tubes at 17:30.”

“Understood, Tina.”

Cutting the line, Tina then looked at the large screens giving a view of the outside to the bridge crew. The Saturn System was the jewel of the Outer Solar System, for many reasons. There was of course Saturn itself, with its majestic ring system that made it one of the most stunning sights of the Solar System. Apart of being beautiful, the giant gas planet was also a plentiful source of helium, ammonia and hydrogen deuterium, the latter an important ingredient of the cryogenic isotopic fuel used by all interplanetary ships. The cryogenic fuel production facility on the tiny moon of Prometheus, deep inside the rings of Saturn, was in fact one of only five such facilities in the whole Solar System, making it a primordial asset. Six other moons of Saturn, all with diameters

larger than 400 kilometers and composed half of water ice and half of rocks, made ideal places for subsurface hydroponic farms, dairy farms and cattle ranches. Their combined food production capacity more than made the Saturn System self-sufficient in foodstuff, at least of the basic kind, while leaving a sizeable quantity available for export. The dairy farms on Enceladus were in fact the largest producers of dairy products in the Outer Solar System. Two hundred refrigerated containers now loaded aboard the KOSTROMA were filled with such dairy products destined for Vesta and the population of the Asteroid Belt. Finally, there was Titan, the second largest moon in the Solar System and, with a diameter of 5,151 kilometers, larger than the Moon, Pluto or Mercury. Its dense atmosphere of nitrogen, ethane and methane, its surface lakes of liquid ethane and methane and its outer crust of water and ammonia ice made Titan a treasure of hydrocarbons and other chemicals, all in great demand on Earth and the rest of the Solar System. As the industrial center of the Saturn System, Titan was home to over 26 million people, mostly employed by its chemicals industry. Life on Titan, with its thick orange-brown atmospheric haze and its frigid surface, was however far from idyllic and was made bearable only by simulating Earth conditions and views inside cities buried deep under the surface ice. Those who could afford or had occasions to spend some weeks off Titan did so gratefully, even though a direct one-way trip to Earth typically took five weeks or more. Passenger liners, built for speed, long range and passenger capacity, could do such a trip in less than three weeks and handled the bulk of the passenger traffic in the Solar System, but charged hefty prices for a passage. Cargo ships with some passenger facilities, like the KOSTROMA, took care of those who could not afford a liner ticket but could accept a longer trip. Such travelers were typically families relocating to a new world to get jobs, government functionaries being transferred and students heading for years of studies on Earth or returning home. Because of that particular composition of travelers, 1,200 of the 1,260 passenger cabins of various sizes on the KOSTROMA were economy class, which was fine with Tina. While the ship's facilities were good enough to render even long trips comfortable, she had no desires to cater to crowds of upper class snobs. Her primary interest was cargo transportation, a trade much more lucrative than mass passenger transport and one also much more important in her opinion to the future of humankind than simple space tourism.

Leaving the ship's navigator, Dana Durning, in charge of the bridge, Tina left her pilot's chair and took an elevator cabin ride down to the Promenade Deck, 110 meters

below the bridge level. There, Tina walked towards the outer promenade and its access airlocks. A key part of the ship, the outer promenade was a six meter-wide, fifteen meter-high-ceiling avenue forming a closed ring 160 meters in diameter, with commercial shops along the inner side and large armored windows giving a view of space along the outer side. Facing the armored doors of the main access airlock on the promenade were reception counters where Natalia Vasilyeva and her assistants were greeting passengers and sorting them out before leading them to their respective cabins. Reinforcing Natalia's small crew for this occasion were the eight sex workers of the ship's sex club 'JUPITER', one of the small commercial enterprises and boutiques that rented space aboard the KOSTROMA. Tina had laughed when her uncle had first shown her that practice, but she had quickly seen the wisdom of that move. The six young women and two men were physically attractive and were trained by trade to be pleasant and sociable with strangers. They also knew well the layout of the ship and could easily guide passengers around. In return, they and their manager, Madam Lee, got discounts to their rents aboard ship, which satisfied both parties. It also had the benefit of making unnecessary the hiring of more costly permanent personnel for what was essentially an activity that took only a very small part of the time of a cargo run.

Taking a discreet position near the reception counters, Tina watched with interest the variety of passengers coming aboard her ship in small groups. The Spacers populating the Outer Solar System were an eclectic lot indeed, but they had one common point: they were all professionally active, in contrast to the Earth's masses of unemployed or inactive people whose lives were subsidized by government entitlements and pensions. This socio-economic aspect of Humanity was in fact starting to rend it apart in two, with Earth's massive population of over eight billion people on one side living on a polluted, depleted planet. On the other side were less than 350 million Spacers dispersed around the Solar System, working hard to produce the mineral resources the Earth could no longer provide itself. Those Spacers lived in an inherently dangerous and inhospitable environment which made adequate living and working facilities mandatory, simply to ensure survival. Building and maintaining such space facilities was very expensive and had at first been the burden solely of Earth's population, when the space expansion of Humanity had started in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century. However, that was now a thing of the past, with the human space colonies now being self-sufficient or nearly so. The problem was that many on Earth still thought of the

Spacers as spoiled, high-living elitists prospering on the back of the majority. The Spacers shot back that the spoiled, high-living elitists were actually the few millions of bankers, industrialists, land owners, corporation executives and high-placed politicians living in their gated mansions and private islands on Earth, mostly isolated from a general population half formed of hard-working but lowly-paid menial and agricultural workers and half of unemployed people, those who had lost for good their jobs because of the general depletion of Earth's resources. The big problem with those unemployed was that they could not be shipped 'en masse' to the Outer Solar System colonies: the housing and life support infrastructure for so many extra hundreds of millions simply did not exist.

As Tina reflected mentally on all this while leaning against a support pillar, a small boy maybe five years old ran suddenly away from his young mother, chasing after his soccer ball. The ball rolled towards Tina, prompting her to make a few quick steps to stop it with one foot. Grabbing the ball, Tina handed it with a smile to the Eurasian boy.

"Here is your ball, boy. You should remember that artificial gravity can sometimes play funny tricks with your ball."

"Uh, thank you, miss." Said the boy in a timid voice. As he turned around to go back to his parents, Tina had a sudden idea and followed him. The boy went to a young Asian man and a Caucasian woman carrying an infant Eurasian girl, with the small family about to register at Natalia's reception counter. Giving a discreet wink first to Natalia, Tina pointed the boy and his family.

"I could guide this family once registered, Miss Vasilyeva, if it could help." Natalia, an intelligent and quick-witted woman, smiled and nodded her head.

"Your offer is welcomed, Tina. Registering them will take only a minute." After finishing to process the group of nine teenage students heading to Earth for university studies that had been at the counter, Natalia invited the Eurasian family to come forward. She then took the identity cards and boarding passes presented by the Asian man. The latter spoke in a polite tone tainted by the nervousness typical of first time space travelers.

"Good day, miss. I am Kenji Kurozawa and I am heading with my family to Vesta. Here is my wife Joan, my son Hiro and my little daughter Kimi. I took one-way tickets, as I am going to study advanced ore smelting techniques for a few months on Vesta."

"Welcome aboard, Mister Kurozawa." Said Natalia before holding down in succession the electronic identity cards of the family against an electronic reading panel, copying the data on the cards to the ship's computer records. She next selected a specific cabin for the family, with her computer then producing three suitably coded electronic entry cards. Natalia clipped a long holding ribbon loop to each card before handing them to the man, woman and small boy of the family.

"Here are your key cards, Mister Kurozawa. I counsel that you wear them around your necks, so that you have them handy at all times. You have Cabin 12-D-08." Natalia then produced a number of small printed pamphlets, distributing them to the Kurozawas.

"Here are as well a simplified map of the ship, a list of instructions to be followed in case of an emergency and a list of the facilities and services available on board. All passengers are to attend a short briefing at 17:45 in the ship's auditorium, just prior to departure. If you have no questions at this time, Specialist Tina Forster will now guide you to your cabin. Feel free to pick her knowledge of the ship if you wish so."

"Mister Kurozawa, if you will follow me with your family." Said Tina, taking over from Natalia. She then led the Kurozawas, who were in turn leading an anti-gravity chariot carrying their luggage, down the main promenade. In this, Tina was following a long established practice meant to introduce new passengers to the commercial concessions installed on the ship and thus help their businesses. Having fun playing her role of guide, Tina described the various shops and facilities as they followed the closed loop of the promenade, lined on both sides by potted plants and small trees to make the surroundings more pleasant.

"We are presently on the ship's Promenade Deck, which houses the various commercial concessions present on the KOSTROMA. All those facilities will of course be pleased to serve your needs or wishes. While your tickets cover the cost of your meals, which are provided by the ship's cafeterias, a number of small restaurants and service counters offer at reasonable prices a variety of specialty foods to those who want to vary their diet. We are presently passing in front of the 'SWEET TOOTH' candy store and of the 'ENCELADUS SWIRL' ice cream parlor."

Tina noted with amusement that young Hiro's head snapped immediately towards the two stores with obvious interest, prompting his mother to preempt him.

"Later, Hiro, later!"

“Next, we have the ‘HOUSTON GRILL’, a Texan counter serving grilled meats and hamburgers, the ‘LONDON KIPPER’, a traditional British fish and chips counter, and the ‘SUSHI BELT’, a sushi counter. We also have a Middle-East grill, the ‘HOUSE OF KEBABS’, a noodle counter...”

They went by four more small restaurants and crossed a wide intersection leading to another main airlock before the Kurozawas slowed down at the sight of an establishment’s façade decorated with flashy neon signs.

“A sex club, here on a cargo ship?” Asked Kenji Kurozawa, incredulous. “I would have expected this, and all those other shops, on a liner, not on a cargo ship.”

“Well, let’s say that the previous owner of the ship had some very personal ideas about how to attract clientele.” Replied Tina with a malicious grin. “To his credit, I have to say that the KOSTROMA is rated highly by the passengers who booked passage with us in the past. In fact, passengers in the middle to low income bracket love traveling on the KOSTROMA. Most mixed cargo/passenger ships have no such facilities like this shopping promenade, while they charge no less than us for cabins. As for liner ships, they charge at least four times more for a cabin than us.”

“It is true that the price we paid for our cabin was very reasonable, miss.” Said Joan Kurozawa. “How do you manage to keep your prices so low, in fact?”

“Actually,” said Tina in a serious tone, “we make most of our revenues from the cargo we carry, Misses Kurozawa, and by a long shot. We can thus afford to keep the prices for our cabins low, which in turn endears us to low budget travelers.”

“A sensible policy indeed and one we will certainly not criticize, miss.”

The group took ten more minutes to tour the other shops and facilities on the promenade before heading down a main hallway towards the core central axis of the ship and its banks of elevators. Little Hiro was by now all excited by the facilities he had seen and would have run back to the promenade’s playground if not for being restrained by his parents. Taking a lift and going up three levels to Deck 12, Tina then guided the little family to one of the ship’s 320 economy-class two-bedroom cabins. Opening the sliding access door of the cabin for the Kurozawas, Tina let them enter first in the small lounge of the cabin. Kenji Kurozawa looked around at the comfortable furniture, which included sofas, a large audio-visual entertainment unit and a bar counter with refrigerator, and nodded his head with satisfaction as Tina spoke.

"This is the lounge of your cabin. The bedrooms are past this curtain door to your left. You may want to leave your anti-gravity chariot here and carry later by hand your luggage: the hallway forms a ninety degree corner and would be a bit tight for the chariot."

Taking the lead again, Tina pulled open the curtain door leading to the bedrooms and walked in a short hallway. She showed the Kurozawas another curtain door to the left.

"This is the door of the bathroom, which includes a full-size bathtub. Next will be the children's bedroom."

The latter room, while small, was carefully designed and contained two double bunk beds, plus a work desk, a chair and two storage closets. The beds had as well large drawers at the bottom. Letting her passengers examine for a moment that room, Tina then went to the nearby main bedroom, which was as large and well furnished as one would expect of a good hotel room on Earth. Tina walked past the large double bed and opened what looked like a sort of small storage unit, unfolding and deploying a padded baby crib with its textile mesh cage. She then smiled to Joan Kurozawa.

"If you prefer to have your adorable little girl sleep in your room, I believe this crib would be large enough for her, Misses Kurozawa."

"This is all very well designed." Said Joan, checking the crib for its sturdiness and padding. "We didn't expect such a nice cabin for the price we paid. If the food at the ship's cafeteria is on the same level, this trip will be quite enjoyable."

"Our cafeteria may not serve luxury gourmet food, but I believe that you will find the quality and variety most adequate. I..."

Tina's wrist communicator then buzzed, interrupting her. Excusing herself with the Kurozawas for a moment, she then opened the lid cover of her communicator, activating it and lighting the small display screen inside the lid. The head of Ingrid Holtz appeared, her expression serious.

"Yes, Ingrid?"

"Sorry to bother you, Tina, but I have an urgent call for you from Mister John Volpe, of the Jovian Shipping Lines."

"Uh, give me a few seconds before transferring me, Ingrid."

Tina then smiled apologetically to the Kurozawas.

"I am sorry to have to leave you like this, but duty calls."

"Go ahead, miss." Said good-naturedly Kenji Kurozawa. "You were of great help. We will manage from here."

“Thank you, sir. Have a good trip, you and your family.”

Leaving the cabin in a few quick steps, Tina looked back at her communicator once in the main hallway.

“Go ahead, Ingrid: transfer the call.”

The head and torso of a man in his forties wearing a good suit soon replaced the image of the blond specialist. Ingrid knew well John Volpe, as the man was the Vice-president for space operations of the Jovian Shipping Lines, which provided the KOSTROMA with the majority of its transportation contracts. It was thus good policy to be polite with him. John Volpe was anyway a decent, reasonable man.

“Mister Volpe, what can I do for you today?”

Volpe made a forced grin.

“Potentially a lot, Tina. I just got a big headache handed to me and you and your ship are the only ones who can help solve my new problem.”

“I’m all ears, Mister Volpe.” Replied Tina, bracing herself for trouble.

#### **14:58 (Universal Time)**

#### **Space liner M.S.S. APOLLO**

#### **Orbital terminal, Titan Magnus Spaceport**

Zara Varanian exploded with anger as her impresario and manager meekly stood in front of her after delivering the bad news to her in her luxurious cabin.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, OUR SHIP IS BROKEN? HOW THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO GET BACK TO EARTH IN TIME FOR MY BIG TOUR?”

Leon Steinberg made an apologetic smile at his mercurial star client: Zara Varanian, as well as being recognized as one of the most popular singers in the whole Solar System, was known to be a diva with a difficult character and with little patience for whatever obstacles she found on her path. One had once said that she was about as unstable as nitroglycerine, which was actually close to the truth.

“Uh, I spoke directly with the ship’s captain and he told me that his main engine has suffered a major engineering breakdown that will force him to go to a repair yard for many weeks. He however told me that an alternate ship is docked to this terminal and is ready to take us to Earth.”

The diva, a small, thin woman in her late twenties with a sensual body, pretty face and intense black eyes, calmed herself somewhat at those last words.

"That's better! And what is the name of that passenger liner?"

"The ship is called the KOSTROMA. It is actually a cargo ship."

"WHAT?! DO THESE IDIOTS EXPECT ME TO PITCH A TENT IN SOME DIRTY CARGO HOLD? I'M GOING TO SUE THEIR ASSES OFF FOR THIS!"

"Please, calm down, Zara. The Jovian Lines assured me that this cargo ship actually has quite decent passenger facilities. It is also supposed to be a fairly speedy ship, as cargo ships go. We should suffer only three days of delay compared to our original planned date of arrival on Earth. We can still live with that delay and conduct your tour on time."

"And there isn't any other, better alternative than that cargo ship?"

Steinberg shook his head at once.

"I have gone over the arrival and departure schedules with the terminal's traffic control center. No other ship will be available to go to Earth for another three weeks. Worse, the first ships then are a collection of cargo ships with only minimal facilities for passengers, all in economy class. The next real liner available for a ride to Earth won't come here for another five weeks."

"Five weeks? Why so long?"

"Because of the distance, Zara." Explained patiently the manager. At least she had not screamed...this time. "Saturn is over one billion kilometers from Earth. Even with all the ships traveling in space today, the Solar System is a huge place. That and the fact that passenger ships constitute only a very small part of the space traffic. I assure you that this is the best alternative we have, Zara."

"Alright, we will transfer our things on that...what's the name again?"

"The KOSTROMA. I will arrange for our transportation to that ship right away."

"Good! If I am not satisfied with that ship, though, I will still sue the Jovian Lines for all they got."

## **16:18 (Universal Time)**

### **Docking Station Number Four**

#### **Orbital terminal of Titan Magnus Spaceport**

As her air limousine made its way down the long pressurized structure supporting eight of the docking stations of the orbital terminal, Zara Varanian couldn't help be

impressed by the enormous size of the behemoth she was supposed to embark on. In comparison, the passenger ship APOLLO, her initial ride, was nearly a toy. Just one of the twenty or so pods hooked to the flanks of the KOSTROMA was nearly as big as the APOLLO itself. Her wonder however turned into alarm when she saw the dense stream of containers, crates, vehicles and persons entering the ship via multiple access tubes.

"Leon, you better tell me that you reserved already the best cabin on board for me. Look at all these people going in!"

Steinberg had a quick look from his seat besides Zara and smiled to her, apparently unconcerned.

"Do not worry, my dear. I was told that the KOSTROMA had ample room for all the passengers on the APOLLO. Even more, the reserves of fine foodstuff and alcohol stored aboard the APOLLO are also being transferred aboard the KOSTROMA. Miss Wang, the liaison person from the Jovian Shipping Lines, assured me that we will be as comfortable aboard the KOSTROMA as aboard the APOLLO."

"Humph! Maybe they are not total incompetents after all." Conceded Zara.

Another nine minutes and the air limousine was able to enter the cargo ship through one of the communications tubes that led to a sort of combination of garage and storage space. Two young women, one impeccably dressed in a female business suit and the other wearing a simple red Spacer's work coverall, greeted Zara when she stepped out of her limousine. The woman in business suit, an Oriental, bowed her head in salute at Zara.

"Miss Varanian, I am Miri Wang, sent by the Jovian Shipping Lines to ensure that your trip is most satisfactory to you. Welcome aboard the KOSTROMA."

The other woman seemed annoyed a bit at hearing Wang greet Zara aboard and presented her right hand in a very plebeian way in the diva's eyes.

"Welcome aboard my ship, Miss Varanian. I am Tina Forster, captain, first pilot and owner of the KOSTROMA."

Despite her social prejudices, Zara did not miss the part about Forster being the owner of such a huge and thus expensive ship and shook her hand briefly.

"Thank you, Captain. I am told that your ship is quite fast for a cargo ship."

"It is, miss, although there are some safety limits I can't ignore when at full load. Be advised that we will have to make a brief stop at Vesta, in the Asteroid Belt, to pick up a cargo of refined metals on our way to Earth. I however intend to keep my engines

at near maximum performance during our trip in order to keep you and the other passengers of the APOLLO near your original schedule.”

“A stop in Vesta? Is that really necessary, Captain?”

“It is, Miss Varanian. That load of metals is by itself worth a lot more than my whole ship and is important to sustain the industries on Earth.”

“Oh?! I will take your word for it, then. I suppose that you have cabins ready for me and my entourage?”

“Effectively, Miss Varanian. Once your luggage is taken out of your limousine, I will personally guide you to your cabin, while Miss Wang will take care of your assistants.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Said Zara before turning towards the driver of her limousine and to a big, beefy man in a dark suit. “Karl, Devin, you may start unload our luggage from the limousine.”

The two men nodded their heads and opened the trunk of the vehicle, while a crewman of the KOSTROMA brought forward three small anti-gravity chariots. As the men started emptying the limousine, taking out a bewildering quantity of suitcases and travel bags, Tina’s sharp eyes caught on something. Approaching the beefy man, she patted his shoulder, making him stop his work as he looked at her with curiosity.

“Yes, miss?”

“I see that you are armed. I suppose that you have a weapon carrying permit?”

“Of course, miss! I am one of the bodyguards for Miss Varanian. Do you want to see my carrying permit?”

“That won’t be necessary: I believe you. I however want to see the ammunition in your pistol.”

Intrigued, the bodyguard still obliged her, taking out his pistol from his shoulder holster and removing its ammunition clip, handing the latter to Tina. She took one look at the bullet at the top of the clip and frowned.

“This is an armor-piercing bullet. It is good at piercing body armor but is also able to puncture a wall or viewing port of my ship and thus cause a catastrophic explosive decompression. Do you have low-penetration, frangible bullets, mister?”

“Uh, no, miss.”

“Then, go see later my chief of security, Mister Morrison, and get some frangible ammunition from him. I will not allow you to carry around my ship a weapon with armor-

piercing rounds. Keep your weapon unloaded until you can get some new ammunition. The same goes for the other bodyguards of Miss Varanian.”

The bodyguard hesitated, looking briefly at his employer. Leon Steinberg took on himself to give him an order.

“Do as she said, Devin. Karl, unload your pistol as well.”

The bodyguard and the driver complied at once, making Tina nod in satisfaction.

“Thank you for your comprehension, gentlemen. By the way, you may be interested to know that there is a fully equipped pistol firing range on my ship.”

“A firing range? On a ship?” Said Steinberg, truly surprised. Tina smiled to him.

“A small one but one with a range of thirty meters and five firing lanes. My ship’s security guards do need to practice their pistol shooting regularly after all, and we spend most of our time in space.”

“Decidedly, your ship seems to be full of surprises, Captain.”

“It is the sixth biggest ship in terms of mass in the Solar System, mister. There is thus ample room aboard for many things that would not fit even on big passenger liners like the APOLLO. I will be more than happy to give you and Miss Varanian a tour of my ship tomorrow, once we are on our way.”

“I will be looking forward to it, Captain.”

Tina then stepped away from the limousine, letting the driver and bodyguard finish unloading the vehicle.

Four minutes later, and with all three chariots full to capacity and the limousine moved to its storage spot, the group followed Tina to one of the cargo lifts running along the central axis shaft of the ship. The sixteen persons and three chariots easily fit inside the big cargo lift, made to accommodate five meter-long short cargo containers. Tina then made the lift rise to Level 15, where the cabins reserved for Zara Varanian and her troupe were. Once out of the lift, the group split in two, with Miri Wang escorting most of Varanian’s employees and assistants towards their respective cabins. Tina stayed with the diva, her dressing lady and her executive secretary, leading them to one of the few business-class cabins on the KOSTROMA. Stopping finally in front of a sliding door, Tina opened it by using her access card, which opened all the doors on her ship, then invited Varanian in.

“Your new home for three weeks on the KOSTROMA, Miss Varanian. I hope that you will be satisfied.”

Fully expecting to be disappointed, Zara stepped inside a spacious lounge and looked around her. The first surprise was the size of the room itself, which even had a dining corner at one end with a table for four persons. The lounge also featured a bar corner and a huge plasma display unit faced by comfortable sofas. The lounge in her cabin aboard the APOLLO had been significantly smaller than this one. Tina then went to a door in one corner, opening it and revealing a small bedroom with a double bunk bed and one single bed.

“This bedroom will accommodate your two assistants, Miss Varanian. It has its own complete bathroom and entertainment unit. We will see next your bedroom.”

Crossing the length of the lounge, Tina opened a door at the end, closely followed by a curious Zara. The latter actually smiled with satisfaction on seeing the big bedroom and its attached walk-in closet and luxurious bathroom, complete with a large whirlpool bath.

“Your ship keeps surprising me, miss. This is as good and certainly as spacious as any first-class cabin I have ever seen on a liner.”

“Thank you, Miss Varanian. For supper, the cafeterias are on Level Ten. There is a separate dining room for business-class passengers there. There are also a few small fast food counters on the Promenade Deck, on Level Nine. Those counters, like the other shops on the Promenade Deck, are however commercial concessions and you will have to pay for your meals there, contrary to the cafeterias. You will find a number of information pamphlets on the ship’s services and facilities on your bedside table. I will now leave you to let you install yourself. Have a good evening, miss.”

“You too, Captain.”

Once Tina was gone, Zara gave a few orders to her two female assistants, making them unpack her numerous bags and suspending or putting away their content in the walk-in closet and in the chest of drawers of her bedroom. In the meantime, she examined with interest the few pamphlets she found on her bedside table. That was when she realized the true size and volume of the KOSTROMA. As large and spacious as the decks she had seen up to now were, the passengers cabins and attached facilities represented actually less than ten percent of the internal volume of the ship. And that didn’t include the volume of the various cargo pods that could be attached to the ship and that represented most of its cargo capacity. One piece of information then made her open her eyes wide and suck air in. Activating her wrist watch/communicator, she frantically called her manager, who answered after two buzzes.

“Yes, Zara?”

“Leon, they have an auditorium aboard this ship, a 3,200-seat auditorium! We could throw a few shows aboard during our trip. It could be good practice for us, apart from helping us pay for our trip.”

“An auditorium? That is certainly something worth looking after. I will go have a look at it after I’m unpacked and report to you after. What cabin are you in?”

Zara examined quickly the access card given to her by Tina Foster before replying.

“I am in cabin 15-A-01. And you?”

“I’m in cabin 15-B-06. When are you going to have supper?”

“I will go to the business-class cafeteria on Level Ten at six thirty.”

“Good! I will see you then.”

About one hour before the agreed supper time with Leon Steinberg, Zara, having showered and changed, decided to tour some of the facilities of the ship with her executive secretary. Being intensely curious about it, she first went to the ship’s auditorium. While the furnishing of that huge hall was rather austere to her taste, the acoustics proved adequate, like the facilities for the performers in the back of the large stage. Now more decided than ever to throw a performance on the KOSTROMA, Zara went next to have a quick look at the business-class cafeteria, which was already open for supper. She used that occasion to book in advance a table in a corner that would provide her some intimacy, then advised Leon of that by wrist communicator. With half an hour still to spare, Zara then went down to the Promenade Deck and toured quickly its boutiques and counters. The sight of the sex club JUPITER did attract an amused smirk on her face but, when she looked at the pictures of the club’s ‘performers’ near the front entrance, she couldn’t help feel some interest towards one of the male dancers, named simply ‘Marcel’ on the advertising. The man, apart from being built like an Adonis, obviously had Mediterranean blood in his veins, something that attracted Zara. Discreetly noting mentally the operating hours of the sex club, the diva then continued her tour of the promenade.

As Zara Varanian was completing her exploration of the Promenade Deck, Tina Forster was taking place in her command chair on the bridge of the KOSTROMA. Her first business was to call in succession Denise Lonsdale, the ship’s cargomaster, and Natalia Vasilyeva, the head hostess, to confirm with them that the loading and

embarkation were completed. Once she had their thumbs up, Tina contacted Chief Engineer Rose Tillman, who answered from the main engineering control room.

“Main engineering!”

“This is Tina. Are you ready to fire up the main drive, Rose?”

“Affirmative! Our three fusion generators are on and hot and our capacitor banks are fully loaded. As soon as we clear the terminal’s safety zone, I will be able to light up the main drive’s fusion chamber on your order.”

“Excellent! I will contact now the terminal’s traffic control center to get clearance to undock. I will get back to you in a few minutes.”

“I will be ready, Tina.”

Cutting that line, Tina then called by radio the traffic control center of the orbital terminal, getting a nearly immediate response.

“Titan Magnus terminal, go ahead, KOSTROMA!”

“Titan Magnus terminal from KOSTROMA, we are ready for space. You may disconnect and retract your communication tubes and docking clamps.”

“Understood, KOSTROMA. Retracting communication tubes and clamps now.”

Tina then watched one of the secondary viewing screens of her station, where she had a view of the communication tubes linking the KOSTROMA with the terminal. Those, along with the giant clamps that had secured the big ship to the terminal, unhooked from the KOSTROMA and slowly pulled away, leaving the cargo ship to float freely alongside the spaceport terminal.

“KOSTROMA, from Titan Magnus terminal, you are free to maneuver away.”

“Thank you, Titan Magnus terminal.” Answered Tina before turning her head towards Dana Durning, the ship’s navigator. “Light up our navigation lights, Dana!”

“Navigation lights on! There are no craft or other ship in our departure path.”

Tina nodded in understanding: with a present total mass of eleven million tons, the KOSTROMA would easily crush any craft or small ship unfortunate enough to be caught in its path, even at very low speed. Her next order went to Frida Skarsgard, who was now effectively first pilot of the ship.

“Frida, you may start pulling us away on gravity sails.”

“Aye, Captain!”

Frida then tugged gently her control stick, sending computerized signals to the various gravity sail surfaces of the KOSTROMA. Under her commands, the gravity sails, in

essence a form of gravity mat that sent gravity waves against metal plates like wind blowing in a canvas sail, started moving the ship away from the terminal, slowly at first. Gravity sail drives were common to all interplanetary ships and formed the main drives of many of the smaller classes of ships and of all auxiliary craft. While not as powerful as thermonuclear fusion drives, gravity sail drives had the advantage of being simple to operate and maintain, needed only a source of electrical power and were safe to operate near people or other craft. In comparison, a ship needed to back away by tens of kilometers from any space terminal or ship before it could fire up its fusion drive. If it didn't do that, then the long, searing hot plume of plasma from a fusion drive could burn away or even melt any craft or ship caught in its exhaust. The gravity sails of the KOSTROMA were only powerful enough to impart to the ship, when at full load, an acceleration of less than two meters per second square, making it look slow and ponderous. Right now, accelerating away from the space terminal at one quarter gravity under gravity sails, the KOSTROMA took a full twenty minutes before it was distant enough to safely fire its main drive. At that point, Tina contacted again the main engineering control room via intercom.

"Captain to engineering: you may light up the main fusion drive now. Keep it at five percent power and neutral thrust at first."

"Understood, Captain."

"Frida, align the ship on our calculated path to Vesta. Be ready to apply power."

"Understood, Tina."

Down in main engineering, Chief Engineer Rose Tillman, a 21-year veteran of space flying, eyed critically the readouts from her instruments as she was about to light up the main fusion chamber of the ship's thermonuclear drive. A push on a large red button then started the computerized startup sequence. Electrical brakes were applied to half of the massive flywheel capacitors sitting on the deck under that of the main fusion chamber, extracting from them a massive electrical surge of eight gigawatts. That surge in turn fed a huge bank of multimegawatt lasers, which then sent dozens of powerful laser beams through optical conduits that converged on the main fusion chamber. Those laser beams, entering the fusion chamber at carefully calculated angles, hit a tiny pill of deuterium-tritium, vaporizing it while at the same time compressing the gasses under tremendous pressure and temperature. The deuterium-tritium then ignited into thermonuclear fire, which lit up the fine mist of deuterium-tritium

fuel pre-injected in the fusion chamber. The tremendous surge of thermonuclear plasma filled the fusion chamber, with its excess plasma leaving via a magnet-lined conduit. When functioning as a source of boost for the ship, that excess plasma would travel to the four fuel injection chambers of the fusion drive and ignite in turn more fuel, producing millions of tons of thrust. Right now, however, that hot plasma simply vented away in space from both the forward and aft nozzles of the KOSTROMA's main drive, producing no effective thrust. Simply closing either the forward or aft plasma acceleration conduits would then produce thrust in one direction, pushing the cargo ship in the desired direction or braking its flight. Rose Tillman watched this critical process for a few seconds before calling back the bridge.

"Captain, we have a sustained fusion reaction in the main drive chamber. We can apply power any time you want now."

"Thank you, Rose." Answered Tina before turning her head towards Frida Skarsgard. "Engage main drive at sixty percent power and initiate our pre-calculated flight plan."

"Main drive at sixty percent! Engaging on pre-calculated course."

The main engines of the KOSTROMA then erupted, producing a staggering ten million tons of thrust and creating an exhaust plume of hot plasma tens of kilometers long. However, instead of increasing its absolute orbiting speed relative to the Sun, the cargo ship actually started to decrease its speed, in order to come down from the gravity well of Saturn towards the orbit of Vesta. Helped by the efficiency of its fusion drive and its large fuel tanks, the KOSTROMA then went on decelerating for hours, to match the orbital speed of Vesta, in the Main Asteroid Belt.

## **21:42 (Universal Time)**

### **Entrance lobby of the JUPITER sex club**

Mark Cisco exchanged a satisfied grin from a distance with Madam Lee, the owner of the club: business was good tonight, no small thanks to all the extra passengers from the liner APOLLO. Many of those extra passengers were also obviously financially more comfortable than the average passenger the KOSTROMA was accustomed to carry. That meant bigger tips and a more generous consumption of drinks, the latter being the biggest part of the revenues of the club for Madam Lee. Presently, a group of seven wealthy businessmen were having a rowdy time in one

corner, enjoying a table dance from a voluptuous blonde, Vera Lutjens, while a no less enthusiastic group of four young women were admiring from very close the anatomy of the beefy Rick Westmore. With glass partitions between sections that could be polarized to become one-way mirrors, the action could become in fact about as rowdy as a customer wished. The only rule, which Mark Cisco was tasked to enforce if need be, was that consent had to be mutual and between adults. For even more intimate action, small private cabins could be rented in the back of the club, not only for customer-performer encounters but also for customer-on-customer action if two persons got attracted to each other during their visit at the club. The social mores of the 24<sup>th</sup> Century, at least among Spacers, were tolerant enough to make this quite frequent, actually. Things were a bit trickier on Earth, were what was permitted and tolerated varied greatly depending on where you were.

The club was already nearly at full capacity when Mark saw a young woman and a big, muscular man enter the club and approach his reception counter. He hid a smile when he recognized the woman and acted as if he had no clue that such a celebrity as Zara Varanian was visiting the club: he had learned long ago how such celebrities often wished to go around anonymously during their free time.

"Welcome to the JUPITER, miss, mister. We have separate sections for male and female shows. Where would you like to take a table?"

"In the male dancers' section, please." Answered Zara while discreetly admiring the impressive physique of the bouncer. Mark Cisco nodded and led her and her bodyguard towards the smaller section of the club, finally presenting them an empty table with chairs. Mark didn't miss the fact that Zara's male companion then chose to sit at another nearby table rather than at Zara's side and gave the bodyguard good marks for his professional judgment. He then returned to his post after being given a tip by Zara. A bare-chested waiter with the physique of an Adonis quickly showed up at Zara's table to take her order as she was eyeing the male hunk dancing and stripping on the stage a few meters away.

"Good evening, miss. My name is Marcel. What would you like to drink, miss?" Zara repressed a smile on recognizing the hunk that had attracted her attention on the façade's advertising a few hours ago.

"I will have a red vermouth on ice, please."

"Right away, miss."

Marcel then quickly took the order of her bodyguard, who went for a glass of mineral water, before walking away towards the bar of the establishment. He was back a mere minute later with the drinks. Zara smiled to him as she paid for both glasses.

“Could I ask for a table dance, Marcel?”

“Of course, miss! Let me just finish my tour of the tables and I will be with you.”

Back at the entrance lobby of the club, Mark Cisco soon greeted two new customers, black men in suits. One was huge and powerful, while the other was of medium built, was in his early twenties and wore a very expensive suit and a gold wrist communicator. This is decidedly a night for VIPs and their bodyguards, thought Mark before leading the duo into the female dancers' section and giving them a table. Contrary to the bodyguard of Zara Varanian, the black bodyguard sat with his charge at the same table. While obviously well-to-do, the younger man didn't tip Mark and dismissed him with a negligent gesture of one hand, as if he was chasing away an annoying dog. Mark left without a word, less than impressed by this particular customer.

Less than forty minutes later, a blinking red light and a discreet alarm on Mark's security computer screen made his head snap. He swore quietly to himself when he saw that the alarm came from the special wrist communicator of one of the club's dancers, Joan Ferguson. Furthermore, it came from the area of the table occupied by the young black snob. Without wasting time to check the view from the relevant security camera, Mark launched himself in a quick walking stride, charging towards the table of concern. A panicked cry from Joan then made him accelerate to a run in the semi-darkness of the club.

“LET ME GO!”

Mark arrived near the table to find Joan being forced to kneel in front of the young black snob by the man's bodyguard, obviously to make her give a fellatio. The black bodyguard didn't react fast enough to Mark, who sent him down to the floor in pain with a kick to his testicles. Mark then grabbed solidly the young snob's left shoulder, pushing him in his chair while glaring at him.

“Let her go, now!”

The young man, obviously half-drunk already, glared back.

“Do you know who you are messing with? Why all this fuss for this ill-trained whore?”

Mark did not respond immediately, first helping Joan to get up.

“Go see Madam Lee and tell her what happened to you, Joan.”

“Su...sure, Mark.” Said the dancer in a shaken voice before fleeing. Mark then looked back at the snob he was still holding.

“Customers are to respect our employees, mister. Sex acts are given only with mutual consent. I will now have to ask you to leave the club without further ado.”

As soon as Mark released his hold, the young man shot up from his chair, furious.

“I AM NELSON ZEMBELO, SON OF THE GOVERNOR OF AFRICA! HOW DARE YOU THROW ME OUT?”

A movement behind him and a warning shout from a nearby customer then alerted Mark.

“BEHIND YOU!”

Mark turned around in time to face a bull-like charge by the snob’s bodyguard, who was still grimacing with pain. Quickly pivoting and stepping aside, Mark used the man’s momentum against him, grabbing hold of his collar and forcing him to circle him before throwing him head-first against the nearest wall with a resounding ‘THUMP’. As the bodyguard slumped to the floor, unconscious, Mark activated his wrist communicator, having had enough of these two customers.

“Hello, ship security? This is Mark Cisco, at the JUPITER sex club. I have here a case of assault against an employee by a customer. I suspect that the latter is armed. Send a team as quickly as you can!”

The customer who had warned him, a tall and thin man in his thirties wearing the kind of simple and informal coverall favored by Spacers, joined him besides the knocked out bodyguard.

“If you need a witness, mister, I am all yours.”

“Thank you, sir. That will be most appreciated.”

The young snob eyed with anger Mark, then the other customer.

“You damn Spacers! You always gang up on us Terrans when you can. Wait till my father learns about this: you will then be sorry for this.”

“What is this idiot talking about?” Asked the volunteer witness, surprised and confused. Mark answered while eyeing Nelson Zembelo grimly.

“I suppose that you never went to Earth, mister?”

“Uh, no. Why?”

“Because, then you would have known that many Terrans resent our supposed life of high-tech luxury. They think that they are still subsidizing us, when in fact it is the

other way around now. Unfortunately, some on Earth find it convenient to perpetuate that myth among their citizens, mostly to help hide the fact that they are the ones who are exploiting the masses.”

The helping customer shook his head in disbelief.

“A life of luxury... I have yet to breathe fresh atmospheric air and never swam in a real lake or sea. As for luxuries, this visit to Vesta is the first real vacation for me and my family in four years.”

“That is the story of most Spacers, mister. Too bad that so many Terrans think otherwise.”

The arrival at a run of Bill Morrison, the KOSTROMA’s head of security, and of two of his security guards, interrupted their chat. Morrison, a big and tough man in his early forties, had a stun pistol in his right hand as he looked at the scene around the table.

“Alright, what happened here?”

The young snob immediately pointed an angry finger at Mark Cisco.

“THIS THUG ATTACKED MY BODYGUARD, THAT’S WHAT HAPPENED!”

“Bullshit!” Replied Mark. “He had his bodyguard forcing down Joan on her knees to make her give him a fellatio against her will. I had to knock out his bodyguard when he charged me. Be careful: he may be armed.”

“The receptionist is telling the truth, sir.” Volunteered the helping customer. “I saw everything and so did my two friends at that table.”

Morrison’s eyes focused on Zembelo as he pointed the unconscious bodyguard to one of his guards.

“Leo, find out if that man is armed. If yes, confiscate his weapon and then cuff him. You, mister, sit down!”

Probably because he was too drunk to realize how much in trouble he was, Nelson Zembelo stayed up, shouting in protest.

“DON’T GIVE ME ORDERS: I’M THE SON OF THE GOVERNOR OF AFRICA.”

The response of Morrison was to step forward and brutally push the young man down on his chair.

“I said ‘SIT’! Now, show me your identity card!”

When Zembelo didn’t move to take out his card, glaring instead at him, Morrison frowned.

“Very well! You want to play that kind of game? Then we will find your card by searching you in the detention block. Ahmed, cuff him!”

Zembelo then made yet another mistake and tried to take a swing at the head of security. The latter jumped back in time to avoid the fist directed at his face, then pointed his stun gun at the young man and pressed the trigger. Propelled by a small explosive powder charge to a muzzle velocity of 120 meters per second, the blunt nose, rubber-tipped twenty millimeter caliber slug slammed in Zembelo's ribs, flattening on impact while also delivering a 50,000 volts discharge through a small needle in its tip. The young snob went down like a rag doll with an audible 'HUMPF', his muscles convulsing. Ahmed Jibril then stepped around him and turned him on his belly and cuffed him. As Morrison was shaking his head at Zembelo's stupidity, his other guard, Leo Sanchez, showed him a heavy caliber pistol, along with the magazine extracted from it.

"That bodyguard was effectively armed, boss: he had a ten millimeter caliber SIG-4000 automatic pistol, loaded with armor-piercing bullets."

"This is getting better and better." Groaned Morrison before looking at Mark Cisco. "Where is Joan, so that I can take a statement from her?"

"She's with Madam Lee, Mister Morrison. She was quite shaken by this incident. I suppose that you will need a statement from me as well?"

"Yes, and from you and your two friends as well, mister." Replied the head of security, looking at the customer who had warned Mark. "My men will take care of bringing those two bozos to the detention block."

"Uh, could you send me the names and pictures of those two men later, so that I can place them on the club's black list?"

"That is certainly the right of your club, considering the charges these two will face. Son of a governor or not, that young idiot put himself in deep shit. Did you have by chance a security camera pointed towards this table?"

"I do have one covering this sector, yes."

"Then, let's go review its recent footage. Ahmed, you better call two more men to carry these two birds."

"Yes, boss!"

Letting his two guards take care of the black men, Morrison took with him the three customers that had witnessed the incident and followed Mark to his access counter to view the footage from the security cameras. It took only one minute of viewing to make Morrison nod his head.

"Your security camera confirms your accusations, Mister Cisco. I will download this footage for my evidence files and then take depositions from you and from those three gentlemen, plus one from your waitress."

"What will happen to these two men, Mister Morrison?"

"They will be charged with physical assault, sexual assault, attacking a peace officer and resisting arrest. At a minimum, they will have to pay a stiff fine, on top of staying a night or two in my cells, but they could get up to a year in jail."

"Don't forget that one of them may have a lot of political pull, if we can believe that he is indeed the son of the Governor of Africa."

That brought a mean grin to the face of the head of security.

"I'm not going to wait until we are on Earth before dumping that young idiot, mister. I will recommend to the Captain that we drop these two on Vesta, along with copies of your statements and of this camera footage, so that the Vesta Police Department can deal legally with them. I doubt that the father of this Nelson Zembelo has much political clout on Vesta."

Mark nodded in understanding then: the Vesta Consortium, which owned Vesta and thousands of other asteroids around it, was fiercely independent and its CEO, Karl Langemann, had little regard for Terran authorities. Zembelo had anyway violated laws that applied in the whole Solar System, and not only in the Jovian System.

"Well, I can't say that I will be sorry for that young idiot."

"Amen to that!"

The next twenty minutes were spent giving statements, with Morrison finally leaving Mark and the others to return to their business or, in the case of the three customers, to their ogling and drinking. Those three even got a round of free drinks and a free table dance by Joan Ferguson as a thank you from Madam Lee. Mark had to give it to the gray-haired owner of the club: she may be in a so-called dirty business but she took good care of her employees.

**10:12 (Universal Time)**

**Saturday, February 20, 2315**

**Detention section, MSS KOSTROMA**

**Void between Jupiter and the main Asteroid Belt**

Nelson Zembelo's ribs on his right side were still sore, with a spectacular blue and red bruise at the spot where the stun slug had hit him, when the door of his cell was unlocked and opened. He looked up angrily from his bed at the door, ready to protest again his treatment. This time, his visitor was a young woman in red coveralls, rather than one of his guards. One guard however stood outside the cell, ready to enter, as the woman, a pretty brunette with grey eyes, stopped just inside the door to stare at him with a cold look. Zembelo sat up on his bed and swung his legs out but didn't stand up.

"Who are you? When am I going to be released from this cell?"

"My name is Tina Forster and I am both the captain and owner of this ship. As for your release, it will happen in two weeks, when we will stop on Vesta. There, you will be handed over to the Vesta Police Department, which will process your case and prosecution."

"On Vesta? But I paid a full fare to Earth, not to Vesta!"

"Don't worry about your ticket fare, mister: it has already been credited back to your bank account by the Jovian Shipping Lines. You however assaulted sexually a worker employed on my ship, then attacked my head of security and resisted arrest. You will thus have to face the justice for those charges. The Vesta Police Department has already received electronic copies of the statements and security camera footage concerning yesterday's incident at the JUPITER CLUB and has accepted to take over your case. You will be able to secure the services of a lawyer on Vesta, as is your right. You can in fact contact a lawyer in advance of our arrival if you wish so, but the time lag between transmission and reception will make any real conversation difficult."

"I still want to talk to a lawyer!"

Tina nodded her head but kept her cold expression.

"Then you will get access to a communications link before lunch, Mister Zembelo. Whatever happens, however, you will never board this ship again. As Captain of this ship, and in accordance with the laws and regulations of Space, I declare you Persona Non Grata on the MSS KOSTROMA. Even if you manage to work up a legal deal before our arrival on Vesta, you will still disembark there. Next time you travel in space, remember to treat others on your ship with the same respect you would like to get."

Nelson Zembelo snickered at those words.

"You must be joking! You want me, the son of a continental governor, to treat a sex club whore like an equal? As for your damn ship, wait until my father learns about all this: you will then be able to kiss your sailing license goodbye."

What he then saw in Tina's eyes were not the fear he had expected on hearing his words. Rather, she now stared at him with intense anger mixed with contempt. Her voice was frigid when she replied to him.

"Don't rate too highly your father's influence, mister: he may be fond of plundering the riches of Africa, or rather what is left of them, but he has no say here in the Outer System. I would suspect as well that the executives of some big corporations on Earth would not appreciate it if he made it more difficult for them to receive the hydrocarbons and metal ores that this ship regularly brings to Earth, so don't fool yourself."

Tina then turned around and left the cell. She waited until Ahmed Jibril had locked the cell door before speaking to him.

"I allowed him to call a lawyer before lunch. Apart of that and further legal calls, he stays in his cell until our arrival on Vesta. The same goes for his bodyguard."

"Understood, Captain."

Still fuming from Zembelo's threat, Tina left the detention section at a quick step and went to the central axis and its battery of elevator shafts, calling a cabin and going up three levels to the Crew Facilities Deck, where her suite was. The short trip gave her time to reassess the danger level of that threat. She still didn't think that this governor would have enough political influence to cause her real trouble, but one never knew when the corrupt politics on Earth were concerned. She had better learn more about that Governor Zembelo and then, if need be, she could take some preventive measures. Once inside her private study, she sat at her work desk and booted up her computer. Unfortunately, being in space made it impossible to access instantly a universal database comparable to the old Internet of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The ship's databanks were however regularly and frequently updated every time the KOSTROMA docked in orbit of Earth or of an inhabited moon or planet connected to the Solar System's data network. Tina thus had the equivalent of highly detailed and recently updated encyclopedias at her fingertip. She also could consult the news bulletins relayed with lags of at most a few hours around the system. Her first search was about the political leadership of Africa. That brought up immediately numerous entries about Governor Horace Zembelo.

The man had been elected governor of Africa three times in a row and had now held office for nine years. However, Tina knew better than be impressed by that: African politics, even by Terran standards, were notorious for their widespread corruption, nepotism and outright graft. The reading of a dozen media articles going back up to the first mandate of Horace Zembelo only confirmed Tina's suspicions about him. While officially as clean as a whistle, Zembelo and many of his friends and acolytes had been repeatedly accused in the medias of practicing corruption and nepotism on a large scale. Many of the reporters that had written articles against Zembelo had however been put in jail on a variety of alleged charges on orders from Zembelo, or had been assassinated by killers unknown. As for being elected three times, allegations of vote rigging and vote buying had been leveled repeatedly by many, including by Terran government level agencies. Each time, an 'official inquiry' had cleared Zembelo of wrongdoing. Searching next in a less direct route, Tina read economic and financial statistics concerning Africa and other continents and covering the last twenty or so years. What she saw made her shake her head with disbelief and disgust. Those statistics made it too evident that Zembelo's reign over Africa had been far from being a godsend for the impoverished, overpopulated continent. While a few, high prestige projects had been conducted, often at appalling costs for the continent's limited financial resources, the human services infrastructure and transportation networks had been grossly neglected. Housing and sanitation for the poor, which represented a majority of the population, was rated as being the worst overall compared to all the other continents. In contrast, Horace Zembelo was said to be one of the five richest men in Africa.

Nearly sick with disgust and wondering how things could have fallen to such depths on Earth, Tina ended her database search after two hours of reading. Governor Zembelo was now certified bad news for her if he had strong contacts with Terran government agencies, particularly with the Terran Customs Services and its navy. Tina was however far from ready to let herself be intimidated by such a man and started reviewing mentally the people and contacts she could use to shield herself and the KOSTROMA from any possible abusive procedure. A couple of names readily came to her mind. She then noticed the time and nearly jumped in her chair: she was about to miss the last service for lunch at the crew's cafeteria! Leaving her study at a quick pace, she walked quickly to the crew cafeteria, which was close to her quarters, while still thinking about her potential problem with Zembelo. She however cleared her mind and

pasted a smile on her face before entering the cafeteria: a visibly worried captain made for a worried crew.

**08:01 (Universal Time)**

**Sunday, February 21, 2315**

**Business class cafeteria, Deck 10**

**MSS KOSTROMA**

Zara Varanian was having breakfast with Leon Steinberg, discussing schedules to practice a performance in the ship's auditorium, when a message was heard on the public address system.

"Attention to all! This is the Captain speaking! The ship will hold today a 'First deep space walk event' for all the children, either passengers or relatives of crewmembers, who have a personal spacesuit with them, are eligible for such a walk and have the permission of their parents. Those who are interested are to register for the walk at the ship's customer services counter on Deck 16 before noon today. For those who do not have their spacesuit, a limited number of spare suits will be available from the ship's stores. A refresher course on space walk procedures will follow at two o'clock, with technical checks of spacesuits at three o'clock. The space walk itself will be held at four thirty and will be reserved in priority to the children who never did a deep space walk before. If necessary, a second space walk will be scheduled as well for tomorrow, at the same hours. Thank you for your attention."

Before Zara could say to Leon that the notion of sending young children out on a space walk was crazy and irresponsible, at least four children sitting at nearby tables, three of them preteens, screamed with joy and started pestering their parents for permission to go on the said walk. To Zara's disbelief, most of those parents agreed readily, making her look wide-eyed at her agent.

"My god, Leon, this is nuts!"

Leon didn't answer right away, his eyes following a small girl of maybe seven years of age in the process of physically dragging her mother out of the cafeteria, probably to go enroll for the space walk.

"Uh, I was about to say the same, Zara. Maybe we should ask the Captain about this so-called first deep space walk."

A man in his thirties eating at the next table smiled to them on hearing that.

“Uh, excuse me if I may appear to be rude, but I think that I can explain this event to you. I am an executive from one of the mining companies on Titan and did my first space walk at the age of eight. It is actually a cherished event in the life of all Spacer children and one can participate as young as the age of six. There are actually three types of space walks a Spacer kid can strive to complete. One, the most common and frequent, is the surface walk event, when a child goes for his first outing in a spacesuit on the surface of an airless moon or planet. The second type of event is the space walk event, where a child goes out of a fixed space installation for a tour in the vacuum. Finally, there is the deep space walk event, when a child goes out of a ship in transit, like today.”

“But, our ship is presently moving at many kilometers per second.” Objected Zara. “A child, or even an adult, would be swept away if going out at such speeds.” The man smiled with comprehension at her misunderstanding.

“Our ship is moving very fast right now, yes, but it is not accelerating or decelerating, miss. It is just free-falling towards the orbit of Vesta. Thus, anyone exiting the ship now would simply float alongside it.”

“Oh, I didn’t think about that. But still, why make children face such risks?” The mining executive adopted a serious expression as he carefully worded his answer.

“Because, for all of us Spacers, learning how to live and work in space is not only a question of practicability: it is actually a question of survival. Someone who doesn’t know how to put on and use properly a spacesuit and who lives on a ship or a space installation not only puts his or her life at risk unnecessarily, but also puts other lives at risk as well. Let’s say that you are a teenage girl living on a space station and that you never learned to use a spacesuit in a vacuum and in zero gravity. Let’s also say that one day a stray meteorite hits your space station and causes a catastrophic decompression in your section of the station. If you can’t put on a spacesuit properly by yourself, then you will force other people to help you. That will prevent them in turn from helping others or from helping to repair the breach in the station, just when time is most critical.”

“Uh, I see.” Said Zara, contrite. “I have to say that, on Earth, many people would simply care about themselves and their families and forget the others around them.”

“And that is where the biggest difference between Terrans and Spacers lies, miss. Without wanting to brag, us Spacers have learned the hard way that we must all

work as a team and must help each other if we are to survive and prosper outside of Earth. Individuality is not discouraged, on the contrary, but selfishness is. Contrast that to what we see in the medias about the various social troubles on Earth. Don't get me wrong, miss: we have our share of sociopaths and criminals, but the great majority of Spacer population believe in mutual assistance. That is why we encourage our children to learn very young how to work in a spacesuit. Another difference with Terrans is that we won't tolerate unproductive people that are still in their physical prime, for the simple reason that we don't have the resources or housing capacity to support such free-loaders. On Earth, you could at the worst pitch a tent or build a shack somewhere and survive, but in space you can't do that. Building space housing and living facilities and sustaining them is both expensive and time-consuming, apart from needing to be carefully planned in advance if you don't want to end up with a major disaster in the near to medium future. Before you could think that we look down on our old people because they aren't productive anymore, let me assure you that they are well treated and respected for their experience. Many of them choose any way to continue working well into their sixties and seventies, as long as they are physically and mentally capable of doing their work. On Titan, I know of an employee of my mining company that still operates an ammonia separation processor at the age of 81, and I can certify that he is damn good at it, miss. He swore that he would die at his post and I believe him."

"Wow! You sure are making me reassess a few things, mister."

"Glad to be of help, miss." Said the executive with a smile before continuing his meal. That left Zara free to think about many things from new angles. After eating in silence for a few minutes, and with the mining executive having left the cafeteria, she looked at Leon Steinberg and spoke softly to him.

"You know, Leon, I think that I will go watch that first deep space walk event this afternoon."

Zara made good on her declaration, being part of the crowd that first encouraged the 37 young children, ranging in age from six to twelve, that went for a carefully supervised space walk along the huge bulk of the KOSTROMA, then cheered wildly the children once they had successfully completed their adventure. The happiness on the face of the children, along with the pride and joy evident in their parents, made a profound impression on Zara then. She watched on as well when Tina Forster, as Captain of the ship, gave to each child during the end ceremony a ball cap hat with the

embroidered badge for first deep space walk and the badge of the MSS KOSTROMA. One of the most cheerful parties she had ever attended followed in the evening, with the new deep space walkers treated like heroes. That day changed forever the view Zara had of Spacers as a community.

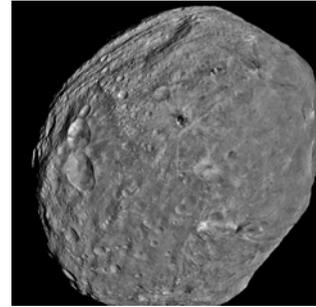
## **CHAPTER 3 – PIRATES ON THE PROWL**

**09:55 (Universal Time)**

**Monday, March 8, 2315**

**Docking Station 5, Kirkland Spaceport**

**Vesta asteroid, Main Asteroid Belt**



Tina was on attendance in the Hangar Deck as the last of the heavy crates full of iridium powder and platinum ingots were stored away in the warehouses on Level 7B. Just those 5,150 metric tons of metals, a puny portion of the cargo mass still carried by the KOSTROMA, were worth a staggering 138 billion credits. Piotr Romanski and Denise Lonsdale stood at her sides, watching as well as Javier Domingo drove his heavy forklift and deposited the heavy crate atop a pile of two other crates. Cargo handling robots then swiftly secured the pile of crates with metallic straps.

“I don’t think that I ever eyed a more valuable cargo in my whole life.” Said Denise Lonsdale, Cargomaster of the KOSTROMA. Piotr nodded his head slowly.

“It sure represents a very nice shipping fee for us all.”

“And a complete ship overhaul in a year or two.” Added Tina. “Then, the KOSTROMA will stay commercially competitive for at least another forty years, maybe more. I sure have some ideas already about what to include in that overhaul.”

“More passenger cabins and facilities?” Ventured Piotr, making Tina shake her head.

“No! Our real business is cargo hauling. Our passenger facilities are already excellent by any standards for a cargo ship. What I am looking at are more powerful gravity sails, along with a higher efficiency fusion drive, to cut our fuel consumption and make us even more competitive. I am also looking at adding a true direct landing capacity for our ship, so that we do not depend anymore on orbital docking stations around moons or asteroids without an atmosphere, like right now.”

“Such a landing capacity would be nice indeed.” Said Denise Lonsdale, thoughtful. “It would make our ship that much more versatile and may in fact make it unique in terms of cargo delivery abilities. Imagine if we could be able to drop directly on the surface of a deserted moon or asteroid complete habitat modules. Contracts would then come to us like iron to a magnet.”

"A most interesting thought indeed." Said Piotr approvingly, seeing the commercial potential of such a ship capability. "However, let's not spend already money we have not earned yet."

"Well said, Piotr!" Replied Tina. "Well, now that our loading and unloading is now completed, I better return on the bridge, so that we could get on our way."

Letting the two others go their own way, Tina took an elevator cabin up to the bridge complex and sat in her command chair. As she was giving a string of orders to undock her ship from the spaceport, Ingrid Holtz turned her head towards Tina, seated a few paces away from her communications and sensors station.

"Tina, I have an incoming call for you from Mister Langemann, the CEO of the Vesta Consortium."

"Transfer it on my chair's screen number two, Ingrid." Said at once Tina, wondering why such a rich and powerful man would contact her directly. The head and torso of a Caucasian man in his fifties then appeared on one of her three visual screens. Langemann appeared somber.

"Captain Forster, I am glad I could contact you before your departure. I wanted to convey to you my best wishes for a safe trip for you and your crew and passengers."

"I thank you for that, Mister Langemann. We will take good care of your metal and should be able to deliver it to Earth in fifteen days."

"That would indeed be a speedy delivery, Captain Forster." Said the multi-billionaire before becoming most serious. "The other thing I wanted to tell you was that I had discreetly asked the Terran Customs Navy's regional commander for an escort ship for your trip to Earth. Unfortunately, he turned down my request, citing as a pretext a lack of available ships. I have my doubts about that pretext but didn't insist, in order not to attract undue attention to your ship and cargo. The only thing that I can tell you now is to be careful during your trip, Captain Forster. Tens of thousands of space miners have worked hard to mine and refine that metal ore."

"I will exercise the utmost caution during my trip, Mister Langemann. Thank you for your warning."

"Then, I will not take more of your time and wish you a good trip, Captain."

"Thank you again, Mister Langemann. KOSTROMA out!"

Closing the video link, Tina then sat back in her command chair and thought hard for a moment. Langemann, while appearing to be only mildly concerned, had in fact seemed

to her like he had wanted to convey some very serious misgivings. Her mind went at once to what she knew of the regional commander of the Terran Customs Navy in the Vesta Sector. Rear Admiral Sanjit Parwan was widely said among Spacer merchant captains to have attained his present position through political favors rather than merit. There were even rumors that he was susceptible to bribes, a charge that could in fact be laid against many officers of the Terran Customs Navy. The TCN, while not exactly despised by Spacers, did not attract much respect, and that for many reasons. Its officers and crews were too often arrogant towards the merchant ship crews they stopped for inspection and were seen to be more interested in levying as much customs fees and taxes as they could instead of doing an honest job of regulating and protecting space traffic. The level and quality of training of the TCN crews was also often spotty, varying widely according to the competence and energy of individual TCN ship captains. The fact that the TCN recruited its junior ratings and officers strictly from Earth instead of from the Spacers population, in order to ensure their loyalty towards the Terran government, had a lot to do with that. With this in her mind, Tina understood why Langemann was worried: he had to ask for an armed escort ship for such a valuable cargo, but obviously didn't put much trust in Rear Admiral Parwan's competence or even honesty. If Parwan decided to sell to criminals the information about the cargo on the KOSTROMA, then her trip to Earth could indeed become quite hazardous.

Tina put those thoughts in the back of her mind for the next hour, time for her ship to maneuver away from Vesta and fire its main drive at low power to start a cautious path to Earth through the Main Asteroid Belt. Once the KOSTROMA was underway on its pre-calculated trajectory, Tina told Frida Skarsgard, Dana Durning and Ingrid Holtz to come with her to the small conference room adjacent to the bridge, then called by intercom Rose Tillman, Denise Lonsdale and Bill Morrison to ask them to join her in the bridge conference room. Last but not least, she spoke with the ship's main computer, nicknamed 'Spirit', a machine with a high level of artificial intelligence and with access to all the ship's databanks.

"Spirit, this is the Captain. I am about to start a command staff meeting in the bridge conference room. I want you to listen in on that meeting and be ready to provide data as needed, as well as any suggestions from you."

"With pleasure, Captain." Replied simply the female voice that personified the main computer.

With that done, Tina rose from her command chair and went to join the others in the conference room.

**23:47 (Universal Time)**

**Thursday, March 11, 2315**

**Bridge of the MSS KOSTROMA**

**Main Asteroid Belt**

Renée Dargenteuil had taken only minutes ago her post as the night watch duty pilot and bridge officer, along with four other duty crewmembers, when Anwar Duharto, the duty sensors specialist, frowned while staring at one of his display screens.

“Renée, we have just been swept by a long range radar pulse. The problem is that there are no known registered space installations or ships in this sector within normal maximum range of a D-band radar.”

“Oh? From where did it come from?”

“From our port bow area, bearing 310, elevation 064. Unfortunately, this type of D-band radar is very common as a long range sensor on many merchant and TCN ship classes.”

“What do our optical and infra-red sensors see on that bearing?”

“Nothing, except for a small asteroid we were due to pass by at a separation distance of approximately 28,000 kilometers.”

Renée thought over that information for a moment. The KOSTROMA was presently in the space coasting mode, with its main fusion drive lit but on idle. They were moving at a relatively slow pace, in order to safely navigate through the dispersed asteroids in this part of the Main Belt. Any space installation in this sector would have by law to have registered with the TCN, so that its position could be added to the navigation charts published by the Navy and used by all the ships in the Solar System. As well, any ship flying through would have had, like the KOSTROMA, to file a flight plan with the TCN local space traffic control center. Whatever had generated that radar pulse was thus technically in violation of space navigation regulations. With the directives received from Tina Forster following the staff meeting of three days ago still in her mind, Renée decided to call the Captain in her cabin. Tina answered on the third buzz in a sleepy voice, having been apparently already asleep in bed.

“Yes, Renée?”

"Captain, we have just been swept by a radar from an unregistered ship or space installation. The problem is that there should be nothing but us in this sector right now." Tina took a deep breath to wake up fully, then nodded her head.

"I'm on my way to the bridge. Keep a close eye on that radar source in the meantime."

"Understood, Captain!"

Three minutes after closing the intercom link, Renée got another report from Anwar, this time in an alarmed tone of voice.

"I now have a fusion drive flare signature from the direction of that asteroid." A mere second later, the duty communications specialist, Minh Wa Hien, reported as well to Renée.

"I have an incoming call on the short range inter-ship frequency."

"Switch it to my station, Hien."

What Renée got was an audio link with no video picture.

"MSS KOSTROMA, this is the Terran Customs Navy frigate TIBERIUS. We intend to rendezvous and board you for a customs inspection. Acknowledge, over." Renée didn't answer at once, nor did she activate her own video link, instead analyzing the information she had to date. Why would the TCN first pretend that it had no ships available to escort the KOSTROMA, then position a frigate to intercept it in the middle of nowhere for a customs inspection? It didn't make sense. Tina Forster then walked in briskly on the bridge, her hair still disheveled but her eyes alert.

"Report! What do we have here?"

Renée resumed quickly what had happened up to now, finishing just as a second call came in.

"MSS KOSTROMA, this is the Terran Customs Navy frigate TIBERIUS. I say again, heave to and be ready to be boarded for a customs inspection, over."

Tina's face showed immediate skepticism on hearing the call.

"A customs inspection, now and here, after they refused us an escort ship? No way! Mister Duharto, point our main forward optical telescope on that ship: let's recognize it the old-fashioned way."

"Yes Captain!"

Pointing and focusing the powerful optical telescope of the KOSTROMA, an instrument that would have made an astronomical observatory proud, took a few seconds. The ship

that then showed on the main viewing screen still appeared small but its silhouette was clearly defined, making Tina swear angrily.

"That's no TCN frigate! It looks more like a medium cargo ship. Spirit, search your databanks and try to identify this ship!"

Being an advanced machine using massive parallel data processing, Spirit gave an answer within a fraction of a second.

"Approaching ship identified as an ORION-class merchant cargo ship. Further detailed identification pending more detailed view of the ship as it will get closer."

"Thank you, Spirit." Replied Tina. "An ORION-class cargo ship..." Thinking furiously for a moment, she then gave a quick series of orders.

"Renée, take back the pilot seat and give me the command chair! Hien, sound the ship's general alarm! Call the crew to emergency stations: Situation Papa! Then tell all the passengers to stay in their cabins or, if out of them, to return to them at once and don their emergency life suits. However, they are not, I say again, not to go to the life pods. Spirit, lock all the life pod access hatches until further order: nobody boards a life pod until I say so."

"Understood, Captain." Replied the main computer's voice. "All life pod access hatches now locked and under central control."

Tina did not have time to give more orders before the intense blue ray of a high-power laser cut across the KOSTROMA's path and a third call was heard.

"MSS KOSTROMA, heave to and be ready to be boarded, now! If you do not answer or try to flee, we will fire again."

"Let me answer that, Hien." Said urgently Tina, now sitting in her command chair. Thinking quickly about her answer, she then adopted a near-panicked tone of voice to reply to the call.

"Damn it, TIBERIUS, give us a chance to respond: we were in the middle of a night watch rotation!"

"Well, next time be more on the ball, KOSTROMA." Was the harsh response. "You will keep coasting as you are now doing and will prepare to receive an inspection team via your port passenger boarding airlock."

"Understood, TIBERIUS. We will be ready."

Tina, knowing that she was now playing a very risky game, disconnected the ambient microphone of her command chair and put on quickly an ear microphone while giving orders.

"Be sharp, people: we are more than probably facing now an armed pirate ship. We will proceed according to our Plan Alpha. Spirit, start from now on to carefully compute the approach trajectory of this ORION-class ship. Advise me when it will be inside the target zone."

"Understood, Captain."

"Excellent!" Said Tina before looking at the other crewmembers present on the bridge. "PUT ON YOUR SPACESUITS, HALF OF US AT A TIME!"

Tina stayed in her command chair while Renée Dargenteuil quickly put on her spacesuit, kept like those of the others in a small locker room adjacent to the bridge. Once Renée was suited up and back at her station, Tina ran herself to the locker room and hurried into her spacesuit. That took her a good four minutes despite her beating her past record time for that task. When she returned to her command chair, she saw that the approaching ship was now much closer. The voice of Spirit came to her earpiece as she was sitting down.

"Captain, further identification now possible. There is a 93 percent probability that the ship approaching us is the MSS RISING STAR, slightly modified from its original registry standard."

Tina's face hardened at those words.

"The ship of Uncle Peter..."

She threw a hateful look at the image of the approaching ship: those aboard had most probably murdered her uncle and his whole crew after capturing the RISING STAR. Her resolve to not surrender her ship and its occupants only grew harder. Using the internal communications system, she called her head of security.

"Bill, this is Tina. The ship approaching us now is, or rather was, the RISING STAR, the ship of my uncle Peter. It is armed with at least high-power lasers and is trying to pass off as a TCN frigate, the TIBERIUS. Whatever happens, we will not let them take the ship without a fight. If we surrender or let them aboard freely, then we can expect to be all slaughtered without mercy. Be ready to use deadly force against any boarder when they try coming by the Promenade Deck port passenger airlock."

"We will be ready for them, Tina." Replied Bill Morrison after a short delay. Tina nodded to herself and continued to observe the approach of the other ship.

On the ex-RISING STAR, the man occupying the command chair made a mean smile as the KOSTROMA grew on the display screens, still coasting in space.

"They seem to have bought our lies. Mind you, the crew of that big mother didn't sound too hot. This should be quite easy."

"But it is one big mother, boss." Replied another man sitting at a converted station nearby that controlled the ship's armament. "I am not even sure that our lasers could do much damage against the thick skin of that ship."

"Bah! We still have our electro-magnetic rail guns and our missiles. Besides, they don't have any weapons. The most we can fear is some small arms fire when we board it, but we have ample firepower on our side to deal with that. They, on the other hand, have to worry about the safety of a couple thousands passengers. Unless their captain is totally nuts, we will not encounter any resistance...until it is too late for all of them."

Another pirate manning the navigator's station looked at his leader with a fake worried look.

"Hey, you're not planning to kill the pretty ones as well, boss?"  
The pirate leader laughed.

"Do I look that stupid, Carver?"  
The man at the communications station seemed to concentrate for a moment as he listened to an incoming call, then smiled at his leader.

"Boss, someone aboard that big whale finally woke up: they are at last questioning our identity."

"It took them that long? Man, they are even thicker than I hoped for! Tell them to shut up, lay still and let us board, or we will start carving them out with lasers and missiles. Be ready to jam the long range ship radio frequency, in case they try to call for help."

As the communicator obeyed him, the pirate leader eyed the KOSTROMA's huge bulk, as seen through a viewing screen.

"Easy billions... I can already taste a nice, comfortable retirement."

On the KOSTROMA, Tina Forster was watching intensely the approach of the pirate ship, now only a few kilometers away and maneuvering with the help of its gravity sails. The voice of the ship's main computer came on as the ex-RISING STAR got within 400 meters and was level with the KOSTROMA's bow section.

"Approaching ship now in the target zone, Captain."

“Very well! Renée, be ready with our main fusion drive, as discussed before. Spirit, you now have ship attitude control for the next few seconds. Fire at will!”

The KOSTROMA’s huge mass then started rotating around its longitudinal and pitch axis in small but carefully calculated moves. The first life pod launch tube cover flew open and the eight-ton life pod inside it blew out, accelerating at a rate of 35 meters per second square under the power of its solid rocket booster motor.

On the pirate ship, the launch in rapid succession of at least five life pods drew at first an incredulous look from the man at the weapons control station.

“What the... These idiots are abandoning ship!”

The pirate captain thought the same thing at first but changed his mind when he realized with a pang of panic that all the life pods launched from the KOSTROMA were in fact coming straight at his ship.

“SHIT! THEY ARE FIRING THEIR PODS AT US! EVASIVE ACT...”

The first life pod, an ovoid-shaped armored steel shell with a mass of eight metric tons and built to withstand the tremendous pressures and temperatures of even Venus’ hellish atmosphere, then slammed at a velocity of over a hundred meters per second in the aluminum alloy hull plating of the pirate ship while still under rocket motor boost. The collision, equivalent to the impact of a medium truck slamming at a speed of over 400 kilometers per hour, breached the hull plating, with the mass of the life pod continuing through to buckle and rip open the internal bulkhead, causing a massive explosive decompression. The impact also jarred and shook severely the ship, throwing it out of its previous axis and ruining the aim of the pirates’ weapons. Before any pirate could react, four more life pods slammed at point-blank range in their ship, ripping open to space a number of compartments and causing extensive damage. A second volley of five life pods followed a mere two seconds later, further adding to the damage and mayhem. One of the life pod impacts even took out the pirates’ missile launch box, retrofitted two years ago in an improvised space yard, while another impact wiped out the forty man-strong pirate boarding party, waiting inside the main airlock.

Inside the pirate ship’s bridge, the first impacts threw the pirate leader, who had not buckled his seat harness out of overconfidence, out of his command chair. With a bleeding forehead from banging his head against a nearby control station and with his left ribs hurting like hell, he got laboriously back on his feet while grimacing with pain,

then threw an angry look at the KOSTROMA's image. His angry look changed to one of utter terror when he saw that the big cargo ship's four forward fusion drive exhaust nozzles, each one with a diameter of twenty meters, were now pointed straight at his ship. The image from his external cameras then filled for a fraction of a second with blinding light before going dark, the cameras having being melted by the million plus degrees centigrade of the fusion plasma jets.

On the bridge of the KOSTROMA, Tina Forster watched with cold satisfaction as the pirate ship was enveloped completely by the plasma exhaust from her ship's fusion drive, now at full retro thrust power. The KOSTROMA's forward tractor beam generators were also powered up, immobilizing the pirate ship relative to the cargo ship and preventing it from emerging out of the hot plasma cloud. After about six seconds, large blobs of molten metal and other materials started streaming out, but she kept her engines on for another thirty seconds. When she put back her engines to idle, ready to power them back on if need be, there was only a large, shapeless mass of white hot metal left in space in front of the KOSTROMA.

"Justice has been done." She said quietly to herself as her bridge crew cheered wildly around her.

Zara Varanian had been asleep in her cabin when the howl of the ship's alarm had brutally awakened her. Disoriented at first and unsure what to do, she had taken nearly a minute just to remember where she had put the emergency life suit leased to her with her cabin. Fortunately, putting on that life suit had been child's play. Conceived as an emergency vacuum suit for passengers who didn't own their own spacesuits, it resembled once pressurized a big egg from which jutted out two short tubular legs and two gloved arms. Unpressurized, it was not much more than a flat metallic backpack to which was attached a flabby suit made of layered fabrics and polymer, the whole thing crowned by a detachable and transparent helmet wide enough to let a person slip into the suit via the opened helmet. The thing was somewhat crude-looking but had the benefit of being able to fit various sizes of persons without being custom-fitted. It was also relatively inexpensive and very simple to use. What Zara thought of it now as she nervously waited, sitting in her lounge with her executive secretary and her dressing lady, both wearing as well emergency life suits, was that she looked utterly ridiculous in that contraption. She also was starting to think that, maybe, she should have put on the

adult diaper that came with the emergency suit, instead of dismissing it as too embarrassing.

As she waited with her two employees in her lounge, an emergency message, along with a repeating video showing how to put on an emergency life suit, was displayed on the large flat screen of her entertainment unit. It still said to all passengers to stay in their cabins and to refrain from trying to contact the crew to ask them questions, but Zara grew furiously tempted to call somebody as the minutes passed. The muffled noise and shakes from multiple life pod ejections about twenty minutes after the start of the alert made her sit up nervously in her sofa.

“Now, what the hell was that?”

Her two employees didn't answer, themselves not understanding what was going on. The answer came however after another two minutes, when the howl of the ship's alarm stopped and the image of Captain Forster sitting in her command chair replaced the instructions on the screen of the entertainment unit.

“May I have your attention, please. This is the Captain speaking. I am sorry for the inconveniences of the last half hour but our ship had to evade a collision with an unexpected space obstacle. The problem has however been resolved and all danger is now gone. You may take off your emergency life suits now and return to sleep or to your previous activities. Again, I am sorry for any inconvenience this may have caused you. I will ask you however to repack your emergency life suits and store them back in their lockers, ready for any future use. Thank you for your attention, ladies and gentlemen.”

“A space obstacle? Does she means an asteroid?” Asked the executive secretary. Zara nodded slowly her head at that.

“Probably that, or a piece of space debris of some kind. I heard that there are millions of uncharted space debris floating around, from garbage containers to broken ship hulls. Colliding with one of them would definitely be bad for us. Thank God that our ship's crew seems to be on the ball. Well, let's get out of these ugly plastic eggs, girls.” Her employees were too happy to comply, having found the experience a bit claustrophobic. On her part, Zara let her dressing lady repack her emergency life suit for her and went back to bed after a quick visit to the bathroom.

With the alarm terminated and her message of reassurance given to her passengers, Tina sat back in her command chair and thought about how to handle this

incident with the space authorities. Complicating her decision process was the fact that she was now sure that someone, either from the Vesta Corporation or from the TCN, possibly Rear Admiral Parwan himself, had leaked her flight plan to those pirates. How else could they have been able to ambush her ship so precisely in the vastness of space? That Parwan had refused to provide an armed escort ship for such a valuable cargo load tended to make Tina believe that the leak came from the TCN. However, by law she had to report fully on this incident to the TCN. For one thing, she now had twelve empty life pod launch tubes to refurbish and refill, something she would have to explain in detail anyway. Finally taking a decision, she rose from her chair and went to pat Renée Dargenteuil on the shoulder.

“You have the bridge back, Renée. I am going to my day cabin to start writing my report on this incident. In the meantime, make four copies of all the relevant sensors, communications and video logs, ready to be attached to my report.”

“Four copies, Tina?”

“Yes! One for the ship’s logs, one for Karl Langemann’s eyes only at the Vesta Consortium, one for the Jovian Shipping Lines space operations center and one for the central command of the Terran Customs Navy on Earth. The message will be classified ‘Urgent’, but we will send the copy for the TCN two hours after the other copies. Advise our supply officer as well to secure in advance twelve replacement life pod from Earth, to be installed once we are docked at the Las Americas spaceport.”

“Got it!”

With a million things on her mind, Tina walked out of the bridge proper by a door connecting it to her day cabin, a small suite that allowed her to rest or work in private while staying close to her bridge’s command chair. Wording her report on what was going to be the first official pirate attack in a hundred plus years was going to prove a delicate job. For one thing, she was not sure how the Terran authorities would react to her utter destruction of that ship and the killing of its crew, especially if someone in the TCN had an interest in hiding the existence of these pirates. After all, if there had been one pirate ship, there could well be others still hiding around the Main Asteroid Belt and bribing people into silence. Hell, there could even be a whole pirate base hiding out there! Her report could very well unleash a storm of reactions, both official and unofficial, some possibly hostile towards her. With a cargo of rare metals worth over 140 billion credits, some very powerful people could have had their hands dipped in the jar.

**02:16 (Universal Time)**

**Friday, March 12, 2315**

**Residence of Karl Langemann**

**Kirkland, Vesta asteroid.**

“Sir! Sir! Wake up, please!”

“Uh?” Said groggily Karl Langemann, waking up slowly in his bed. Finally able to focus his eyes in the semi-darkness of his bedroom, he saw that his principal aide, Agneta Braun, was bent over his bed. Many forked tongues pretended, in Langemann’s back of course, that the beautiful blonde in her late thirties was in reality his mistress, but in truth she was the one member of his personal staff that he trusted completely. She was also a highly intelligent and competent woman of strong character, able to take hard decisions quickly when needed. If Agneta had decided that he needed to be awakened in the middle of the night, then it must have been for a truly urgent matter.

“What is it, Agneta?”

“We just received an urgent message from the KOSTROMA, sir, eyes only for you.”

“Did you read it?”

“Yes sir! The KOSTROMA is safe, but it just repelled a pirate attack while still inside the Main Belt. The pirates were lying in ambush for the KOSTROMA but Captain Forster was able to destroy the pirate ship in a rather surprising way.”

The words ‘pirates’ and ‘ambush’ finished waking up fully Karl Langemann, who swung his legs out of bed and sat up.

“Damn! Somebody leaked the KOSTROMA’s route and cargo manifest. Alright, where is this message?”

“It is on your personal computer, sir. I already opened the message for you.”

“Well done, Agneta! Give me a few minutes to read it. I will certainly have directives for you afterwards.”

“Understood, sir. Would you like a cup of coffee while reading that message?”

“It would be most welcomed, Agneta.”

The industrialist then got up and put on his favorite robe and slippers before walking out of his bedroom and into his private study. Sitting behind his work desk, he started reading at once the message shown on his computer’s screen. Next, he watched the multiple audio-visual recordings attached to Forster’s report, nodding in appreciation at

the way she had dealt with the pirate ship: there was a young woman of merit. A maid delivered to him a coffee service as he was halfway through the viewing and he sipped with content on a hot cup that finished waking him fully. Eight minutes later, he sat back in his swivel chair, feeling a mix of relief and anger. Relief that the KOSTROMA and its precious cargo were safe. Anger at the one who had informed the pirates of the cargo ship's route. His mind went nearly immediately to Rear Admiral Parwan: the man was at best an incompetent idiot, unwilling or unable to do his job properly, or at worst an accomplice to piracy, a crime he was sworn to prevent from happening and that rated the death penalty. Langemann did not however forget that many other actors may be at play here and that he would need to cover all the bases if he wanted to ensure his personal safety and the financial freedom of his consortium. Pushing a button got the ever ready Agneta Braun to step inside his study and walk to his work desk, stopping in a nearly military posture.

"Yes, Mister Langemann?"

"We need to find how and by whom the KOSTROMA's itinerary and schedule were leaked to those pirates. Don't spare the means or the money to find that out, Agneta. Also, I will need to know if the good Rear Admiral Parwan has any dirty little secret of his own. This affair now has top priority."

"It will be done, sir."

"One last thing: have an extra ten million credits wired to Captain Forster and tell her that it is a reward for her and her crew for a job very well done."

"Understood, sir." Replied calmly Braun before turning around and leaving the study. Now alone, Karl Langemann wondered how many other pirates existed in the Main Belt. If piracy ever became a serious and widespread problem, it would have the potential of strangling space commerce, raising dramatically insurance fees for shipping and discouraging space tourism. That would definitely be disastrous for all Spacers and not only for himself.

## **CHAPTER 4 – REFIT AND SHORE LEAVE**

**06:33 (Universal Time)**

**Sunday, March 14, 2315**

**Docking Station 2, Las Americas Spaceport**

**Earth orbit**



As Tina expected, the first persons to come on the KOSTROMA from the spaceport once her ship had docked in Earth orbit were a team of Terran Customs Navy officers with grim expressions on their faces. She met them at the entrance point on the Promenade Deck, presenting her right hand to the senior officer, a commodore no less.

“Commodore, I’m Tina Forster, owner and captain of the MSS KOSTROMA. Welcome aboard!”

“Thank you, Captain Forster.” Said politely the commodore, a small, thin Asian man in his forties, while shaking her hand. “I am Commodore Hiro Misawa, sent by the Headquarters of the Terran Customs Navy to investigate the incident between you and an unidentified ship you destroyed in the Main Asteroid Belt.”

Seeing Tina tense up at his choice of words, Misawa quickly reassured her.

“Please do not take negatively how I phrased that, Captain Forster. It is just that, until proven, little is known officially for certain about that incident, apart from the role played by your ship. I do not want to imply in any way that you acted wrongly, on the contrary.”

“That does reassure me, Commodore Misawa. If you will please follow me, I will bring you to my bridge-level meeting room, where you will be able to review all the pertinent data. Is my crew allowed in the meantime to start unloading our cargo and our passengers?”

“They can go right ahead, Captain. I will just ask that your senior officers stay aboard for a few more hours, that is until we leave.”

“An understandable request, Commodore. This way, please.”

Twelve minutes later, Tina sat with the four TCN officers around the large table of the bridge meeting room and ordered from the crew’s cafeteria trays with coffee and tea

service sets and an assortment of muffins, croissants and other light pastries. While they waited for the food and drinks to be delivered, Tina selected on the computer terminal in front of her a number of electronic files, then sent copies to the terminals of her visitors.

"Here are all the pertinent electronic files on the incident, gentlemen. You are of course welcome to peruse any other file in my ship's databank if need be."

"Your cooperation is truly appreciated, Captain Forster." Said Misawa sincerely. "Could you tell us first in your own words what happened out there in the Main Belt?" Tina obliged him with good grace, speaking for about three minutes. Misawa was thoughtful for a moment before asking his first true question.

"These pirates, did you recognize any of them from their voice?"

"No! If you implied that the old crew of the RISING STAR had gone into piracy, I will flatly tell you now that I will never believe that. I knew well my uncle Peter and most of his senior officers and they were all honest, decent people. I have personal recordings of my uncle and of some of his crew that you can listen to and you will find that their voice signatures don't match with any of the voices from the pirate ship."

"Without wanting to insult you by doubting your word, miss, could we have copies of those recordings?" Asked one of Misawa's officers, a tall African woman.

"You can, Lieutenant-commander. In fact, I will retrieve them right now and send them to your terminal, so that you can copy them."

"Thank you, Captain."

Tina was still sifting through old communications recordings, selecting some and sending them to her visitors' terminals, when a young and very beautiful Asian dark-skinned woman, a teenager actually, entered the meeting room after knocking on the door. Dressed like a waitress, she pushed a cart supporting cups, smoking pots and plates close to the table. Tina was secretly amused to see the three male TCN officers focus at once on the newcomer with delight.

"Commodore Misawa, may I present you Miss Tiki Batrang. She works as a waitress both in our crew's cafeteria and at the lounge-bar APEROSSIMO, one of the commercial concessions on our Promenade Deck. I have to say that she has quite a few of my male crewmembers smitten."

"I can see why." Replied Misawa, smiling. That made young Tiki smile as well, making her even more delectable. She however served the TCN officers and Tina

quickly and efficiently and left without delay, in order not to distract unduly her captain's guests. Tina thanked her mentally for that and looked at Misawa, who was sipping from his cup of coffee.

"I believe that the voice recordings I just gave you will put to rest the thoughts that my uncle and his crew turned to piracy. My belief is that they were executed by the pirates after their ship was captured by them two years ago."

"Unfortunately, your ship left only a mass of hot slag out of that pirate ship, Captain Forster." Said the female lieutenant-commander. "It will now be impossible to identify those pirates."

"And I am sure that Captain Forster had no other choice at the time, short of surrendering her ship and then possibly see her crew and passengers slaughtered." Cut Misawa, to the secret relief of Tina. "In fact, I have to say that the tactics you used were near strokes of genius, Captain. What made you think about using your life pods as projectiles?"

"Well, in view of the extremely high value of my present cargo, I was worried from the start of my trip about what I would do if attacked. I eventually realized that my life pods were the nearest things to projectiles I had. Attracting the pirate ship within their effective range was actually the real challenge. The aiming and firing of the pods was handled by the ship's main computer, using the ship's attitude control."

Misawa then asked a question that left Tina confused and shocked.

"Captain Forster, if you were fearing an attack on your ship, then why didn't you request an escort ship from the TCN's sector commander?"

"But...Mister Langemann, CEO of the Vesta Consortium and the owner of the rare metals I carry, did ask for a TCN escort ship. Rear Admiral Parwan rejected that request, citing the lack of available ships."

"Rear Admiral Parwan did?" Said Misawa, clearly surprised. Tina then understood that only part of the facts was known on Earth...or that someone was trying to cover his behind in this affair.

"Yes, according to Mister Langemann. In view of the immense value of my cargo for Earth's industries, I was very surprised as well that your Admiral Parwan didn't consider escorting my ship as his top priority, Commodore."

"Indeed!" Said Misawa, frowning at the possible reasons for such a refusal. The female lieutenant-commander however reacted in a much more heated way at what she thought Tina was implying.

"Surely, Captain Forster, you are not suggesting that Rear Admiral Parwan was negligent in his duties?"

Tina, having heard enough of her, stared coldly at the lieutenant-commander.

"Lieutenant-commander Mavimbi, that is exactly what I am suggesting. We Spacers are constantly requested by your navy to pay taxes, shipping and custom fees of all kinds and are sometimes stopped and inspected on the whim of your captains in the middle of shipping runs. We thus have I believe a reasonable expectation to get some protection from the TCN when transporting cargoes worth many billions of credits. On this run, my cargo was worth over 141 billion credits, more than the worth of your whole navy. Yet, your sector commander could not be bothered to provide my ship with an escort."

Mavimbi was about to reply hotly when Misawa raised a hand to signify her to keep silent.

"Captain Forster has a valid point, I must say. I will definitely inquire about that aspect of this incident. Well, now that we have all the data we need to study this incident, I think that we can let the good captain free to take care of her business, unless you have something else for us, Captain."

"Actually, I do, Commodore." Said Tina gravely. "That pirate ship's armament was visible once at short range, thus I could not see how it could use regular spaceports to refuel and resupply. It must have had a base of its own, a clandestine base that could be sheltering more pirate ships and would be used to transfer its illegal loot on more legitimate-looking ships for shipping and sale to customers that are not too scrupulous about forged waybills. I believe that the TCN should seriously investigate that possibility, Commodore."

"Again, you make a lot of sense, Captain Forster." Replied Misawa somberly. I will convey your suspicions to my superiors."

"And what about Rear Admiral Parwan?"

"My superiors will have to examine his case, miss. In his case, I can only make suggestions."

Meaning that somebody up Misawa's chain of command will probably hide the whole mess under the carpet, thought bitterly Tina. Misawa then rose from his chair after a last sip on his cup of tea and presented his right hand, which Tina shook after rising herself.

"Well, thank you very much for your cooperation, Captain Forster, and for your hospitality. We will keep you apprised of the final results of our inquiry."

“That is much appreciated, Commodore. Let me guide you back to the boarding tube.”

Twelve minutes later, Tina was seeing off Misawa and his three officers at the port boarding gate of the Promenade Deck. Natalia Vasilyeva, who was supervising the disembarkation of their passengers, approached Tina, stopping besides her and watching with her the TCN team walk away.

“So, what is the Navy saying, Tina?”

“They say that they will investigate the pirate attack against us. Commodore Misawa appears to be a good officer, but I don’t have much faith in his superiors. For all we know, Rear Admiral Parwan, of the Vesta Sector, may very well be the one who leaked our route to the pirates, but I could not say so directly to Misawa. We can only hope that Misawa will have the balls to push his investigation all the way. Well, enough about that! None of our passengers suspect that we were attacked on our way to Earth, I hope?”

“I heard nothing about that...yet. They all seemed to have enjoyed their trip, including even our choosy diva. I arranged for one of our shuttles to carry her and her troupe, complete with vehicles and equipment, directly to her hotel in Paris. That made her quite happy.”

“A nice move, Natalia. What would I do without you?”

“Muddle through?” Suggested with a smile the tall blonde, getting an elbow in the ribs in response.

“Yeah! Well, I will go see Denise on the Hangar Deck. I will feel better when that rare metals cargo will be offloaded and our shipping fee credited to our bank account. See you at lunch, Natalia.”

Going down two levels, Tina found Denise Lonsdale supervising the unloading of the crates of rare metals with three men. One of the men, the local representative of the Jovian Shipping Lines at Las Americas Spaceport, was known to Tina, but the two others drew blanks in her memory. A strong contingent of armed security guards bearing the patches of the Corbon Metals Consortium were on hand as well, supplementing the four armed guards from the KOSTROMA’s security section. Raising her nose from the data pad she was looking at, Denise smiled at Tina as the latter approached her group.

“Ah, Captain! I believe that you know already Mister Jimenez, from the Jovian Shipping Lines?”

“I effectively do.” Said Tina, stopping besides the group and shaking Jimenez’ hand. Denise then presented the two other men with her.

“Then, let me present you Mister Fred Nugent, representative of the Corbon Metals Consortium, and Mister Antonio Bergamini, representative of the insurance group that was covering this cargo of metals.”

Tina shook hands with both men, with Bergamini speaking to her in a low voice while smiling widely at her.

“My insurance group is presenting you a very special thank you for protecting your cargo the way you did, Captain Forster. I don’t want to sound insensitive about the fate of your crew and passengers if those pirates had succeeded in boarding you, but having your cargo stolen would have meant a huge blow to us, possibly even bankruptcy. Our CEO has thus authorized me to credit your ship’s account with the sum of fifteen million credits as a reward for safeguarding this shipment.”

Tina’s face brightened on hearing that: while some would call that reward ‘niggardly’ in view of the value of the cargo involved, the fact was that nothing obliged the insurance group in giving her any reward at all.

“Those fifteen million credits will make for a nice vacation bonus for my crew, Mister Bergamini. Please present my warmest thanks to your CEO.”

“I certainly will, Captain.”

Fred Nugent was next to speak after taking the time to register the serial number of an outgoing crate of rare metals.

“My consortium is also very pleased with you and your ship, Captain Forster. This cargo of rare metals will sustain our smelters for a good seven months and will help us keep a steady production of specialty steels. Iridium in particular is in such rare supply these days. Thank God that the Vesta Consortium recently found a real nugget of an asteroid made nearly entirely of heavy metals. We will certainly keep your ship in mind when we will need to transport another shipment of rare metals.”

“Thank you for that thought, Mister Nugent. I have however to warn you that I will possibly get my ship to a shipyard for a mid-life refit after unloading of this cargo and payment of the shipping fee. My KOSTROMA is still in very good shape but it is 25 years old now and it could use an infusion of newer technology.”

That made Nugent smile widely and he showed her his right thumb.

"Then, it will be my pleasure to use this thumb to certify delivery of the cargo and to authorize the transfer of 4.246 billion credits to your ship's account as soon as all these crates are moved out and on their way to our ground installations, Captain."

"Hell, for four billion credits I would suck that thumb with pleasure, mister!" Replied Tina, making the group laugh. Alfonso Jimenez, whose JSL was getting a cool half billion credits of its own for having helped arrange the shipment deal, nodded slowly his head.

"The Jovian Shipping Lines will be sad to lose the services of your ship for all these months in refit, Captain Forster. We will be however most happy to eventually reintroduce a rejuvenated KOSTROMA on our shipping lanes."

"Well, my KOSTROMA may go into a refit, but I still will have all my embarked fleet of passenger and cargo shuttles available to take up the slack for in-orbit and orbit-to-ground transportation work on behalf of the Jovian Shipping Lines. However, I intend to give first a good month of vacation on Earth to my crew...and myself."

"That is most understandable, Captain Forster." Said Jimenez, brightening. Being able to use the shuttles from the KOSTROMA would save him daily tens of thousands of credits by avoiding the need to rent at inflated prices the services of Terran-owned shuttles, which were getting greedier by the month and, in his mind, were less well maintained than the shuttles belonging to the JSL fleet. The group then went on watching the unloading of the heavy crates of metal ingots and powders. A bit over two hours later, Fred Nugent made a show of signing with his thumbprint the transfer of the shipping fees to the KOSTROMA's and the JSL's bank accounts. Of a common accord, the group then went to the crew's mess to toast the event with a round of drinks. Another hour and Jimenez left the ship with Nugent and Bergamini in very good spirits indeed.

**15:58 (Universal Time)**

**Monday, March 15, 2315**

**Crew mess, MSS KOSTROMA**

**Docking Station 2, Las Americas Spaceport**

Tina waited until all the members of her crew and their families, including the personnel temporarily transferred from the APOLLO and the staff and owners of the

commercial concessions on the Promenade Deck, were sitting before starting to speak in her microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the KOSTROMA, now that the unloading of all our cargo is completed, I will be happy to announce a few good news to you. First, you may all know already that our latest cargo has earned us a huge shipping fee equal to a bit over four billion credits, plus an insurance reward of fifteen million credits and another ten million credits bonus from the Vesta Consortium. While most of that money will be used for a serious refit of our ship and for our future operating expenses, all of you will get substantial individual bonuses. Since this huge profit was due to the specific cargo we hauled on this latest run, all the crewmembers that worked aboard during that run, including those temporarily assigned from the cruise liner APOLLO, will each get identical immediate bonuses of 100,000 credits. The employees and owners of the commercial concessions renting space on our Promenade Deck will receive on their part individual gifts of 25,000 credits, to thank you for the services you provide on this ship.” Tina had to pause for a moment, while a wave of loud cheers went through the crowd.

“There is more, my friends. Each permanent crewmember of this ship will as well see soon an individual bonus of one million credits transferred to savings accounts in your names at the Jovian Credit Bank on Callisto Prime. I will urge you to be cautious about how you use this money and that you ideally save it for your retirement days, or for the higher education of your children. We don’t know how the economy or space commerce business will fare in the years and decades to come, so, please, try not to burn that money on wild buying sprees.”

This time, there was a delayed reaction to her announcement before the crowd cheered again: her crewmembers were obviously stunned by their sudden good fortune. Tina again waited for a relative calm to return before speaking.

“I intend during the next few days to go shop around the shipyards in Earth orbit and around the Moon, in order to find a suitable yard that could conduct a major refit of the KOSTROMA, especially to its propulsion systems. Once such a yard is selected and a refit contract is signed, we will move our ship to that yard, then will be free to take a well deserved vacation on Earth. You will each get an all-expenses covered, one month paid vacation package for you and your families at one of the Earth vacation resorts our administrative office will select. Be assured that we will not be cheap about the resorts selection we will offer. After that month of vacation, you will return to the ship to help with its refit, but will be able to leave your families at the vacation resorts for the duration

of the refit, and that out of my pocket. For the staff and owners of our commercial concessions, do not worry about seeing your businesses shut down during the ship's refit. You will be allowed to stay open as long as it does not interfere with the refit work. Furthermore, I am suspending from now until the end of the refit the need for you to pay your monthly rent, whether you close or stay open."

More cheers and applauses followed her words. Now feeling as proud and happy as she ever had been before, Tina smiled to the crowd around her.

"That is all for the moment. You may start shopping around for Earth resorts in which you would be interested to spend your vacation. Our administrative office will then select the ten most popular resorts that you will suggest and start preparing packages for your use. Oh, one last thing: LET'S GET THIS BAR OPENED!"

Tina didn't have to repeat herself before there was a massive surge towards the bar of the mess.

### **10:06 (Universal Time)**

**Thursday, March 18, 2315**

**Chief designer's office, Avalon Space Yards**

**Earth orbit**

Tina was led by an Avalon Space Yards senior secretary to the office of the enterprise's chief designer, where she was greeted by a tall, lean man in his late forties with blond hair and clear blue eyes. The man, dressed very informally with an opened neck shirt and beige slacks, gave her a frank smile while presenting his right hand, which Tina shook.

"Welcome to the Avalon Space Yards, Captain Forster. I am Gustav Shomberg, chief designer of the yard."

Tina opened wide her eyes as the engineer's grip nearly crushed her hand.

"Gustav Shomberg? THE Gustav Shomberg who designed the Shomberg Fusion Drive?"

"In person!" Replied proudly the engineer. "So, you want to overhaul and improve your KOSTROMA, Captain?"

"I certainly do! Having it done under the supervision of one of the most brilliant ship designers of the day will certainly help me sleep soundly during the next few months."

The smile of the engineer widened at her words.

“And the reputation of our space yard for quality work is not overblown, I assure you, Captain. But let’s sit down at my design console to discuss your needs.”

Tina accepted the chair shown to her near a work station with a large holographic display sphere, with Shomberg sitting at the station.

“Mister Shomberg, I will certainly not dispute the reputation of your shipyard, which is well known, but I was surprised to learn that it is presently working only at half capacity. Mind you, I am not complaining about that, as it is giving me an opening to get your enterprise to work on my ship.”

Shomberg’s smile dissipated somewhat and he became thoughtful, speaking in a calm, slow voice.

“That, Captain, reflects the latest government budget cuts to its space-related expenditures. In case you haven’t heard in the news, the financial situation of the Terran government has worsened steadily during the last months, due to increasing demands by Earth’s population for social benefits and assistance.”

“I have heard about those demands but, frankly, found many of them completely unreasonable, Mister Shomberg. There are already too many billions of Earth citizens living on welfare and doing nothing. Hell, there are simply too many billions of people on Earth in view of its depleted natural resources.”

“I totally agree with you, miss.” Said glumly the engineer. “While I work and live in Earth orbit, I consider myself a Spacer first and have little sympathy for the masses on the planet who do little by themselves to improve their lot. Unfortunately, those masses also represent big voting blocks for the politicians of the Terran Federation, blocks that they can manipulate and use to stay in power by granting them ever more generous social benefits. However, those benefits have to be funded in order to keep the Federation’s budget from sinking into red ink. Unfortunately, Grand Administrator Li and his governing council have chosen to fund these social programs via cuts to space development projects and increased taxes on Spacers and space shipping. We at the Avalon Space Yards saw last month a government contract for the refit of a number of heavy units of the Terran Customs Navy cancelled abruptly, leaving us high and dry with no warning. The Terran government is even disputing payments for stocks of structural steel and aluminum and ship machinery parts we had acquired for that contract.”

“But, such a breach of contract is clearly to be blamed on the government, and not on your yard, no?”

"Most lawyers would say so, miss. However, too many judges in the Terran Federation justice administration are corrupt or totally subservient to the government, owing it their seats."

Tina looked at the engineer with visible worry.

"Are things really becoming this bad on Earth? I watch regularly the space news but did not pick up on that."

"Miss, one would need solid proofs before being able to publicly post such accusations without risking immediate arrest for defamation of public servants. Most news agencies won't risk such legal pursuits...or worse."

"Worse? What do you mean?"

Shomberg bent forward towards her and lowered his voice, as if he was afraid to be overheard.

"Let's say that, in the poorer areas of Earth where the government gets the majority of its public support, an increasing number of journalists and reporters critical of the Terran administration have been attacked by bands of thugs and beaten, or even killed in a number of cases. When some of those reporters complained to the local police, they were either ignored or accused of having provoked the incidents themselves. In most cases, nothing was done. I have a friend on Earth who was an investigative journalist. She was looking into a case of government corruption in India when she was brutally beaten at night by a bunch of thugs. When she went to complain to the police, she saw with a shock that one of the policemen at the station was one of her attackers. She then decided to drop her complaint and abandon her investigation. She has since abandoned journalism."

Tina could only look at him with horror and disgust before she could regain her voice.

"But, that's outrageous!"

"Yes, and it unfortunately represents a growing trend in the state of affairs on Earth."

"But, I am due to send soon my crew on extended shore leave on Earth. Are you saying that they would then be at risk?"

"Not if they avoid certain areas and don't meddle publicly in local politics or social affairs. Personally, I avoid Africa and the Indian Subcontinent like the plague, and have done so for years. They are grossly overpopulated and polluted, are ripe with widespread corruption and are sustained only by massive social programs from the

Terran Federation. Australia, North America and Northern Europe are however quite safe for Spacers in my opinion.”

“Quite safe for Spacers... I am not sure that I like what your last sentence implies, Mister Shomberg. Why would Spacers be especially at risk on Earth?”

“Because many in the unemployed masses on Earth believe that us Spacers are living on their back, a belief that the Terran government does little to dispel. You must know the old proverb that says: if you have a problem, it is easier to blame outsiders for it than to deal with it.”

“Yes, I know it.” Said Tina in a dejected tone. Shomberg then patted gently her shoulder.

“Please forgive me for having lowered your morale with such a ghastly subject, miss. Let’s see now what the Avalon Space Yard can do for your ship.”

Nearly three hours of technical discussions followed, with Shomberg projecting a 3D image of the KOSTROMA on his holographic display and modifying it as he responded with suggestions to the refit requirements presented by Tina. At the end of the discussion, Tina looked with awe at the 3D image of her ship, now quite different from its present state.

“My God! This would indeed be like a dream come true. How much would all this work cost and how long would it take, Mister Shomberg?”

“I would have to first do detailed plans and calculations before I could give you an accurate cost estimate, miss, but I would say out of experience that the bill would come to a bit over three billion credits. Fortunately, the machinery parts and plating we had stockpiled for that now cancelled government contract will allow us to save a lot of time and shave some of the costs. I would say that the work should take between seven and eight months.”

“That is quite reasonable, in view of the finished product.” Said Tina, satisfied. “I will be waiting for your yard to send me a detailed contract proposal for signature before giving my final approval. Once the contract is signed, I will move my ship in dry dock. Can my crew help your workers during the refit?”

“To a degree. Most of the work will take place outside of the main hull, so your people will be free to still use their onboard accommodations during the refit.”

"That suits me just fine, Mister Shomberg. By the way, there are a number of commercial concessions that rent space aboard my ship. If they are interested, your workers would be welcomed to visit and use them."

"Concessions? What kinds exactly?" Asked the chief designer, showing interest. Tina then took out of a pocket a small electronic tablet and switched it on, then opened a file listing the facilities of the KOSTROMA. She presented the tablet to Shomberg, who read quickly the list. He smiled on reading some of the entries, then gave the tablet back to Tina.

"I believe that our yard workers would indeed be interested to visit some of the establishments on your ship, miss. I must say that, for a cargo ship, your passenger facilities are impressive. Once overhauled, I believe that your ship will be well equipped to attract many juicy contracts."

"I am certainly counting on it, Mister Shomberg." Replied Tina, a wide smile on her face. Something then came back to her mind and she became quite serious. "Uh, with all these fascinating proposals of yours, I forgot to mention something: I will need to refurbish and refill ten of my life pod launch tubes."

"You had some kind of emergency aboard your ship recently, miss?" Asked a surprised Shomberg, bringing a grimace on Tina's face.

"You could say so, mister. I wanted to keep that incident hush hush, but I suppose that it will come out sooner or later. In truth, my ship was attacked by a pirate ship while navigating inside the Main Asteroid Belt a few days ago. Since I strongly suspected that those pirates would not leave living witnesses behind, I decided to defend myself by firing life pods from point blank range at their ship. While they were spinning out of control, already severely damaged, I then fired my main fusion drive and caught their ship in my plasma exhaust, melting them to a slag."

Shomberg stared at her for a moment with disbelief, then broke out into a short laughter before regaining control of himself.

"Life pods as shells: that was a brilliant tactic, miss."

"Maybe but, if I ever encounter other pirates again, which is a possibility, I doubt that the same trick will work twice."

"I never heard before about pirates actually existing in the system, miss. Maybe this was a fluke incident."

"I don't think so, mister. The ship that attacked me was owned before by my uncle and had disappeared without a trace in 2313."

Tina then quickly told him about the story of the MSS RISING STAR, how it had disappeared and how she had recognized it during the pirate attack. That left Shomberg in deep thought for a moment.

“So, you have legitimate concerns about the possibility of future pirate attacks, but are not confident about the TCN protecting your ship?”

It was Tina’s turn to laugh, but with a bitter tone to it.

“Them, protecting me? I am not even sure that it was not a TCN officer that leaked my flight plan and cargo manifest to these pirates. I suspect that your answer will be no, but is there any legal way I could have some armament mounted on my ship?”

“None!” Answered at once the engineer. “Only TCN ships have the legal right to carry any armament bigger than portable firearms, miss.”

“Damn! I thought so!”

“However...”

Tina looked with surprise at Shomberg, who was thinking hard. She however didn’t dare break his train of thoughts and waited for him to speak again.

“However, you already have aboard your ship most of what you would need to have a pretty powerful ship battery indeed. The work and modifications needed to turn these parts into a weapon system would be relatively minor and could even be done by your own crew while in space. It would be just a question of installing a number of new optical conduits and connecting them to the new sensors turrets that you wish to have installed on your ship.”

“Go on, Mister Shomberg. You certainly have my full attention now.”

The engineer then spoke for a few minutes, using a few holographic schematics to explain his idea. At the end of it, Tina could only nod her head, impressed.

“Hell, that is a brilliant idea, Mister Shomberg. I think that you just sold me on the concept. Uh, may I ask why you told me about this after saying that arming my ship would be illegal?”

Shomberg stared gravely at Tina as he replied to her in a calm voice.

“Because you are a fellow Spacer in need of help, Captain. Because I believe that you have a legitimate reason to want this. Because I, like you, have no confidence in the TCN or in the Terran authorities. Because we Spacers may very well end up having to face the TCN and the Terran authorities in a direct confrontation in the not too distant future.”

Tina, shocked by his answer, could not speak for seconds.

“But, how could you say that?”

“How? By being able to listen directly to unfiltered, uncensored local and regional news from the surface for years and by thus having a clear picture of what is really going on on Earth, Captain Forster. Earth is ready to implode under the weight of its excess population, its pollution and its depleted resources. Add to that a Terran government unwilling to take the hard measures needed to restore some balance on Earth, but also too willing to make us Spacers the scapegoats in the eyes of these billions of unproductive, often poorly educated Earth inhabitants. You then have the recipe for a disaster fuelled by ignorance, indolence and corruption. Believe me, miss: in some areas of Earth, the word ‘Spacer’ has a pejorative meaning. I know from personal experience.”

Tina digested his words with difficulty, her stomach churning acid as she stared at the engineer, unsure if he had spoken the truth or had let some bitter incident influence his thinking. Whatever it was, she certainly was going to do her own digging into this subject...and soon. Rising from her chair, she shook hands with Shomberg.

“I will certainly keep in mind what you told me, Mister Shomberg. I will be waiting with great expectation for your detailed contract proposal for a refit.”

“You should get it in a week, Captain. You will get the best from Avalon Space Yards.”

“I do not doubt that, Mister Shomberg. We should see each other soon. Goodbye, Mister Shomberg.”

“Goodbye, Captain Forster, and have a nice vacation with your crew.”

“I certainly intend to.”

True to his word, Shomberg sent a detailed contract proposal, complete with electronic blueprints of the modifications and work to be done on the KOSTROMA, six days later. Tina signed the contract after reviewing it with Piotr Romanski and with her engineering staff, finding everything to be most satisfactory, including the very reasonable final price tag of 3.18 billion credits. That was actually going to leave her with a much bigger financial reserve than she had hoped for, something that she was certainly not going to complain about. She somehow suspected that the Avalon Space Yards was making her a preferred customer bargain, probably because the yard was going to be able to use up much of the stockpile of unpaid materiel it had been stuck with after the government had abruptly cancelled its own contracts. The next day, she

moved her ship to the giant main dry dock of the Avalon Space Yards, a gigantic airtight space structure that could accept ships up to 2,500 meters long and 1,500 meters in diameter and that would allow the refit work to be done in a pressurized, climate-controlled environment. A few days of furious work by her crew were then needed to stash away or temporarily dismantle the equipment and fittings that could be in the way during the refit. Then, Tina was free to let her crew go on their well deserved vacation. By a coincidence that did not escape her mind, the refit work proper started on April 1<sup>st</sup>, April Fool's Day.

### **16:11 (North American Pacific Coast Time)**

**Friday, April 2, 2315**

**ENOS LAKE LOG CABIN tourist lodge**

**North of Nanaimo, Vancouver Island**

**Canada**

Tina breathed a sigh of content as she was about to land on the small landing pad of the ENOS LAKE LOG CABIN, having crossed at low altitude the east coast of Vancouver Island just north of Nanaimo, on the lower Pacific coast of Canada. The magnificent sight of the still heavily forested region and of the waters of the Queen Charlotte's Strait was like a balm for any Spacer that had not seen nature's beauty for months or even years. The tourist lodge owned and run by her cousin, Janet Forster, sat on top of a forested hill near the southern tip of Enos Lake, a small lake a bit over one kilometer long. The lodge, being on a dominant feature, also gave a good view of the eastern coast and of the neighboring small town and harbor of Dolphin Beach. Apart of the fantastic panoramic view, the lodge provided accommodations for tourists in a series of randomly dispersed, old-fashioned wooden log cabins connected to the lodge's main building, also made of logs, by natural stone-paved trails. Whenever she visited Earth, Tina never failed to pay a visit to the lodge, to relearn how to live with nature. Now that she was the owner and captain of her ship, she had made a point of adding the ENOS LAKE LOG CABIN to the list of resorts to be used by her vacationing crew members. Being presently in the off season for tourism, Janet Forster had been in turn more than happy to reserve twelve of her log cabins to the KOSTROMA's crew.

Setting down gently on the pad the light passenger shuttle she was piloting, Tina then twisted her head to look at the 34 men, women and children from the KOSTROMA that had chosen the lodge as their vacation spot.

"We have arrived at Enos Lake. You may now disembark and grab your luggage while I power down the shuttle. I will be with you in a minute."

Her cheerful passengers did not waste any time to leave the shuttle with their bags, stepping out in the fresh, humid air of a Vancouver Island early Spring. There was no snow on the ground but the outside temperature was around eight degrees centigrade and there was a salty breeze coming from the coast. Mark Cisco, one of the passengers of the shuttle, took a deep breath of fresh air with relish.

"Aah, real air! I can smell the pines and spruce trees around. I will love this vacation"

Joan Ferguson, another passenger of the shuttle, shivered a bit in the fresh wind.

"I should have brought a warmer coat with me. It is colder than I thought."

"Bah! You will have ample opportunities to buy something warm here, Joan."

Mark smiled gently on seeing the youngest children in their group break away at a run towards the nearby forest while screaming with joy, two adults after them.

"I can easily understand these kids' rowdiness: it must be the first time for some of them that they can run around freely in the open without a spacesuit."

"Just seeing this blue sky is already nice by itself." Said softly the stripper. Mark then pointed the Sun, low on the horizon.

"Unfortunately, night is approaching. Let's go to the lodge's lobby, to get our room keys."

"Cabin keys!" Corrected Tina Forster, who was passing by them on the way to the main building. "Here, you rent cabins, not rooms."

"I stand corrected, boss." Replied Mark, attracting a giggle from Tina.

"It's Tina for you, not boss, you nice big hunk."

"Yes, boss!"

The trio laughed it out on their way to the main building of the lodge, built in 'A'-frame fashion with large, varnished wood logs. There were only a few people present in the reception lobby and waiting lounge, including a mature woman standing behind the reception counter, when the group entered. The receptionist immediately walked out from behind her counter to go exchange a warm hug with Tina.

"Welcome to Enos Lake, Tina. It has been a while since your last visit."

"I was kept busy, Janet. And you? How are you doing?"

"Quite well indeed. Business is good, the husband is behaving and so are my kids, who are growing at a frightening rate."

"Aren't they all? Before further personal talk, could I have my group registered first?"

"Of course! After all, we will have many more days to talk together and exchange news, right?"

"Effectively, Janet. Apart from occasional trips back to orbit to check on my ship, I intend to have a solid month of vacation."

"Your ship..." said dreamily her cousin. "That was quite a gift that Uncle Bill gave you."

"Yes, and I am improving it right now. The KOSTROMA just entered an orbital yard for a major refit. I will however wait until tonight to tell you more about that."

"Right! Let's take care of your group of space truckers."

"Space truckers?" Said Tina in a false, outraged tone of voice. "Please!"

"Alright, alright!" Replied Janet with false contrition. "Your group of space wanderers."

"That's better!"

Registering Tina and her group and then guiding them to their respective cabins took Janet Forster a good forty minutes, by which time the Sun had settled under the horizon. The log cabins did possess modern amenities, but these had been built in with discretion, to preserve the old style look of the log houses as much as possible. Of a previous common accord, Joan Ferguson and Mark Cisco took shared occupancy of one of the cabins, not because they were planning on dating each other but because they trusted each other out of their work together at the JUPITER. Unpacking their bags took only a few minutes, following which the two of them decided to return to the main lodge building to have supper. Once out of their cabin, however, Joan was attracted to the sight of the waters of the nearby straight, on which the fading dusk lights were dancing, and stopped near the landing pad to admire the view.

"God, it is so nice to be able to see true nature like this. Life on the KOSTROMA is comfortable, but nothing can replace this. When I think that us humans have destroyed much of Earth's beauty."

"Some places have fared much worse than here, Joan. Luckily, this region has been protected for centuries by comprehensive environmental regulations and laws. I have quickly read about the history of the Canadian Pacific coast yesterday. At one time, clear cut logging operations were threatening to erase the forests on this island. Fortunately, the local people saw the folly of that and convinced the local government to declare much of the island as protected nature areas. There is still some logging done, but it is severely regulated, like the fishing industry."

"At last, some good sense!" Said Joan, still contemplating the coast and sea. "My last visit to the British Islands, some six years ago, was a severe disappointment. The air there was severely polluted from all the industries, while too many cities and suburbs had been reduced to overcrowded slums full of unemployed people. Going out at night was risky, with gangs of young thugs roaming the streets. I promised myself never to come back there."

"I can understand you, Joan. My own visit to Detroit three years ago nearly cost me my life. I had made the mistake of going through a particularly bad district at night and barely got out of it, with a number of knife cuts and stab wounds as a bonus." They were silent for a moment, watching the sea in the distance, before Joan spoke again in a low voice.

"Mark, do you think that Earth could turn around and regain its past beauty again?"

"Uh, I frankly don't know, Joan. Unfortunately, the mineral resources that have been depleted can never be recovered. Earth now depends on us Spacers for minerals. As for the air, water and vegetation, it would be possible in my opinion to clean up our act, but only if the local populations and governments are ready to make the efforts and pay the price for such a cleanup operation. Unfortunately, too many people on Earth now care only about themselves and the short term."

"But, they managed it here, no?"

"Yes, and it is to their credit, but some regions, like Africa, are now nearly beyond redemption. Earth's biggest problem, and one that has been one for centuries, is that there is too many people living on the planet. Africa is the most overcrowded, impoverished and polluted continent of all, yet they still refuse to practice birth control there, claiming old traditions and religious practices as excuses. It is also by far the continent with the most corrupt governments. Half of the continent has turned into deserts and there is a severe water and food crisis, yet African administrators are still

mostly preoccupied with stealing as much public money as they can before leaving power, if they ever do leave power.”

“And the central Terran government, why isn’t it doing something about that?”

“Maybe because it is about as corrupt and short-sighted as the regional administrations. I am afraid that it will take something major to wake up all those politicians.”

“Something major? Like what?”

“Something like a major natural disaster, or a food crisis, I don’t really know, Joan. I tell you what: how about forgetting all those problems and concentrate instead on enjoying our vacation here?”

Joan rested her head on his shoulder and crossed her arms to protect her torso from the cold wind.

“You are right, Mark. Let’s enjoy our time here while it lasts.”

**04:26 (North America Pacific Coast Time)**

**Wednesday, April 14, 2315**

**ENOS LAKE LOG CABIN tourist lodge**

The buzz of her wrist communicator woke Tina in her cabin well before the first lights of dawn. Shaking off her sleepiness, she activated the small viewing screen, to see the concerned face of Patricia O’Neil, who was on duty this week on KOSTROMA’s bridge.

“Yes, Patricia?”

“Tina, sorry to wake you up like this, but one of our crewmembers is in hospital in Acapulco, Mexico, and his family is being detained by the local police.”

That woke fully Tina in a hurry. Throwing away the bed sheets, she swung her legs out and sat up on the edge of her bed.

“What exactly happened?”

“According to the wife of Denis Sweeny, who was only allowed to place a call ten minutes ago by the local police, they were harassed in a restaurant last night by some local customers. When the Sweeny’s left the restaurant, those customers attacked and beat up our technician, then pretended that our man started the fight when the police arrived. The police arrested the whole family, charging them with disturbing the peace, and is still holding Misses Sweeny and her three children at the central police station in

Acapulco, while our technician has been admitted at the city's main hospital in serious condition. Misses Sweeny seemed to have been unable to speak freely when she called, but I got the strong impression that the local police is part of the problem here."

"Okay, send me via my communicator a map with the precise location of the Acapulco central police station and that of the main hospital. I will also need the hospital room number of our technician. Send me as well pictures and short bios of the Sweeny family, so that I can recognize them in Acapulco. Then alert our medical section and have a medical evacuation flight prepared. If our technician can be moved, I will not let him or his family in Acapulco. I will depart from Enos Lake as soon as you send me the maps and info."

"Understood, Tina. Should some of our security people go with the evacuation team?"

"No! They would have no jurisdiction or legal mandate on Earth. I think that I will have to play nice with the local bastards to get our people out. Thanks for warning me." Tina then closed the link and jumped out of bed to dress as quickly as possible. She was running out of her cabin less than six minutes later, heading for her light shuttle.

She took off two minutes later, having started her fuel cell generators while waiting for the maps and info from Patricia O'Neil. Now armed with that information, she quickly sent electronically a flight plan to Acapulco to the regional air traffic control center, then put her craft on auto-pilot. She took the time of her flight to first study the biographical data on the Sweeny's. Denis Sweeny was one of the small craft maintenance technicians of the KOSTROMA and had no criminal records, being seemingly a quiet, sociable family man. Next, Tina placed a call to the Acapulco main hospital, trying to get more information on the medical state of her technician. However, she was refused that information, on the grounds that it was confidential and personal. Giving up temporarily on that, Tina then called the Acapulco Police Department, getting a receptionist that answered in Spanish, then in English.

"...Acapulco Police Department. How may we help you?"

"My name is Tina Forster and I am the employer of a man your police arrested last night, along with his family. I would need to discuss their case with your desk officer on duty, please."

"One moment, please: I am transferring you to the duty desk."

After a short wait, Tina was connected to a burly man wearing the uniform of a police sergeant sitting behind a desk or counter. Thankfully, the man spoke a fair English.

“Duty desk, Sergeant Mendoza! What may I do for you, Miss Forster?”

“I would like to arrange for the release of Denis Sweeny, who is presently being treated at the main city hospital, and of his wife and three daughters, who are presently in your custody. I am their employer and am presently flying towards Acapulco. I believe that there was a serious case of misunderstanding in this case.”

From neutral, the policeman’s expression became nearly disdainful.

“No misunderstandings, miss: your employee caused a disturbance, then attacked three citizens in good standing. He got what he deserved and will have to face charges of assault and disturbing the peace.”

Tina had a hard time not to show fully her anger and contempt then.

“You pretend that a family man on vacation with his wife and three young daughters would attack three other men, Sergeant? Those accusations don’t make much sense. And why are you holding Miss Sweeny and her three daughters?”

“They also attacked our three citizens and resisted arrest when our officers arrived on the scene, miss.”

Tina could sense that the policeman was lying through his teeth, while the man’s arrogant air was infuriating her seriously.

“Sergeant Mendoza, I believe that this whole story is a crock and that it wouldn’t hold water in front of any fair judge. I am however concerned mainly with the health and safety of my people and am ready to make arrangements to obtain their prompt release, unless you want me to get some very powerful lawyers on your back instead.”

The policeman’s stance then changed slightly as he stared back at her on the video screen.

“What kind of arrangements are you talking about, miss?”

“I am ready to pay for their cautions and for any compensation claims or fines laid against them. I would however prefer to discuss this in private on arrival.”

Tina saw from the man’s reactions that her subtle message had come across, something confirmed when the policeman toned down his arrogance.

“That could effectively be arranged, miss. When will you arrive in Acapulco?”

“In about two hours. Does your police station have a landing pad?”

“Yes, but it is reserved strictly for police craft, miss.”

Tina swore mentally to herself, but then tried something else.

“Could I speak to Misses Sweeny and to her daughters, Sergeant?”

“I am sorry, but you will have to wait until you are at the police station, miss.”

“Very well, Sergeant. I should be at your police station at a bit past nine in the morning, local time.”

“We will be expecting you, Miss Forster.”

Tina, unable to further pretend to be polite with the bastard, then cut the communication link. She took a moment to calm down and chase part of her contained fury before calling the KOSTROMA and getting Patricia O’Neil on the line.

“Patricia, I will need you to find quickly how many of our people are in Acapulco right now.”

“Let me get the personnel roster, Tina.”

Patricia came back on line a minute later.

“We have a total of 41 crewmembers and relatives presently on vacation in Acapulco, Tina. Like the other groups on vacation, they are all staying at the same hotel, including the Sweeny’s, at the MARRIOT BEACH HOTEL to be precise.”

“Good! I will now ask you to call all of our people at the MARRIOT and tell them to start packing immediately for return on the KOSTROMA. Tell Valentina Suvarova to fly out with a light personnel shuttle and to go get our people out of Acapulco without delay. I am placing Acapulco out of bounds to our crew as of now. In the meantime, I will be taking care of the Sweeny’s.”

“I’m on it, Tina.”

Less than twenty minutes later, Tina got another call, this time from her head of security, Bill Morrison.

“Tina? This is Bill! I am presently in Acapulco with my family and got your recall order. What is going on?”

Thanking Morrison’s presence there, which gave her someone with a cool head and strong nerves to look over her people in Acapulco, Tina took a minute to explain the situation to him. Her recount of her conversation with Mendoza made his face harden.

“The bastards are looking for a bribe alright. The whole charges must be bogus. I have to say that I won’t really be sad to leave Acapulco, and neither will the others.”

“What do you mean, Bill?”

“That, while subtle most of the time, there is an undercurrent of hostility towards Spacers in general here. The hotel staff is polite enough, but I understand Spanish and I

could overhear a few comments made in our backs in town, especially in the less affluent parts. Us Spacers are not really popular around here, except when we drop money on the table, of course.”

“I see! Could you do something for me, Bill, while I do my best to get the Sweeny’s out of police hands?”

“Sure, Tina! What is it?”

“I would like you to gain access to the Sweeny’s room and to pack up and take away their things, then to pay their room bill. The faster we can all get out of Acapulco, the better. I will reimburse you later for the Sweeny’s room.”

“Don’t worry about that, Tina. Keep me posted on the Sweeny’s.”

“I will, Bill.”

At three past nine, local time, Tina landed in the Acapulco international airport and took fifteen minutes there to go to one of the airport’s banks, opened 24 hours a day, to withdraw a large sum in cash. She then jumped into an air taxi that got her to the city’s central police station, a big concrete building that had seen better days and appeared to be poorly maintained. That did not surprise Tina, who had read about the chronically insufficient government budgets, misappropriations of public funds and poor pay scales in this area of the Earth and in other places. In a sense, that was going to help her: in places such as these, money truly talked. Having had time to think about her strategy during her flight from Enos Lake, she had a plan of action ready by the time she entered the police headquarters. Needing something first, she looked around briefly and, seeing an employee cafeteria to one side, entered it and went to a vending machine. Buying a tablet of chewing gum, she started chewing on it, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. Her eyes were then attracted to a large television screen in one corner that seemed to be tuned to a news channel in Spanish, with English subtitles. The scene on the screen was one of utter chaos and violence, with a huge crowd of rioters in a city battling a line of riot control policemen. Both sides were freely hitting the opponent side with ferocity, the policemen with police batons, riot gas and rubber bullets, the rioters with bats, crowbars, bricks and even Molotov cocktails. Appalled by such violence, Tina approached the screen to better see. The reporter on the scene, in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, was explaining that the riot had been caused by growing popular demands for more generous subsidies on food staples for the poorer segments of the population. The reporter then alluded to other, recent food riots in city slums across

South and Central America, including one a week ago in Mexico City. At one point, the reporter interviewed some bystanders at the edge of the riot, with those shouting angry claims against the government handling of the food subsidies, which were deemed grossly insufficient. One of the protesters then made Tina's ear get up when he claimed angrily that the money 'wasted on Spacers' cut into the subsidies for the popular masses. His claim was immediately echoed with approving remarks by those around him. Having heard enough and disturbed by it, Tina walked out of the cafeteria, then took a moment to take out her gum and tear a small part away, gluing and flattening that part against the outer face of the cover of her wrist communicator, where a small red light indicator would normally be blinking when the device was operating. Then opening the cover, she punched in a series of short commands, then partially closed the cover, her communicator now in continuous sound and video recording mode and with the signals being as well retransmitted to the KOSTROMA via her light shuttle.

Throwing first the rest of her gum in a waste basket, Tina walked to the reception desk in the lobby, which was manned by two police officers and a civilian receptionist. Stopping in front of the receptionist, she spoke to her politely in English.

"Good morning, miss. My name is Tina Forster and I am here to see Sergeant Mendoza, at the duty desk."

"Let me call the duty desk, miss. It won't be long."

The young woman punched in a number on her videophone, then waited two seconds before starting to speak in Spanish with someone on her screen. After a short conversation, the receptionist looked back at Tina and pointed a large double door on one side wall of the lobby.

"Sergeant Mendoza is waiting for you, miss. The duty desk room is just beyond those double doors."

"Thank you very much, miss."

Tina forced herself to walk at a calm pace towards the double doors while steeling herself for the verbal confrontation that probably would follow soon. Pushing the double doors, she entered a starkly more austere room compared to the lobby. Vast but furnished only with rows of uncomfortable plastic molded seats for visitors, it had a long counter on one side, behind which sat or stood a number of policemen. One policeman near the door immediately confronted her in a barely polite tone in Spanish. Tina shrugged her shoulders and spoke in English.

"I'm sorry, but I do not speak Spanish. I am here to see Sergeant Mendoza. He is expecting me."

The Mexican policeman then barely hid a cruel smile.

"Ah, you are the employer of that trouble-making gringo Spacer. Follow me."

It took everything for Tina to hold her temper, but she followed the policeman without a further word, ending in front of an overweight police sergeant sitting behind the duty counter. She casually put her forearms on the counter, discreetly pointing the micro-camera of her communicator towards the sergeant, who nodded his head after eyeing her quickly.

"So, you are Miss Forster? You are quite young for a ship captain."

"I am also the owner of my ship, Sergeant." Said Tina, making the man's eyebrows rise with surprise. "We spoke earlier online while I was flying in. Before discussing how to resolve this case to our mutual satisfaction, I would like to see Misses Sweeny and her three daughters and speak to them."

"That can be arranged, Miss Forster. Follow me, please."

First opening a panel in the counter to let in Tina, the sergeant then led her to an adjacent section containing a series of holding cells made with steel bars. Tina soon stopped in front of a large communal cell reserved for women, most of them looking like prostitutes. Her eyes immediately stopped on Alice Sweeny, huddled on a corner bunk with her three young teenage daughters. Her face, apart from sporting numerous bruises and a black eye, showed fear and despair, while she clung protectively to her youngest daughter Cynthia, who was eight years old. The oldest daughter, aged fourteen, also sported bruises on her face and head, to the shock of Tina. Snapping her head towards Mendoza, Tina eyed him with contained anger.

"Who beat up Misses Sweeny and her eldest daughter, Sergeant?"

"They resisted arrest, so our men had to play rough. They also assaulted our three citizens that your employee attacked."

"Sergeant, I will not waste time qualifying your ridiculous claims for what they are, unless you can convince an honest judge that a family man on vacation with his wife and three young daughters would attack three grown men. I would like to speak to Misses Sweeny and her daughters, preferably in private."

The semblance of politeness on Mendoza's part then evaporated and he stared back at her with contempt.

“You are not on your ship, miss, and we make the laws here, not you Spacer parasites. These four will remain in cell until you give me a good reason to change my mind. As for getting the charges to stick, you really think that we will have trouble to find volunteers to act as witnesses against Spacers?”

Seeing that the policeman wanted to play hardball, Tina changed her tactic, giving Mendoza a hard look.

“Sergeant, I am this close to deciding that dealing with you is a waste of time. These people are my crewmembers and are under my responsibility. You either start becoming more reasonable or I will go get the most powerful lawyers I can find and will launch a lawsuit against you and your police department for police brutality and wrongful arrest. Know that I am now making this a matter of principles and am ready to spend as many millions of credits as necessary in pursuing a lawsuit all the way up to the Terran Supreme Court. You will then have to explain to your police commissioner and to your mayor why they have to spend millions in legal fees, on top of attracting disrepute on your tourist industry, when everything could have been settled quietly to our mutual satisfaction.”

The police sergeant stared back at her with anger for a moment, then clenched his teeth and hissed.

“Very well, miss. What do you propose exactly?”

“I want all charges dropped against the Sweeny’s, in exchange of which I am ready to pay compensations to the three men you pretend were attacked by my employee.”

“I can’t take such a decision by myself, miss. I will have to speak first with my lieutenant.”

“Fine with me but, first, I want to speak to Misses Sweeny and her daughters.”

Mendoza seemed for a moment like he was going to refuse her request, then made a gesture to the policeman nearby holding the keys to the cells and gave him a short order in Spanish before facing Tina again.

“Very well, you can speak to them, but here. You have five minutes.”

Tina did not answer, returning his glare until the door of the cell was opened. She then entered and, ignoring the other female prisoners, hurried to the Sweeny’s. Alice Sweeny hugged her with the strength of despair when she knelt in front of her.

“Thank God you came, Captain! This has been nothing but a pure nightmare.”

"I swear that I will do the impossible to get you and your husband out of trouble, Alice. How have you been treated here up to now?"

Tina didn't like the way the battered woman hesitated and lowered her head before answering.

"Not very well. Male policemen searched me and my daughters, forcing us to completely undress and joking between them as they abused my daughters."

Tina couldn't help throw a hateful look towards Mendoza before looking back at Alice Sweeny. She made sure as well that her communicator's camera could record the woman's battered face.

"Tell me quickly what happened before your arrest, Alice."

"We...we were eating supper at a restaurant in town. Just before we could finish our meal, three men eating at a nearby table started taunting us in Spanish. We couldn't understand what they said, so Denis decided to cut our meal short and return to our hotel. Those three men however followed us outside of the restaurant and continued to harass us verbally as we were trying to find a taxi. Other passersby then joined in on the jeering and taunting. When Denis tried to tell the three men to leave us in peace, he was then attacked by them and was punched and kicked until he fell on the sidewalk. The three men, encouraged by passersby, continued to kick Denis while he was down. That was when I and Lisa tried to interpose ourselves, but we were punched and kicked as well. Two policemen arrived after a moment and stopped the men from hitting us, but let them go, while they arrested us. Denis was then unconscious and was bleeding from the nose and mouth but they waited until we were all at this police station before calling an ambulance for him. I haven't been able to see Denis or speak to him since then. I...I am so afraid for him."

Alice Sweeny then broke out in tears, prompting Tina to hug her until she quieted down a bit.

"Don't worry, Alice. I will go visit Denis immediately after this and will come back to see you again."

"Please, make it quick, Captain. These people hate us: we will never get fair justice from them here."

"I know, Alice. Have faith, though: I will do everything possible to get you out. I will now have to discuss with that policeman. Hang on!"

Cold resolve on her face, Tina got up and went to the cell's door, which the jailer opened for her. Going out in the corridor, she stared hard at the sergeant while taking a small pad and a pen from a pocket, quickly writing a number on the pad and tearing the page to present it to Mendoza, along with one of her calling cards.

"These are the terms under which I would like to discuss the dropping of charges and release of my people, Sergeant. While you talk to your lieutenant, I will go visit my employee in hospital. One more thing: any more sexual abuse by your cops against that woman and her daughters and the deal is off and the lawsuit on. You or your lieutenant can call me at my number if you take a decision before my return. One last thing. If you think that I don't have the money to outspend your legal department, you better think twice."

Mendoza quickly glanced at the small page in his hands and did a double take, then eyed her with caution.

"I will see what I can do, miss."

Tina then walked out of the cell block, leaving the sergeant to hurry towards the third floor office of his boss.

Once outside of the police headquarters, Tina took another air taxi to go to the city's main hospital. Entering through the main entrance of the hospital and going to the reception desk, she got directions to Denis Sweeny's room, which was actually a common ward adjacent to the emergency section. Her anxiety grew as she walked towards the emergency and saw the conditions inside the hospital. There were patients on gurneys nearly everywhere along the corridors, and the medical equipment seemed to Tina to be both old and in insufficient quantity compared to what she was accustomed to see in the KOSTROMA's medical section. The medical staff seemed also tired and harassed, overwhelmed by the number of patients. When she arrived at the common ward where Denis Sweeny was supposed to be, she found herself facing a sea of gurneys, some separated from the others by sliding curtains but most being simply lined up in tight rows. A few nurses and doctors were literally running around, treating their patients the best they could. Tina then noticed that not all the patients were hooked to medical monitors. Looking worriedly around for Denis Sweeny, she was stopped by a nurse that had noticed her.

"May I help you, miss?"

“Yes! I am looking for a man named Denis Sweeny, who works for me. He was brought in yesterday night with multiple contusions.”

“Let me just check at the control desk, miss.”

While the nurse walked to a work station a few meters away, Tina continued to scan visually the ward. Her eyes suddenly recognized her technician, lying on a gurney in a far corner and apparently asleep. Not waiting for the nurse to return, Tina walked quickly to Sweeny’s bed, noticing that he was one of the patients not hooked to a monitor. She tapped the shoulder of a passing nurse and pointed Sweeny to her.

“How come this man is not hooked to a monitor, miss?”

“We don’t have enough monitors for all our patients, miss.” Replied impatiently the nurse before walking away. The first nurse then approached Tina, an electronic tablet in her hands.

“I see that you found your employee, miss.”

“Yes, I did. How is he doing?”

“Well, he was admitted last night with a severe concussion and multiple contusions. Since then, scanners have revealed two fractures in his skull, one above his right ear and the other across his forehead. He has not regained consciousness since his admission.”

“And he is not hooked to a medical monitor despite his concussion and skull fractures? He could slip in a coma unnoticed and die, dammit!”

The nurse gave her a reprobate look.

“We are doing what we can with what we got, miss. Are you a doctor?”

“No, but I have seen enough medical emergencies aboard ships to know how tricky concussions are.”

“So, you’re a Spacer, miss?”

Tina felt anger swell inside her then.

“And what is that supposed to mean, miss? We are human beings, like any Earth inhabitant, and we care no less for the others around us.”

The nurse seemed to regret her words and mellowed down.

“Let me do a check on your employee, miss.”

Sidestepping around Tina, the nurse went to stand by the side of Sweeny’s gurney and grabbed his left wrist to check his pulse. Tina suddenly felt cold dread when she saw alarm appear on the face of the nurse, who then pressed two fingers of the technician’s jugular, shouting an alarm in Spanish after a few seconds.

"I HAVE NO VITAL SIGNS HERE!"

That attracted a male doctor and two more nurses at a run, with Tina having to stand back to let them pass. Now worried sick, she watched anxiously as the doctor examined Denis Sweeny, only to lower his head in discouragement after less than a minute. After speaking angrily to the nurses, the doctor went to see Tina, speaking softly to her in English.

"I am sorry, miss, but it seems that your employee died about twenty minutes ago, judging by the body temperature. We can't do anything for him anymore."

While tempted to accuse him and his staff of gross medical negligence, something she would have good justification to do, she could see the appalling conditions under which the hospital staff was working. Looking sadly in the doctor's eyes, she kept her voice low and polite.

"The fault was not yours, or that of your nurses, doctor. The guilty ones are the men who attacked and beat up my crewmember, and the politicians who didn't provide sufficient budgets to allow proper treatment of all these people. My employee is a Jovian citizen and, as such, I request that his body be delivered to my care, so that he could be properly autopsied and then buried according to our customs."

"Uh, I don't know about releasing the body to you, miss. This man was brought in from the police station yesterday, accused of assault and battery. The city police will certainly want to run their own autopsy on him."

"So that they could make all evidence of wrongful arrest disappear, doctor? Know that this man's wife and her three young teenage daughters are presently in police custody, accused of supposedly resisting arrest and of assault against three grown men. The truth is that my employee was brutally assaulted, along with his wife and daughters, then arrested, simply because they were Spacers. Furthermore, his wife and daughters, which I just visited in jail, were sexually abused by local cops, with male officers strip-searching them. I am talking here about girls as young as eight. If you want to be part of this cover-up, fine, but then expect to be included in the lawsuit I will unleash on this city's administration and police department. I have plenty of millions available for such a lawsuit and I will take it as high as the Terran Supreme Court. I have presently a medical shuttle on standby in my ship. I can have it here in less than one hour, if you release the body to me."

The doctor hesitated for a long moment, then nodded slowly his head.

"Your man is dead. Whether he was guilty or not, he paid a price no court of justice could exceed. You may call your medical shuttle now, miss. I will go prepare the release papers."

"Thank you very much, doctor. It will be much appreciated. Here is my calling card, in case you get in trouble for your decision."

The doctor examined the card for a moment, then pocketed it and walked away. Tina gave a sad look at her dead crewman, filming his body before switching her communicator to call mode.

"Patricia, this is Tina. Denis Sweeny died about twenty minutes ago at the Acapulco Central Hospital and I have gained release of his body into my care. Send that medical evacuation shuttle down at once, before the local police makes his body disappear."

"Our medical shuttle is already in Acapulco, Tina. It landed at the airport fifteen minutes ago and was awaiting further orders there. I will tell the shuttle to lift off at once."

"Thank God for a crew full of initiative!" Said Tina, meaning it. "The body will be at the common ward of the emergency section. I will stay with it in the meantime."

"And his family? What is happening to them, Tina?"

"They are still in custody and were in fact sexually abused by local cops. I am however working on their release. Just get me this shuttle in a hurry."

"On its way, Tina!"

Putting back her communicator into recording mode, Tina then waited by the side of Sweeny's gurney, contemplating the dead man. The doctor in charge of the ward came back to her fifteen minutes later, just as Doctor Maria Perez and two of the KOSTROMA's paramedics were entering the ward with a medical evacuation anti-gravity capsule. The local doctor looked with envy at the ultramodern capsule, then made Tina sign the release form, giving her a copy afterwards as Sweeny's body was transferred to the capsule. This done, Tina faced Maria Perez, who had been looking around her with growing indignation.

"Bring Denis Sweeny's body back to the KOSTROMA, then perform a detailed autopsy on him, Maria. Treat his death as a suspected homicide. I consider the local police as partially responsible for his death as well. Don't let anyone else take the body."

“Understood, Tina. We are on our way.”

The KOSTROMA’s medical team then left in a hurry with their capsule, leaving Tina with the dejected local doctor.

“Again, miss, I am truly sorry if we were not able to do more for your man.”

“And, again, I am not blaming you, doctor. In fact, I now intend to do a charitable donation to your hospital as soon as this whole stinking affair is over. Thank you again for your comprehension, doctor.”

Tina again took an air taxi to return to the police headquarters. She however waited until she got confirmation that her medical shuttle was safely on its way to orbit before entering the building. With her communicator on record mode, she walking resolutely to the duty desk of Sergeant Mendoza. The latter did not miss the hard look on her face.

“So, how is your employee, miss?”

“Dead! He died about one hour ago in hospital without ever regaining consciousness.”

Alarm showed up on the man’s face, probably because of the possible repercussions from this rather than from regret at Sweeny’s fate, even though he then tried to look sorry.

“I am sorry to hear that, miss. My lieutenant is ready to discuss the release of his wife and daughters with you.”

Tina gave the fat policeman a disgusted look.

“An innocent man is dead and you still are trying to take more money from me for the release of his family? Tell your lieutenant right now that my first offer is final. If he still wants to continue with this charade of justice, I will then add criminal negligence and homicide to the other charges of the lawsuit that I will then launch against your police department and this city’s administration. I will then contact the Jovian authorities with the facts of this affair, which will most probably convince them to slap a travel ban advisory against Acapulco across the whole of the Outer Solar System. You will then have a hard time to extract more money from visiting Spacer tourists, whether legally or illegally.”

“Uh, let me call my lieutenant, miss.”

“Please do, Sergeant.”

After a short call, Mendoza looked back at her with jaundiced eyes.

"I am going to escort you to the office of Lieutenant Guerrero, miss. Follow me."

On her way to the third floor, Tina was briefly worried about these crooked cops becoming really stupid and trying to intimidate her through violent threats. That would be about the most stupid move they could do now but, on the other hand, they had not yet proved that they were intelligent. Tina was however resolved to win in this case, even if she had to spend months in courts to make these bastards pay. She was finally introduced in an office occupied by a bull of a man, who eyed her hatefully. She crossed her hands in front of her, making sure that her communicator could film the police lieutenant. The latter growled in English, a dangerous tone to his voice.

"Do you know what could happen to a dirty Spacer girl like you who tries to dictate to us what to do? You could be found dead in a ditch tomorrow morning, victim of an apparent mugging. Even better, you could have been gang-raped as well before being killed."

Tina was able to make a conclusion then: these cops were definitely not intelligent. She, and by extension the KOSTROMA's communications logs, now had proof that this Lieutenant Guerrero uttered unequivocal death threats towards her.

"Before you continue to think that your title of police officer puts you above the law, Lieutenant Guerrero, I would urge you to use your head first. You think that nobody else knows that I am here, and for what reasons? Maybe your local courts would be corrupt enough to buy your version of the facts, but not higher courts all the way to the Terran Supreme Court. Even if I die or disappears, then it will be the Jovian Shipping Lines and, ultimately, the Jovian authorities that will press the investigation of this case. A Jovian citizen is already dead, which is more than enough to attract attention on your police department. To continue prosecuting that man's family on the outrageous charges you put against them and to make me disappear as well would only firm up the noose around your neck."

The police lieutenant jumped on his feet and glare at her.

"And you really think that anybody here on Earth cares about what you Spacer bloodsuckers could say? Our people live mostly in poverty while you arrogant Spacers live in luxury, selling us minerals and chemicals at inflated prices. I could send your Misses Sweeny and her little whores to jail for years on whatever charges I decide to bring and there isn't a thing that you could do about it. I could in fact find as many

witnesses as I want against your people, and nobody here in Acapulco would be sorry to be rid of more Spacers.”

Tina eyed the man with utter disgust: his stupidity and hatred were at a level difficult to believe.

“Lieutenant Guerrero, you have right now three options, in my mind. First, you could finally show some sense and end all this quietly by dropping all charges against my people. Second, you could be stupid and continue to hound the Sweeny’s, until some higher court finds you guilty of abuse of authority, wrongful arrest and sexual abuse of minors. Third, you could be even stupider and decide to kill me on top of everything, which would basically land you eventually in jail for life. As for my previous offer, in view of the threats you just made against me, it is withdrawn. You will now have to explain to your men why you blew away their part of the take.”

Now enraged like a bull, Guerrero burst out from behind his desk and grabbed Tina by the front of her shirt, violently slamming her back against the wall of his office.

“YOU LITTLE BITCH! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO BACK YOUR THREATS! I CAN MAKE ANY EVIDENCE I WANT OR MAKE THEM DISAPPEAR AS WELL. THE MEN WHO BEAT UP YOUR DAMN SPACER DID A PUBLIC SERVICE AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED. I WILL TAKE A SPECIAL PLEASURE TO MAKE YOU SUFFER BEFORE CUTTING YOUR THROAT TONIGHT.”

“But, Lieutenant, we can’t...” Stuttered the sergeant, who had watched the whole thing and was looking at the scene with horrified eyes. Guerrero gave him a contemptuous look while still holding Tina against the wall.

“ARE YOU LOSING YOUR BALLS, SERGEANT? YOU ARE READY TO LET THAT SPACER WHORE THREATEN US? SHE IS TOO DANGEROUS FOR US NOW. BESIDES, SHE PROBABLY HAS ON HER THE MONEY SHE PLANNED TO GIVE US. WE WILL TAKE IT, THEN MAKE HER DISAPPEAR.”

Tina, despite the physical fear of being held by such a strong, brutal man, still was not ready to give up and spoke with as firm a voice she could muster.

“I am more dangerous than you think, you bastard.”

She then raised her left wrist to her face and opened fully the cover of her communicator, showing the faces of Patricia O’Neal and of two more crewmembers who had listened to the transmission over her shoulders.

“You got all that on record, Patricia?”

"From start to end, Captain." Replied the communications specialist, both angry and fearful for Tina. Guerrero looked at the communicator, dumbfounded, as Tina eyed him coldly.

"Another thing, Lieutenant Guerrero: you destroy my communicator now or terminate the link and my crew will immediately alert the Terran Federal Police. If, however, you become reasonable, abandon right now all charges against the Sweeny's and release them into my care without delay, I will then wait twelve hours before releasing the records in my possession to the federal police. That should give you enough time to disappear somewhere in some shit hole with your stolen money before the hunt is on. One of my crewmembers is now dead, mostly because of you and your crooked cops, and I am in no mood anymore to play nice with you. You had your chance and you blew it, so forget about any money from me. Now, get your hands off me or I will tell my people to alert the federal police right now."

He looked at her with pure hatred but released his hold on her and stepped back. His face flushed with emotions, he then looked at his sergeant.

"Do as she says, Sergeant Mendoza. Release the Spacer family and erase the file against them."

Shaken and starting to realize that his own career as a policeman was about to end, the sergeant could only nod his head before leaving the office, followed closely by Tina. Once alone, Guerrero looked outside through the windows of his office at the city and its beach area, then slammed both of his fists on his desk with impotent rage.

"HIJA DA PUTA<sup>1</sup>!"

## **20:29 (Universal Time)**

### **Captain's cabin, MSS KOSTROMA**

#### **Avalon Space Yards main dry dock, Earth orbit**

The buzz from the door of her private study caught Tina as she was pouring herself her third scotch of the evening while sitting with both feet resting on top of her work desk.

"Come in!"

---

<sup>1</sup> Hija da puta! Daughter of a whore, in Spanish.

The door slid open and Dana Durning, the chief navigator and unofficial executive officer of the KOSTROMA, entered the study at a cautious pace. She frowned on seeing the half empty bottle in Tina's hand.

"You know that drinking won't make Denis Sweeny's death disappear, Tina."

"Probably not, but it may stop me from thinking about it." Replied Tina in a tired voice, making Dana shake her head.

"It won't do that either. Do you mind if I sit for a talk?"

"Go right ahead, Dana."

The young woman, four years older than Tina and shorter by a good ten centimeters, grabbed one of the swiveling padded chairs in the study and placed it in front of the desk before sitting in it and staring thoughtfully at her.

"You did all that you could for Denis and his family, Tina. In fact, you did more than most would have done, a lot more. You don't need to blame yourself."

"Maybe not, but I am the Captain! As such, I am ultimately responsible for the safety of all aboard, Dana."

"On this ship, yes, but you can't control what happens on Earth, Tina. I reviewed the recordings you took in Acapulco, apart from talking to our people that returned from there, and I have to say that the intensity of the hatred against us Spacers there came as a shock to me. We were lucky that no other crewmembers fell victim to lynching mobs in Acapulco."

Tina took another sip of her scotch before replying in a subdued tone.

"Dana, someone recently told me that we Spacers were on a collision course with Terrans and that things could soon turn ugly. I didn't want to believe that person then, but now I have to think seriously about that possibility. The conditions on Earth for its population seem to be worsening, mostly because of overpopulation, and we are easy scapegoats for those billions of people living in poverty and ignorance. You just need to watch some of the food riots going on around the Earth to see that. The person who confided in me was afraid that the Terran authorities would use the resentment against us as a safety valve for the popular anger."

"Even if that is true, Tina, there is little we can do about it by ourselves."

"That's not completely true, Dana. What we can do is to prepare ourselves as best we can for the eventuality of such hostilities."

“How? We have no armaments and none of us are soldiers. Besides, would things really go as badly as ending in a war? Humanity has not known war for over a century now.”

“Because the planet finally got an effective central government, which was then able to force a general disarmament. However, that central government, the Terran Federal Council, is now treating us, the Spacers, as scapegoats to assuage the discontent of the billions of unemployed, restless people on Earth. How much can you, as a Spacer, accept in terms of humiliation and exploitation from Terran authorities before saying enough? I think that we soon will have to do just that, but we will then need something to defend ourselves if the Terran Federal Council decides to force its will on us. Fortunately, we may soon have something on the KOSTROMA.”

Tina then told Dana about what Gustav Shomberg had suggested about turning their fusion ignition lasers into ship weapons, plus her own idea on how life pod launch tubes could be turned into missile silos. The navigator finally nodded her head slowly.

“Those are brilliant ideas, I have to say. Let’s say that we can soon install laser turrets on our ship. What about the rest of the Spacers? The Terran Customs Navy has over a hundred armed ships, plus tens of thousands of trained and heavily armed soldiers. What could we do, alone, against such a force?”

Tina then put down her glass on her desk and got up from her chair, new resolve in her.

“We could show the example to other Spacers, Dana. You were right about the alcohol: it won’t resolve my problems.”

“What do you intend to do now?” Said Dana while rising herself from her chair.

“Send a warning back to Jupiter. I know that the Terran Federal Police already has my recordings and accusations against those dirty Acapulco cops. Let’s make sure that the Terran authorities don’t simply bury this case to hide it. I have a good friend that works for the Jovian News Network and who will most probably be interested to hear about this.”

**15:08 (Universal Time)**

**Saturday, April 17, 2315**

**Office of the Jovian System’s Governor**

**Callisto Prime, Callisto**

**Jupiter System**

Janet Robeson sat back in her swivel chair, her face hard, after finishing reviewing the video news clip that had gone viral through the Jovian System yesterday. She had heard about it yesterday but, due to her busy schedule as Governor of the Jovian System, had not had time to watch it until now. A number of her aides and officials that had seen it had finally convinced her to take some of her time to watch it. Now she understood why they had been so adamant about her viewing it.

“Do we know something more about this, apart from that news clip, gentlemen?”

“We do, Governor.” Answered her press attaché. “In reaction to the first viewings of this clip on Earth, a Earth-based Jovian reporter went to Acapulco to investigate the anti-Spacer feelings there. What he found was at least as bad as what the original clip suggested. Even more, this resentment against Spacers does not limit itself to the Acapulco area, nor is it solely out of popular misconceptions and ignorance.”

“Explain, George!”

“Well, it seems that local Terran officials have not been shy in the last months about publicly blaming space projects and expenditures for the lack of funds for further foodstuff subsidies. That false belief in turn took popular roots in the poorer areas on Earth.”

“And since when are these Terran officials spewing this venom?”

“It apparently started just after the last Terran federal budget was passed by the federal senate seven months ago, Madam Governor.”

“The irresponsible idiots!” Muttered the sturdily-built, 58 year-old woman. She next looked at her public safety official.

“Are there any indications that other Spacers may have fallen victim to this smear campaign, Harry?”

“Yes, Madam Governor! After this news clip went viral, I reviewed the statistics about Spacers victims of crimes on Earth during the last ten years. They show a clear spike of such cases in the last six months, with the incidence of violent attacks in particular rising by nearly 400 percent. Of those attacks, the majority of the cases were not resolved by the local police departments, or were blamed by the police on the Spacers themselves. To be more precise, during the last six months, a total of 64 Spacers were murdered on Earth, while another 482 Spacers were hospitalized after attacks or fights. I regret that I did not catch on to this sooner, Madam Governor.”

“Don’t feel too bad, Harry: we all missed it. So, Grand Administrator Li is blaming his budget woes on space expenditures and causing in return our citizens to be

run after by lynch mobs on Earth? Does he have any idea of what he may ultimately cause by such a stupid policy?"

Her political assistant took on her to respond to her hypothetical question.

"My guess is that he realizes it but doesn't care about the consequences to us, Madam Governor. If I may play the Devil's advocate for a moment, I would suggest that the 348 million or so Spacers dispersed around the Solar System weigh little on Grand Administrator Li's mind compared to the more than eight billion people packed on Earth. Technically, he is right about caring more about the majority, but we all know that his cabinet has consistently failed to apply the measures and policies that would help eventually reduce the burden of overpopulation on Earth."

"This cannot go on!" Said firmly Robeson, slamming a hand on her desk. "Spacer citizens have as much rights as Terran citizens and I will not let them be abused and threatened because of some misguided central government policy. Lisa, prepare a travel advisory concerning Acapulco and its surrounding area and submit it for my review and signature by tomorrow morning. Once signed, I want it published across the whole Jovian System. We will also send information copies to Governor Perez on Titan, to Governor Watts on Mars and to the CEOs of the main private consortiums in the Main Asteroid Belt. Their citizens are as much at risk as our own citizens in this affair. We will attach to these copies duplicates of this news clips and of the crime statistics dug up by Harry."

"Grand Administrator Li may not be happy about us potentially hurting part of Earth's tourism industry, Madam Governor." Cautioned Robeson's political assistant, attracting a hard look from the governor.

"I don't care what he will think about this, Lisa. I am more concerned about the safety and lives of our people when they visit the Earth. Li will have to give us good reasons to reassure us about our people's safety before I will rescind that travel advisory."

"What about a possible backlash from Li, Madam Governor?" Said her public safety official. Robeson gave him a corner look.

"What kind of backlash, Harry?"

"Political backlash for one, Madam Governor. Grand Administrator Li has the constitutional power to replace you, even though you were freely elected by the people of the Jovian System. The people of the Jovian System would be outraged, but I am not

sure that he would care about that. He may also apply economic pressures on us, or even order a show of force by the Terran Customs Navy to intimidate us.”

“Then, he would be an even bigger fool than I already think he is, Harry. Earth is presently surviving only because of our shipments of food, chemicals and minerals. Without steady supplies from the Outer System, Earth’s industries would grind to a halt. And Li can’t even pretend that we are fleecing Earth: we are shipping things at a low profit margin and have been for years. This business of accusing us of getting fat on Earth’s back is utter nonsense.”

“But that is not stopping the Federal Council from continuously slapping new customs fees on our shipping, Madam Governor.”

Janet Robeson took a deep breath out of frustration then. She now realized fully how things had soured overall since the last Terran federal election, when totally unrealistic promises had been made by Li and his political party in order to win the votes of large portions of the Earth’s population. Those promises had not been kept, of course, but it seemed that Li had found some convenient scapegoats to escape the popular hire on Earth: her and the other Spacers in the Solar System. Something had to be done before the situation got out of hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that, if we want Grand Administrator Li and his council to see reason, we Spacers will have to speak with one voice. Lisa, we will send in the days and weeks to come discreet feelers by hand-carried letters to the other Spacer administrations, to gauge their sentiments about the present situation with Earth. We will however not include Governor Saxman of Mercury in that list: the man is a complete Li toady!”

“Understood, Madam Governor.” Said the political assistant, while the other advisors nodded their heads. “I will start drafting letters for your review right after the travel advisory is in place.”

**11:39 (Shanghai Time)**

**Tuesday, April 20, 2315**

**Office of the Grand Administrator**

**Terran Federation central administrative complex**

**Shanghai, China**

"This travel advisory is unacceptable! What was Governor Robeson thinking? Wasn't she aware of the effect it would produce on the local economy of Acapulco? That region is already in serious economical trouble, has been for years."

Grand Administrator John Li, a medium-built man in his fifties, threw an angry look at the assistant that had brought that piece of bad news.

"Was this incident she alludes to in her travel advisory as serious as she pretends?"

"I believe so, Grand Administrator." Replied the man, nervous. It was never good for one's career to get Grand Administrator Li angry, whatever the reason. "The Federal Police has investigated the case and found evidence of incompetence, corruption and gross abuse of authority by the Acapulco Police Department, sir. That Spacer ship captain managed to record on camera an Acapulco police lieutenant as the latter was threatening to kill her, apart from confessing that the charges against a Spacer family were trumped up. That police lieutenant was also quite venomous about his opinion of Spacers in general. The news fracas that followed in this case also showed widespread popular prejudice against Spacers among the population of Acapulco, enough in fact to justify a travel advisory, Grand Administrator."

"Bunch of idiots!" Swore quietly Li. "They cut their own throats in public and now I have somehow to get them out of trouble. Very well, let these idiots in Acapulco swallow their medicine and tell the Federal Police to go heavy on those responsible in this affair. We might as well appear to be on the side of true justice in this: it might assuage Robeson's fears. One more trick like that from her, though, and I will eject her from her position."

Li, who was quickly reviewing the text of the Jovian travel advisory and its attachments, then frowned on reading a specific name.

"The MSS KOSTROMA. I believe that I heard that ship's name recently, no?" His aide consulted quickly his electronic note pad before answering.

"Yes, sir. It is the ship that recently destroyed a pirate ship in the Main Asteroid Belt by firing life pods at it as it was about to board the KOSTROMA. The captain is a Tina Forster and that ship is an ultra-heavy cargo hauler with an empty mass of 2.5 million tons."

Li whistled, impressed.

"Quite a big ship indeed! That Captain Forster also seems to be a woman of character. Do you have a picture of her?"

The aide consulted again his pad, then sent electronically a file to Li's computer. The picture attracted a smile on the face of the Grand Administrator.

"She is quite young for her position of ship's captain. She is attractive, though. Thank you, Minh, you may go."

Once his aide was out of his office, Li thought about what this advisory from Robeson could tell him about the future actions of the Jovian governor. Clearly, she had not hesitated much before declaring without consulting him in advance an edict that she knew would displease him. That was definitely one bad point against her in his mind. He then went back to work on another dossier but his aide buzzed him again less than six minutes later, making Li sigh before he let him in. The young man was clearly agitated, making Li's eyes focus on him.

"What is it, Minh?"

"Grand Administrator, the governor of the Saturn System just broadcasted a travel advisory against Acapulco similar to the Jovian advisory."

This time, Li reacted more forcefully, clearly infuriated by that latest news.

"By the dragons! Are all my space governorates going to baffle my central authority like this?"

Regaining his composure quickly, Li pointed an index at his aide.

"Find out if any other Spacer governor or administrator on top of Robeson and Perez have or are planning to publish similar travel advisories. If more do, I may have to call the lot on the carpet for their actions. At the least, they will not get away with this without having to pay a price for it."

To Li's fury, the governor of Mars and all the private consortiums in the Main Asteroid Belt and the Trojans asteroids followed suit with the governors of Jupiter and Saturn the next day. With the governor of Saturn also being in charge of the Uranus, Neptune and Pluto sectors, that left only the governors of Mercury and of the Moon abstaining from publishing a travel advisory against Acapulco. It then took only days before nearly all the Spacers on vacation in and around Acapulco fled their hotels as quickly as they could, while reservations and bookings dried out, sending the city's tourism industry in a tailspin. In a bitter irony, that only exacerbated the local hostility towards Spacers around Acapulco and in Mexico. Police Lieutenant Raphael Guerrero was the first to pay for the broken pots, being chased down, caught and then promptly judged, with the Terran Federal Grand Prosecutor breathing down on the necks of the

judge and prosecutor in charge of his case. Less than three weeks after the death of Denis Sweeny, Guerrero was found guilty of uttering death threats, assault, abuse of authority and perjury and subsequently sentenced to five years in jail, with the loss of his police pension and benefits. The three men who had actually beaten Denis Sweeny were also brought to justice and quickly sentenced to ten years each for aggravated assault and involuntary homicide. Sergeant Luis Mendoza got off relatively easy on his part, being simply kicked out of the Acapulco Police Department.

In Enos Lake, where she had returned to her log cabin to continue her interrupted vacation, Tina Forster greeted the news of Guerrero's demise with mitigated satisfaction. While those guilty of the death of her crewman had been dealt with and punished by the Terran justice system, she had no illusions that those sentences would change the poisonous atmosphere against Spacers on Earth. If anything, the travel advisories from the Spacer administrations ignited a vigorous debate in the Terran Federal Senate and in the governing council about the limits of the powers held by the Spacer governors, whose systems enjoyed a semi-autonomous status, according to the federal constitution. That status had however been couched on paper in rather vague or encompassing terms more than a century ago, leaving politicians and lawyers from all sides plenty of leeway to debate those constitutional powers both in public and in court.

Once her month of vacation was finished, Tina returned aboard the KOSTROMA, giving her log cabin to Dana Durning, who had acted as executive officer on the ship while Tina was down on Earth. With Dana taking her own, well-deserved month of vacation among the forests around Enos Lake, Tina concentrated on following closely the refit work being done on her ship. With their families still on vacation on Earth and with weekends available to fly down to rejoin them, her crewmembers went back to work with gusto, helping as much as allowed the yard workers. The latter, apart from being happy to have work instead of having to go on temporary unemployment, quickly became enthusiastic customers of the JUPITER sex club and of the APEROSSIMO lounge-bar. The families of the yard workers, housed in comfortable accommodations in the yard complex but not having access to many commercial concessions inside the complex, also used extensively the facilities of the KOSTROMA. The owners of the commercial concessions on the ship, instead of the temporary downturn they had expected during the refit period, thus saw their businesses boom during the yard work,

with their profit margins further inflated by the temporary suspension by Tina of their rent payments. With morale high on the ship and around the yard complex, and with the large stocks of materiel and parts already at hand in the yard, the refit work went at record speed. Instead of contemplating a completion date of end of November, a very satisfied Tina could now look realistically on taking her ship out of the yard by the end of October, shaving a full month on the planned schedule. As work progressed on her ship, however, things got more tense between Earth and the various Spacer administrations, with Li's government eventually losing in the Terran Supreme Court its constitutional challenge to the right of the governorates to publish independent edicts. Li then retaliated by squeezing the budgets allotted to space projects, transferring the money thus saved to fuel larger subsidies on foodstuff and housing for Earth's ever growing population. Tina watched all that with growing foreboding, remembering the warning Gustav Shomberg had given him in mid March.

## **CHAPTER 5 – A BRAND NEW SHIP**

**09:45 (Universal Time)**

**Monday, October 25, 2315**

**New bow gravity sail deck, Level 16**

**MSS KOSTROMA, main dry dock**

**Avalon Space Yards complex, Earth orbit**



Gustav Shomberg, touring with Tina the new bow gravity sail deck's main floor, threw his arms up in a gesture of enthusiasm as he looked around him.

"You told me before about what you wanted to do with all this extra volume, but THIS is way beyond my wildest expectations, Tina."

Tina smiled proudly at the compliment while also admiring the more than seven hectares of temperate broadleaf and mixed forest ecosystem, complete with a mix of more than 180 young balsam firs, red maples, American helms, red oaks and red spruce trees and a thick carpet of bushes and long grass, that filled this section of the new deck. Four such sections took most of the volume of the deck, each separated by transparent bulkheads to protect them from being all devastated by a single hull breach. Two of those sections contained temperate broadleaf forests, while the two others contained boreal forests, each section covering 7.5 hectares of grounds. Overhead, fifty meters up, plasma display screens simulated a sunny sky with dispersed clouds, while a sprinkler system was meant both to simulate rainfall and to combat any fires inside the sections. Hidden giant air blowers simulated variable winds, while recorded bird songs and other forest noises were played continuously. Right now, in the middle of this section, one would be hard pressed not to think of being in a real forest.

"Wait a few years, when all those trees will have time to grow more, Gustav. I bought them at the maximum age that they could still be transplanted, but they still will need decades to be fully grown."

"It is already magnificent, Tina." Said Shomberg while admiring the trees and vegetation around him. "This must have cost you a fortune."

"Nothing like what the refit cost me, Gustav, but I did invest a few tens of millions credits in this and on the giant aquariums around the outside periphery of this deck. On

the other hand, having these ecosystems aboard will be priceless for me and my crew when stuck in space for months on end. Their effect on the morale of the crew and of their families will be well worth the price and effort. I also used our refit time to find and hire a few good forestry experts and agronomists, plus more hydroponics technicians and workers to take care of the 250 extra hectares of hydroponic cultures that fill the eight levels of the stern gravity sail deck. With those extra cultures and the dairy and poultry farms down there, this ship's crew will be nearly self-sufficient in basic foodstuffs. We will in essence be like an oasis of life in the middle of space. The only thing we will still have to procure regularly will be meat products, fresh fish, spices and salt."

"Well, with this and with your new engines and gravity sails, your ship will be in a class by itself, Tina. Oh, talking of ship class..."

Searching in a pocket of his coverall, Shomberg took out a data chip and handed it with a serious expression to a curious Tina.

"I predicted to you last March that things between Earth and us Spacers would sour, and that we would need to be ready for a confrontation. Well, the events of the last months certainly point to approaching bad blood and I wish you to be fully prepared for the unpleasantness to come, Tina. I saw yesterday that your crew already completed most of the installation and connection of the laser conduits for your secret weapon batteries. The information on this data chip will help you in how best to use them if things go South."

"What is it exactly, Gustav?"

"The complete specifications and technical layouts of the main classes of ships used by the Terran Customs Navy, along with the specifications of their missiles and rail gun systems. When the TCN asked the Avalon Space Yards to do refit work on their ships, they gave me those plans and specs so that the yard could plan the refit work and then conduct it. When they cancelled the refit contract, they took back their data...but not before I could copy it."

Tina looked at the ship designer with wide eyes while taking the data chip.

"But, if the TCN learns about this, you could be arrested, even executed."

"Then, make sure that they don't learn about it from you. On my part, I erased all remaining traces of that data on my computer and nothing can now point to me, apart from you and that chip."

Tina nodded while eyeing Shomberg with a mix of concern and gratitude.

"Be sure that I will put this data to good use, Gustav. I will transfer that data to another chip and then erase this one and destroy it, so that the evidence trail can't get to you."

"That would be appreciated, Tina. By the way, I have another gift for you."

The engineer then took out a second data chip, this one marked with the letters 'LP', and gave it to Tina.

"This chip contains the detailed instructions on how to modify standard life pods with common existing parts and turn them into short range space missiles. Your engineers and technicians should have fun with that. I also included the algorithms used by the TCN in their missile guidance systems. I believe that you did purchase a few spare life pods, along with the backup inventory of spares for your new engines."

"Gustav, I could kiss you!"

"And what is stopping you, Tina?" Replied the engineer, smiling. That got him a friendly hug and kiss on the cheek from her.

"This data is easily worth ten times its weight in gold. Be assured that I will use it well."

"And you will need it, Tina. Mark my words." Said Shomberg, serious.

The next day, having transferred the last payment for the refit work into the yards' account, a happy Tina and her complete crew took their ship out of the pressurized dry dock and into space for nearly two weeks of post-refit trials. While the KOSTROMA made a test run to Mercury, the ever resourceful Piotr Romanski did not waste time before starting to look for a profitable cargo hauling contract for their improved ship.

**13:40 (Universal Time)**

**Monday, November 8, 2315**

**Office of the Governor of Mars**

**Ares City, Valles Marineris region**

**Mars**

Charles Watts was mostly an unhappy man these days, with things certainly not improving at the moment. Turning away from the screen of his office computer for a moment to rest his eyes a bit, he tried also to calm his mind down but was not very successful at that last task. The last federal budget amendment, which he had been

reading, was like a bodily blow to him and to all the other Martians. Watts could have lived, grudgingly though, with most of what was in it, but one item had filled his stomach with acid: all federal funds for the Mars Terramorphing Project, or MTP in short, were now cut. For Watts, that was more than simple meanness on the part of Grand Administrator Li: it was also an act of criminal stupidity. The MTP had been running for over 86 years now and would still take nearly two centuries of hard work to be completed, but the final product could well be the long term salvation of Humanity: a Mars transformed into a hospitable planet with a breathable atmosphere. Mars, with 186 million inhabitants, was already the second biggest concentration of humans after the Earth, but it would be able to support much more once the MTP had been completed. The problem was that, without federal funds, there was little hope of ever finishing the job. Watts would need to cut his own budget to the bone in order to allow the work on the project to continue, but at a reduced pace only. His only other hope was to get some financial support from other Spacer administrations, but that also was improbable. All the other Spacer governors had been similarly squeezed progressively during the last months by Li's transfer of money from space programs to food and housing subsidies for the Earth's masses.

Watts, a man of 62 who was starting to be slightly overweight, thought long and hard about how to undo the long term disaster that represented this latest federal budget amendment, but could not think of any way. The only solution would be to convince Li and his cabinet to recall and cancel that amendment, something Watts knew was not likely to happen. He finally accepted the bitter fact that he, by himself, could do little against the budget amendment. Mars alone did not have the kind of leverage on Earth needed to get its way in this. Watts then thought about the secret correspondence he had kept in the last few months with Governor Robeson and other Spacer administrators. Robeson had been advocating an alliance of all Spacers to counter the disastrous economic and social policies of the Terran Federation Council. Maybe this was now the time to make such an alliance a reality. Things would however have to be planned carefully and with caution, the Terran Federation having numerous spies and observers on Mars and around the Solar System. For one thing, Watts knew that if he openly traveled to Jupiter to have talks with Robeson, Li would immediately be on the alert and could even react violently to break up any Spacer alliance before it could have a chance to solidify. His mind made up, Watts called by intercom for his personal aide to

come in. She took only a few seconds before walking in briskly, the perfect image of the executive secretary as most men thought they should be: tall, beautiful and competent. Laura Jennings was all that, but she was also utterly loyal to Watts, having worked for him for years and sharing the same dreams as Watts. The one thing she did not share with him though was his bed, contrary to the rumors and insinuations.

“You need something, sir?” Asked Laura in her soft, sexy voice.

“Yes, Laura. I believe that Governor Robeson’s idea of a Spacer alliance now needs to be seriously discussed...in person. I need you to find discreetly for me a fast ride to Jupiter, with departure in the next few days. I don’t want Grand Administrator Li to learn about this trip. Cook up a story as well that would explain my absence for office for a few weeks. You will also be going to Jupiter, by the way.”

“How many more people will be accompanying us to Jupiter, sir?”

“Just my two personal bodyguards and my runabout pilot. I am sure that Governor Robeson will loan me some clerical support personnel once on Callisto Prime.”

His executive secretary then smiled in apparent amusement.

“You know what people could say if you disappear somewhere with me in tow, sir.”

Watts smiled in turn.

“Hell, that could actually be a good cover story by itself! And do not book passage on a cruise liner, please: too many people would instantly recognize me and the news would be out in a second.”

“Understood, sir. I will be as discreet as possible.”

The young woman then walked out of Watts’ office, leaving the governor alone with his thoughts.

**14:19 (Universal Time)**

**Friday, November 12, 2315**

**Bridge of the MSS KOSTROMA**

**Docking Station Seven, Ares orbital terminal**

**Mars orbit**

“Are these damn Terran customs inspectors off the ship yet?”

"Thankfully, yes, Tina!" Answered Patricia O'Neil. "They went back to the terminal via the port communications tube ten minutes ago."

"Good! They wasted way too much of our time, inspecting what is nothing more than a cargo of specialty steel and aluminum products. What the hell did they expect to find? Contraband drugs?"

"Maybe they were hoping for a bribe from us to make them speed up their inspection?" Suggested in jest Frida Skarsgard, sitting at her pilot's station. That brought a grimace to Tina's face.

"As if these new, heavier customs fees don't feel like bribes to me. They cost us a good ten percent of our profit margin for this hauling contract."

Tina then activated her intercom, calling Denise Lonsdale on the Warehouse Deck.

"Denise, how is the loading doing?"

The voice of the ship's cargomaster was nearly drowned out on the intercom by the noise of a heavy forklift passing near Lonsdale.

"All the outside cargo containers are already hooked up and secured, Tina. I will only need about two more hours to finish loading those giant spools of steel wire. The final gross mass of our load for this trip will be 9.62 million metric tons."

"Well, steel is not as glamorous or profitable as iridium, but over nine million tons of it should impress about anybody. Just tell me as soon as you are finished, Denise. The few passengers who booked passage on this trip are already aboard, except for one late one we are still waiting for."

"I believe that our late passenger is finally showing up, Tina." Said Patricia O'Neil, having just received a radio transmission. "He called in to ask to board with his runabout directly in our small craft hangars."

"Give him the go ahead, Patricia, then inform Natalia of this, so she could have someone escort that passenger to his cabin."

"Will do!"

Tina sat back in her command chair, watching her bridge crew at work. Up to now, her improved ship had performed as well as she had hoped for and had proved to be extremely economical to operate, apart from being very fast and responsive for a heavy cargo ship. This would be the first commercial trip of the KOSTROMA since the completion of its refit, but the executives of the Jovian Shipping Lines were already very happy with the results. In fact, the KOSTROMA was now truly the ship of choice for

certain types of cargo hauling contracts, one of which was the fast hauling of super heavy or outsize loads on long and very long distances. Some other cargo ships could haul as much as the KOSTROMA, but none as fast or as economically than Tina's ship. When you dealt with millions of tons of cargo, even a difference of one credit per ton in the cost of transportation represented in the end a very sizeable sum. A few rival shipping companies were already crying foul about this, which suited Tina just fine.

She was still thinking about that when Natalia Vasilyeva called her by intercom, appearing somewhat disturbed.

"Tina, this is Natalia. I am with our last passenger on the Hangar Deck. He wants to speak to you."

Before Tina could ask why, a man's face replaced that of Natalia on the intercom's screen. Tina, who was well informed on public affairs, recognized the man immediately and nearly shouted in surprise.

"Governor Watts?"

"Shhh! I am trying to travel incognito, Captain." Said Watts with a conspiratorial smile. "I would like it if you could find me a cabin where I would not pass by too many other passengers. I also have my personal aide and three male employees with me."

"Well, the cells in the ship's brig are quite intimate but I believe that they would not do in this case, sir." Replied Tina, joking. Watts laughed briefly at that.

"I believe they would not, Captain."

"Well, then I would say that I have one place that could fit your needs, sir. I am coming down to escort you."

Jumping out of her command chair, Tina ran to the elevator banks adjacent to the bridge and took a cabin down to the Hangar Deck, 120 meters below the bridge. By the time she arrived there, Natalia Vasilyeva had already put the luggage of Governor Watts and of his employees on an anti-gravity cart. Watts shook Tina's hand as soon as she braked to a halt in front of him.

"Captain Forster, it is a pleasure to meet you. I must say that your ship is very impressive."

"Thank you, Governor. May I ask what is your final destination?"

“Callisto Prime. I wish to go speak secretly with Governor Robeson about some delicate matters. Would it be possible a bit later for me to send a message to Governor Robeson, anonymously of course?”

“It certainly is, Governor. First, let’s get you a discreet place to stay for you and your assistants. Follow me, please.”

Watts did so without further ado, his assistants and Natalia and her cart on his heels. Tina led them to the central shaft that ran all the way from bow to stern but, instead of taking one of the elevators with doors opening on the central rotunda, used a door that led inside the central shaft itself. A surprised Watts followed her on a metallic gratings floor and through a rather narrow passage, to an elevator tube running inside the central axis shaft. Tina explained herself as they waited for a cabin to come to their level.

“This elevator tube is used only by crewmembers on maintenance duty and no passengers ride it...normally. I will now lead you up to Level 16, where our new Bow Gravity Sail Deck is situated. There, we have hundreds of still unoccupied cabins that are not yet finished refurbishing, except for a handful of them. You will be able to lodge in one of those cabins, away from the other passengers. We also can bring you your meals there, if that would suits you, sir.”

“It certainly would, Captain. Thank you for your comprehension.”

Once at the level of the Human Services Deck, the group exited the cabin and took one of the four large corridors leading outwards, walking quickly to avoid crossing path with other occupants. Tina stopped once at the end of the corridor, which joined another corridor forming a closed loop along the periphery of the section, and smiled to Watts.

“Originally, a few months ago, we would now be near the outer hull of my ship. However, the KOSTROMA just came out of a major refit about two weeks ago. Part of that refit was the addition of a new, saucer-shaped section ringing this deck. The cabins you will occupy are along the outer periphery of that section.”

Tina then activated a heavy armored sliding door, opening it and entering a huge open space. Watts took a few steps before stopping, stunned but also pleased by what he saw.

“My God! A forest in space! We have a few transplanted forests and gardens in underground habitats on Mars, but having this on a ship...”

"You will actually be able to enjoy the sight of that forest every day during your trip, sir: your suite, like the others on this deck, has a balcony overlooking the forest habitat. Talking of suite, the few apartments ready for occupation on this deck include a variety of one, two, three and four-bedrooms suites. Would you prefer separate places for you and your people, or one four-bedroom suite for your whole group, sir?"

Watts was thoughtful for a moment while looking at his senior bodyguard.

"Well, my guess would be that Mister Baranovich, as my senior bodyguard, would object to have me at any distance from his vigilant sight. I will also be using our trip to prepare a few political statements and proposals, so I will also need the constant presence of my personal aid, Miss Laura Jennings. And no, I don't need her for other purposes, Captain Forster."

The last sentence, told with a smile, was taken by Tina as the joke it was meant to be. She in turn made a dismissive gesture.

"Bah, we are fairly blasé about such things on this ship, sir: we have a very nice sex club with strippers both female and male, plus an escort service, on our Promenade Deck."

While the mention of 'male strippers' made Laura Jennings raise an eyebrow, the two bodyguards and the runabout pilot smiled widely at the words 'sex club', something that didn't escape the attention of either Tina or Charles Watts. The latter's smile widened.

"Well, my pilot could take a single bedroom suite by himself, I suppose: he will then be more free on how to use his spare time aboard your ship. Me, my aide and my two bodyguards will take one of your four-bedroom suite, if you don't mind."

"One four-bedroom suite and a single suite it is then, sir."

Leading the group, Tina crossed in calm, moderate steps the 230 meters of temperate lowland forest ecosystem while following an old-fashioned pathway made of rough stone pavements. Watts used that walk to look around him with contentment at the variety of maples, firs, pines, oaks, helms and spruce trees dispersed around the ecosystem's vast grounds, with hundreds of bushes, including berry bushes, covering the spaces between the trees. A tiny form running across the pathway ahead of them then made him exclaim in surprise.

"Hey, what's that?"

Tina raised a hand to stop the governor's bodyguards, who were reaching for their pistols.

“Do not worry, gentlemen: this was only a squirrel.”

“A squirrel, here on a ship?” Marveled Laura Jennings, who was watching the tiny rodent as it climbed a nearby tree.

“Yes! When I went to talk with an expert on forest ecosystems, in order to plan the landscaping of this deck, I was told that some minor animal fauna could be incorporated as well, which would also help the cross-pollination of some plants and flowers on the grounds. So, I selected a limited variety of small animals and birds with the help of that expert, to populate those ecosystems, but made sure not to import insects or other pests. With the conifer cones and berry bushes around, my squirrels will have plenty to eat. As you can see, there are a few park benches installed along the trail, so you will be able to enjoy long promenades around our forests.”

“And I will certainly use them during our trip: I could use some true relaxation time these days.”

Tina gave him a quick look, guessing what he meant by that, but didn't ask a question then. She spoke again when they exited the forest grounds and passed through a large arched tunnel twenty meters long and closed at both ends by airtight armored doors, emerging in a high-ceiling, ten meter-wide promenade that ran in a closed loop along the outer periphery of the Bow Gravity Sail Deck. Watts was then treated to another surprise as he contemplated with wide eyes the huge aquariums covering the inner side walls of the promenade. The aquariums, whose tops reached the ceiling sixteen meters above Watts, were populated by what looked like thousands of fish of various species swimming lazily along the closed-loop aquariums. Fruit trees and bushes were planted at intervals along the outer side of the promenade, which was lined with large, thick armorglass bays showing the nearby Ares space terminal and the surface of Mars below. Tina smiled with pride at his amazement.

“As you can see, sir, I did my best to make my ship as agreeable to live on as possible.”

“And you certainly did a fine job of it, Captain. All this must have cost you a true fortune, no?”

“It has indeed, sir.” Answered Tina in a sober tone. “This was made mostly for the benefit of my crew, though, and not to accommodate luxury class passengers. This ship is actually our home in space, apart from being our bread winner. This, in my mind, should be the ultimate goal of all Spacers: to recreate and nurture in space all the

natural beauty of Earth that was so stupidly destroyed by Mankind during past centuries through greed and short-sightedness.”

Watts, along with Laura Jennings and the bodyguards, nodded at those words.

“I see that you believe in the same dream as me, Captain Forster. Unfortunately, it seems that the Terran Federal Council does not share that dream.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“That the main reason for my secret trip to Jupiter to speak with Governor Robeson is the fact that the Federal Council and Grand Administrator Li just cut all federal funding for the Mars Terramorphing Project...for good.”

Both Tina and Natalia were dumbstruck by that revelation, with Tina exploding in indignation.

“But, the MTP is the future of Mars!”

“Yes, it was, Captain. Unfortunately, it seems that it will now have to be shelved, unless I find a way to fund it or to convince the Federal Council to change its mind about it. Somehow, I believe that the second possibility is rather remote right now.”

Tina took a moment to regain her composure and chase the anger that had flared in her, walking in the meantime down the promenade. She stopped after fifty meters in front of a bank of elevators leading up to the apartment complex, boarding a cabin with her group and going up to the level of the upper promenade, similar in appearance and volume to the lower promenade, but with its inner side lined by three levels of apartments rather than with aquariums. Leading her group out of the elevator, she walked along the façade, soon climbing a small staircase leading to a porch sheltering the entrances of two adjacent apartments. She pointed to the frame of a solid steel sliding panel on the edge of the porch.

“Each of the two exits for every apartment is protected by airtight emergency airlocks that will automatically close in case of a local decompression or fire. This way, the occupants will have the time to don their spacesuits in safety inside their apartments before evacuating if needed. I gather that you have all brought your spacesuits, sir?”

Watts nodded and pointed the distinctive transport cases of spacesuits among the luggage piled on Natalia’s platform.

“We sure did, like good little Spacers.”

“Excellent! Now, let’s register you as the occupants of these two apartments.”

Tina approached a security pad near the door of one of the two apartments opening on the porch, touching a button before speaking into the pad’s microphone.

"Spirit, this is Tina Forster. Initiate the registration and access procedures for this apartment."

"Procedure initiated." Replied a soft female voice. "First occupant, please come forward to the pad."

"Spirit is the ship's main computer, sir." Explained Tina as Charles Watts stepped up to the pad. "It will record your voice pattern, facial features and fingerprints. You will then be able to unlock your apartment at will without the need for an access card or key. We will then repeat the procedure for your people. Only you, them, me and my senior officers will be able to open your door."

"A sensible precaution, I must say, Captain."

"Thank you!"

Registering Watts and his four followers and giving them access to the two apartments took about five minutes. Walking in the four-bedroom apartment, the Martian governor looked approvingly at the vast, well furnished suite, as Tina guided him in a quick tour of the facilities. The large rear façade balcony facing the forest ecosystem drew particular approval from Watts. He was also pleased to find that the master bedroom had its own private bathroom and was also connected to an adjacent study with a view on the forest ecosystem. He stood a moment on the meter-wide armorglass viewing port set in the floor of his study, looking back at a group of curious fish peering up from inside the aquarium.

"Damn, I should have brought my wife with me: she would have loved this ship."

"Wait until you have gone to one of the submerged observation lounges, situated under the staircase sections on this level, sir."

"If you recommend them, then I certainly will, Captain."

"Uh, one last thing, sir. There are presently on other apartment levels and quadrants about 200 workers from a company I hired to do the carpeting and refurbishing of these new apartments. They will be traveling with us to Jupiter, working during the trip. They are Spacers but you should avoid any chance of being seen by them until we pull out of Mars orbit, when we will be able to vet and filter all outgoing communications. In the meantime, I will have stewardesses deliver you meals for the next two days to this apartment. By the way, may I ask how you were planning to keep your absence from Mars a secret, sir?"

Watts smiled at her question and pointed to his female aide.

"I can thank Miss Laura Jennings, my personal aide, for that, Captain. Tomorrow morning, my press attaché will inform the local news that I suffered a mild heart attack during the night and that I must take a month of absolute rest from my duties. Vice-Governor Homa will cover for me in the meantime."

"Neat! I hope that the Federal Council will buy it. What if they don't and find out the subterfuge, sir?"

"We will cross that bridge when we get to it." Said glumly Watts. "Tonight, I will send a text message to Governor Robeson, using a prearranged cover name and coded phrases, to warn her that I am coming and that I want to discuss with her and other Spacer administrators our common problems with Earth. Whatever happens in the next few weeks may decide the future of all Spacers. Hopefully we will be able to find a peaceful solution to this dispute with the Terran Federation. If not, and if Grand Administrator Li decides to play rough, we will then have to find ways to resist him, if that is at all possible."

"There are ways, sir. I can assure you of that." Replied firmly Tina while looking into Watts' eyes.

## **CHAPTER 6 – POWERPLAY**

**19:52 (Universal Time)**

**Wednesday, November 24, 2315**

**Government center of the Jovian Governorate**

**Callisto Prime, Callisto**

**Jupiter System**



“Welcome to Callisto Prime, Governor Watts. I hope that you had a good trip from Mars?”

“I certainly had, Governor Robeson.” Replied Charles Watts as he shook hands with Janet Robeson in her office, in which he had just been introduced after being picked up with his aide and bodyguards at the city’s spaceport. “The facilities aboard the cargo ship KOSTROMA are truly impressive and I was actually able to rest and relax in great comfort. You should try that ship one day.”

“Really?” Said Robeson, both surprised and amused. “Well, then we will be able to start our discussions in earnest with the others tomorrow morning, since you are in such good shape.”

“Who was able to make it to here up to now?”

“Governor Perez, of Saturn; Nadia Suslov, of the Sverdlorsk Group on Hygiea; Jacobus Stein, of the Pallas Mining Industries; Karl Langemann, of the Vesta Consortium and, finally, Shinjo Suzuki, of the Ceres Consortium. Those in turn represent as well a number of minor consortiums in the Main Asteroid Belt and in the Trojans.”

“Excellent! Grand Administrator Li will not be able to ignore such a sum of industrial might and mineral resources.”

“I certainly hope so. But, please, sit down and tell me how things are going on Mars.”

Watts took the comfortable sofa offered by Robeson, with the latter sitting on a padded chair in front of him, then took fifteen minutes to discuss the situation on his planet with her. Robeson in turn told him about the latest developments around the Outer Solar System, concluding with a bitter comment.

"The worst part is that, apart from non-violent passive resistance, there is not much we could do to resist the excesses of the Terran Federation right now. Jacobus Stein, the CEO of Pallas Mining Industries, has confided to me that his consortium produces secretly a small quantity of small arms and light ship weapons, weapons that he has sold to various consortium security forces during the last few years. However, these light weapons won't do much against the heavy units of the Terran Customs Navy. As for the Sverdlovsk Group of Nadia Suslov, it has a sizeable security force of well-trained guards and could possibly defeat any landing by TCN Marines on Hygiea, but that's about it. On my part, all I have in the Jovian System is a few thousands public security officers who are trained for police work, not for combat. If the TCN came here to invade us, there would not be much we could do. We could start producing weapons easily enough with all the high-tech industries at our disposal, but training properly soldiers takes months. Any switching to a war footing would anyway alert Grand Administrator Li and trigger a Terran invasion. You have seen on news bulletin from Earth how brutal their Internal Security troopers are. To think that those goons would be let loose on my citizens gives me nightmares, Charles."

"An understandable reaction, Janet. The Terran Internal Security Forces have a well-deserved reputation for brutality and abusiveness, with most of their soldiers being rather poorly educated, coming in majority from the most impoverished regions of Earth. I certainly wouldn't want to see them land on Mars. Would Pallas Mining be ready to sell discreetly weapons to Mars, so that my people could at least stand a chance against an invasion?"

"I believe so, Charles. We were planning anyway to discuss tomorrow about what to do if the Federal Council decided to play rough with us. You will have your chance to talk with Jacobus Stein then."

"Good! I do have one good piece of news for you, Janet, but it must stay secret: we actually have a hidden ace up our sleeve if the TCN ever sends an invasion fleet here. It is called the KOSTROMA."

"The KOSTROMA?" Exclaimed Robeson on a skeptical tone. "I know that it did destroy a pirate ship a few months ago, but you can't expect it to destroy a Terran cruiser by firing life pods at it."

"Well, it happens that, after her very lucrative contract to carry rare metals to Earth, Captain Forster decided to offer herself a major refit of her ship. That refit centered mostly on a vastly improved propulsion system, but a side effect of it was that

she was then able to turn her fusion ignition laser banks into battleship-class laser batteries. That was of course done in utter secret, with the work completed during my trip to here.”

Janet Robeson was left speechless for a moment by this.

“And how powerful are these laser batteries, exactly?”

“In the gigawatt power range: powerful enough to cut to shreds a Terran cruiser in seconds. She also modified a few of her life pods to turn them into short range space missiles, but would need more parts and, especially, explosives, to produce more of them.”

“My God! That girl won’t cease to amaze me. Alright, I will keep her in mind and will certainly assist her in producing more of those modified life pods cum missiles. We do have plenty of explosives, used by the mining industry in this system. I will make sure that she gets all she needs, courtesy of my administration. Well, we will be able to talk further about this tomorrow. In the meantime, let’s get you a comfortable room for the night.”

**10:36 (Shanghai Time)**

**Saturday, November 27, 2315**

**Office of the Terran Grand Administrator**

**Government central complex, Shanghai**

**China, Earth**

John Li was not happy to see one of his aides storm in abruptly in his office as he was discussing economical matters with his minister of revenue.

“What the hell are you thinking, Mobuto, to barge in like this unannounced?”

The aide, a tall, thin black man in his forties, bowed deeply while excusing himself.

“I am sorry for this interruption, Grand Administrator, but something of utter importance just came to our attention.”

“Then speak!”

“Grand Administrator, our intelligence services have just learned that Martian Governor Watts is presently on Callisto, along with the governors of the Jupiter and Saturn Systems and the heads of the most important consortiums from the Main Asteroid Belt. It appears that they are holding there a secret summit of Spacer administrators.”

The aide's intrusion instantly forgiven, Li jumped to his feet, anger flashing on his face.

"WHAT? ARE WE SURE?"

"Yes, Grand Administrator. Our agents on Callisto Prime have been able to photograph all of these people together yesterday."

"That Watts bastard! He was supposed to be bed-ridden on Mars following a supposed heart attack. I will have his post for this. Do we know what that summit is for?"

"We have only conjectures, Grand Administrator, but the head of our intelligence services believes that they are probably discussing ways to resist our latest budget amendments that cut into space programs."

"That would effectively make sense." Recognized Li, calming down somewhat as he thought about how to react to this move by Spacer administrators. "Very well. Tell Grand Admiral Ming Wa and Field Marshal Reyat Khan that I want to see them here immediately, along with Minister of Space Affairs Andretti."

"Yes, Grand Administrator!" Replied the aide before turning around and leaving. Li made a gesture of frustration to himself.

"I should have known that these Spacers would try to double-cross me. Well, they will pay for this for sure."

"What are you planning to do, sir?" Asked the minister of revenue, somewhat overwhelmed by this. Li gave him a resolute stare.

"At the least, they will have to come here to Earth to explain themselves before me. If they refuse to come, then I will have them arrested for sedition. That Watts is however a goner: he deliberately lied to my administration to go to Jupiter in secret and will lose his governorship for that."

"What if the Spacers resist, sir?"

Li laughed briefly at that, his eyes reflecting anticipated pleasure.

"With what? If they do, then they will have given me the perfect excuse to grab full control of their little space kingdoms. Then, this constitutional nonsense about Spacers rights and privileges will be out of the way and we will be able to use all these new resources to take care of our true priorities. You may now return to your ministry, Mister Vernon. Thank you for your time."

"Then, have a good day, Grand Administrator."

The minister then left, preoccupation on his face. He was a strong partisan of Li's policies, but he could not help think that a war was the last thing that the fragile economy of Earth needed right now.

The broadcasting in the evening of a declaration from the self-proclaimed 'Spacers League' across the whole of the Solar System did nothing to assuage Grand Administrator Li, on the contrary. It announced a public referendum to be held in one week's time on all Spacer worlds, installations and ships, with the referendum to decide if Spacers would secede from the Terran Federation and declare their independence from Earth. An enraged Li, resolved not to let the Spacers League gain some legitimacy through that referendum, then decided to act without delay, just as the various news medias competed to describe the situation in wild hyperboles.

**02:11 (Universal Time)**

**Sunday, November 28, 2315**

**Governor's residence, Ares City**

**Mars**

The public security officers guarding the residence of Governor Watts had little warning before six armored air troop carriers of the Terran Internal Security Forces landed around the building and disgorged dozens of heavily armed troopers. Being lightly armed and heavily outnumbered, the officer in charge of the watch decided not to throw away the lives of his men and women and surrendered without resistance. That did not save the Martian police officers from being brutally manhandled and arrested by the ISF troopers as the front door of the Watts' residence was broken down. Three squads then spilled around inside, their guns at the ready. They caught Watts' wife in her bedroom, as she was putting on a robe after being awakened abruptly by the noise of the front door giving in. Despite her protests, Carolyn Watts was pushed face down on her bed and her hands were forced into her back, to be handcuffed. The ISF officer in charge of the raiding force, an African major, looked on with mean eyes at the mature woman as she was pulled back up on her feet by two troopers to face him.

"I see that your husband is not home, Misses Watts, contrary to what had been announced."

“Why did you come here like this and arrested me? I have done nothing wrong?”

The major’s smile disappeared, replaced by a hard expression. Taking a step forward, he then slapped hard Carolyn, twisting her head to one side.

“By hiding his absence from Mars, you made yourself an accomplice to sedition, like his aides, and you will pay for that. Take her away!”

As the wife of the governor was dragged out of the house, the ISF major had the residence searched from top to bottom. After half an hour of searching, with the house now a shambles, a captain reported to his superior.

“We have found nothing of interest, sir. We have a few personal letters and papers, but none concerning Spacers affairs. It seems that Watt’s personal computer is missing, though: he must have brought it with him to Callisto.”

“I expected that much already. Any indications about which ship he used to go to Callisto?”

“None, Major.”

“Well, that doesn’t matter much: we will beat it out of his aides anyway. Leave a squad here to watch the residence. Anyone who will try to approach it will be arrested.”

“Understood, Major.”

After one last look around the devastated bedroom, the ISF major walked out of the house, his mind going about the list of people he was going to arrest and question. With a full battalion of the ISF based permanently in Ares City, grabbing control of the city was not going to be hard, in view of the weakness of the opposition forces.

## **02:20 (Universal Time)**

### **Callisto Prime Spaceport surface terminal**

#### **Callisto, Jupiter System**

“I don’t like this, Lieutenant: it is too easy up to now.”

The young TCN Marine lieutenant leading the forty Marines in armored spacesuits made a grimace at the comment from his platoon sergeant.

“Maybe, but we should not forget that the Jovians don’t have combat troops: only some police officers. They must know that resisting us would be futile, especially with our two frigates in orbit above us.”

“Still, I don’t like this, Lieutenant.”

'This' was actually a short tunnel connecting the underground hangar where their assault shuttle was with the main communications tunnel linking the various hangars of the surface terminal with the spaceport's main underground complex. The orders to land in Callisto Prime and go arrest Governor Robeson and any other leaders of the Spacers League they could find had come in the middle of the night, with directives to act without delay. That had left the TCN forces in the Jovian System with no time to properly plan their actions or to wait for reinforcements to arrive. That was why the lieutenant and his forty Marines were now on their own in the underground spaceport terminal, on their way to the city's center. At this hour, the lights of the spaceport were dimmed out, as was normal, and nobody but a couple of maintenance robots was in sight. The noise of the armored doors closing at each end of the tunnel then made the sergeant swear.

"I knew it!"

Before the lieutenant could tell him to shut up, the Marines were suddenly catapulted as a group upwards and slammed hard against the concrete ceiling five meters above. As they cried out in pain, the Marines fell down, slamming on the steel floor below. With his nose broken and lips split open, the lieutenant saw with horror that his helmet's visor was cracked. He also understood that someone had played with the artificial gravity controls for the tunnel. An amplified voice then came out of hidden speakers.

"You have five seconds to throw away your weapons. If not, we will play ping pong with you again...after we depressurize this tunnel."

The young lieutenant swore to himself before yelling an order in his helmet microphone.

"DO AS THEY SAY! WE HAVE NO CHANCES AT ALL WHILE TRAPPED HERE."

His Marines obeyed reluctantly, their pride hurt, with most of them also suffering from a number of broken bones. Once their weapons had been thrown away, a large group of Jovians in spacesuits and armed with pistols entered the tunnel by a service door. Grabbing first the discarded weapons, the Jovians then stood over the battered Marines, most of whom were not able to stand by themselves. A tall Jovian woman wearing the insignias of a public security officer examined briefly the Marine lieutenant and gave him a not too friendly look.

"So, you thought that you could simply come and deny us our rights, as if we are mere peons of Earth?"

"I had my orders, miss. What are you going to do to us now?"

"Probably a lot better than your forces would do to our own people, Lieutenant. Your wounds will be treated, then you will be detained until this crisis is resolved. Don't worry: you and your Marines will be well treated."

In low orbit above Callisto Prime, the TCN commander in charge of the two frigates waited anxiously for a progress report from his Marines. His ships had up to now being strictly passive, coasting in orbit while surrounded by other ships in Callisto orbit. Commander Yu still hoped to conclude this without bloodshed, not relishing the idea of a war between Earth and the Spacers. Yu was loyal to Earth but also had learned to like and respect Spacers for the hard working pioneers they were. As Yu was about to request a report from his Marines, an unknown voice came on their tactical frequency.

"TCN frigate TORONADO, this is Callisto Prime Spaceport, over."

After a moment of surprise, Yu keyed his radio microphone to answer.

"This is the TCNS TORONADO. Send, Callisto Prime!"

"TCNS TORONADO, be advised that your Marine landing party and their shuttle have been captured and disarmed. In view of your act of aggression, you are requested to leave orbit immediately and exit the Jovian System, over."

"You are ordering ME to leave the system, Callisto Prime? You are still subject to the authority of the Terran Federation, in which name I acted."

"The authority of the Terran Federation is no longer recognized here, TCNS TORONADO. Furthermore, your continued presence in orbit will be considered as a hostile act. You may come back if the coming referendum decides against independence, but not before. You have one hour to comply and leave the system, over."

"And what if I don't? You have no ships or weapons that can threaten us."

"Your Marines thought as well that we could not harm them, yet they are in our hands. You have no more troops to land anyway, TCNS TORONADO. Leave and let it be. Callisto Prime, out!"

The radio link was then closed, leaving Yu indecisive in his command chair. His executive officer then approached him and spoke in a low voice.

"Shouldn't we threaten them with missile bombardment, sir? We can't let them chase us away like this."

Yu gave his executive officer a dubious look.

"Our orders were to capture the leaders of this Spacers League, not to destroy that city, Mister Guraj. Are you ready to kill thousands of defenseless civilians? I'm not! We should never have launched that operation without waiting for reinforcements anyway."

Yu then looked at his navigator and his helmsman.

"Plot a course to leave orbit! We are returning to our sector base."

Yu suspected that this was about to cost him his command. Better that though than having the deaths of innocents on his conscience.

Less than 2,000 kilometers away, on the bridge of the KOSTROMA, Tina Forster sighed with relief when she saw the two symbols representing the TCN frigates leave orbit without firing a shot.

"Thank God that this Terran commander proved reasonable. I would have hated to be obliged to destroy his ships."

"The next time could be different, Tina." Said Dana Durning from her navigator's station. "Not all Terran commanders will be this reasonable. Some may even relish the occasion to make a name for themselves in a shooting war."

"Still, the idea of killing is not a palatable one to me, Dana."

## **16: 09 (Universal Time)**

**Tuesday, November 30, 2315**

**Vostok Spaceport**

**Hygiea, Main Asteroid Belt**

Nadia Suslov contemplated for a moment the projectile marks on the concrete walls of the shuttle hangar. Her eyes then coldly looked at the wrecked Terran assault shuttles that had been pushed into a far corner of the hangar.

"So, how much damage did these raiders do?" She asked to his head of security, a tough man with an iron will.

"Not much, actually, Miss Suslov. They never were able to go farther than this hangar and the bombardment from their supporting frigate didn't go on for long before our fighters destroyed it. We lost a total of sixteen people, while the whole force of 87 Terran Marines was wiped out. We were also able to recuperate the weapons from the dead Marines. The whole attack was actually rather amateurish, in my opinion."

“Put that on the undue haste they were in because of their orders from Earth. Grand Administrator Li has only himself to blame for his defeat.”

“How did other Spacers centers fare against the Terrans initial assault, if I may ask, Miss Suslov?”

“Except on Mars and Ceres, rather well, Leonov. On Mars, the Terrans were lucky in having already a battalion of troops established there and they were able to rapidly seize control of Ares City. They however did not have enough troops on or around Mars to occupy the other major cities. On Ceres, the Terrans had a field day against those eco-pacifists from Suzuki’s consortium and saw nearly no opposition. The Terrans control the main city, Demeter, but again lacked troops to properly occupy the whole of Ceres. We were however the only ones with the Pallas forces able to shoot down a Terran ship. The rest of the TCN ships then retreated to their sector bases or to Earth.”

“I’m afraid that it won’t be as easy the second time around, Miss Suslov. The Terrans will probably wait for proper reinforcements before attacking again. We will have to work damn fast to improve our defenses.”

“Actually, Leonov, I am not that worried overall, you know.” Said the blond, primly dressed woman, surprising her head of security. “The TCN may look like a formidable force when concentrated, but it has only about a hundred ships to patrol the whole of the Solar System. This time around, they tried to take dozens of places at the same time and it proved their undoing. Now, it is up to us to act before they regain their balance. Governors Robeson and Perez have ordered their systems to go on a war footing and they have started producing weapons as fast as they can, using designs stolen from the Terrans, but it will take time before we see concrete results from that. In the meantime, me, Robeson and Watts have decided on a mission to go try to expel the Terrans from Mars. I offered some of our security troops, while Jacobus Stein, of the Pallas Mining Industries, has offered a sizeable stock of small arms and ammunition to help arm the resistance forces on Mars. On her part, Governor Robeson is providing the ship to transport and land the weapons and troops on Mars. Do you have a good security officer that you could recommend to me and spare for that operation, along with about 200 troopers that will help train and lead the Martians?”

The head of security thought for a moment before answering her.

“I may have such a man, in fact. You remember Captain Michel Koniev?”  
Nadia Suslov beamed on hearing the name.

“The one who led our raiding force against that bunch of claim-jumpers who pretended to have ownership of one of our asteroids? I think that he will do just fine.”

“And he is a handsome man as well, right?” Said Leonov, smiling, who knew well his boss. Nadia Suslov’s personal reputation was about as sulfurous as that of the infamous ‘Zero-G NIRVANA’ space brothel, one of the space installations controlled by her business group. “Okay, I will send him to you to be briefed, while I assemble that Mars contingent.”

### **17:25 (Universal Time)**

#### **Crew mess of the MSS KOSTROMA**

##### **Callisto orbit, Jupiter System**

Tina Forster felt her frustration grow as she faced her assembled crew and their families in the crew mess. Even the owners and employees of the commercial concessions on the Promenade Deck were present, and they were proving as pig-headed as the rest.

“Please understand what is to come, my friends. This ship is going into combat and may suffer serious damage, or may even be destroyed. That is no place for non-crewmembers to be. In fact, I will understand if any crewmembers will refuse to go. None of us are trained military personnel and our weapons are improvised, untested ones. At the least, send your spouses and children to the safety of Callisto Prime.”

“I’m sorry, Captain,” replied Robert Leblanc, one of the cooks of the ship’s main cafeteria, “but Callisto Prime won’t be safe if the Terrans come back. At least, our ship can defend itself. Callisto Prime can’t, yet.”

Vera Lutjens, one of the stripper girls from the JUPITER sex club, was next to jump to her feet.

“Captain, us ‘non-crewmembers’ from the Promenade Deck know the ship from top to bottom and are familiar with all the ship’s security and damage control procedures. God knows you and your uncle involved us in enough disaster drills in the past. I am more than ready to work as a damage control team member or as a cargo handler. I am also good with a spacesuit in zero G.”

“But, what about our children?” Pleaded Tina, getting an immediate response from Alice Sweeny.

"And what about our children indeed, Captain? These bastards on Earth did not hesitate to beat and abuse my three young daughters. You think that they can expect better from Terran assault troopers?"

"And you think that they will be safe if we are boarded after a fight? Let's be sensible, my friends: let's put at least our younger children in a safe place, along with the mothers with babies. We can send them temporarily to, say, Triton, in the Neptune System. They should be safe there."

The men, women and children in the mess looked at each other in silence for a moment, undecided. Finally, Alice Sweeny rose again, partly subdued.

"You are right, Captain. The younger ones should go, along with mothers with babies. However, let the rest of us above the age of twelve decide individually if we stay or go. Everyone of us can be useful to the ship in one way or another. Personally, I will go with my youngest daughter Cynthia and will help care for the small children of other crewmembers."

With a big lump rapidly forming in her throat, Tina nodded her head and pointed her left arm towards one end of the mess.

"Very well, then. The mothers of infants, the children under twelve and all the others who do not wish to end up in combat, please go sit in that corner. Again, nobody will call anyone a coward for not going to war."

Tears came to her eyes when only a pitiful number of the people present, nearly all young children, went to sit in the corner. Only a very few children of twelve or more chose to go to the corner, while all of the employees and owners of commercial concessions chose to volunteer for the war. Searching for Piotr Romanski in the crowd and finding him in the front ranks, she spoke to him in a strangled voice.

"Piotr, we won't need your financial and business genius where we are going, but our children and mothers will need a resourceful leader to conduct them to a safe haven. I would like you to be that leader. Get our children to Triton and keep them safe there. You will have as much funds from me as you wish for that. I will also provide you with one passenger shuttle, to improve your chances."

Piotr, himself near to tears, nodded slowly his head.

"You can count on me, Tina."

Looking around her with tears rolling on her cheeks, Tina manage to say one last sentence before starting to cry openly.

"May you all be safe through this. I...I love you all."

Piotr' group left the KOSTROMA the next morning aboard one passenger shuttle, to go board another cargo ship due soon to leave for the Neptune System. That ship's departure brought tears to many on the KOSTROMA. Then, every man, woman and teenager left on the ship concentrated on the tasks at hand. The food warehouses and cold rooms were filled in prevision of a long period in space; the last maintenance problems were corrected; the vast fuel tanks were filled to capacity and extra stocks of spare parts were acquired and loaded aboard. Those who were not already formally trained as crewmembers, in majority young teenagers and concession employees, were allotted to specific sections of the ship according to their talents and qualifications, where they immediately started a crash training program to at least teach them the basics. The high level of education of most helped, with even teenagers having already some scientific or technical knowledge that could be used.

Two days later, cargo shuttles from the surface of Callisto started bringing in the first locally-produced missiles, which were then loaded into emptied life pod launch tubes around the bow and stern gravity sail decks. Some stocks of small arms and ammunition also arrived, not much but at least enough to arm the KOSTROMA's internal defense force, which would have the responsibility to repel any Terran boarding party. During all that time, Tina studied with her bridge officers and personnel how best to face Terran ships, using the information provided by Gustav Shomberg to find their weak points and devise tactics against them. Then came December 4, 2315, a date to become of great significance for the whole of Humanity.

The crew of the KOSTROMA suspended work for one hour on the morning of Saturday, December 4<sup>th</sup>, in order to register their votes in the referendum for independence held in the whole of the Outer Solar System. The citizens of Mars, being under occupation, were not allowed by Terran troopers to participate, while the governors of the Moon and of Mercury, being creatures of the Grand Administrator Li, refused to hold the referendum. Just before eight in the evening that day, Universal Time, the results were announced to the whole Solar System: the referendum had passed by a wide margin, with 81 percent of the participating Spacers having voted for independence and separation from Earth. The brief cheering that greeted that result in Spacer territory was quickly replaced by grim determination, as all realized that the

Terran Federation would not simply accept that result and let them go peacefully. Effectively, it took only three hours before Grand Administrator Li appeared on system-wide news to declare the referendum results null and void and to call the referendum itself an act of sedition, promising to have the leaders of the new Spacers League arrested and judged for high treason. With that fresh threat in mind, the crewmembers of the KOSTROMA redoubled their efforts to prepare for the undeclared war that was certain to come.

**04:08 (Universal Time)**

**Monday, December 6, 2315**

**Captain's cabin, MSS KOSTROMA**

**High orbit around Callisto**

**Jupiter System**

Tina, deeply asleep after a long day of work and frantic preparations, was awakened in her dark cabin by the insistent buzz of her intercom. Trying to focus her eyes, she pushed the answer button while sitting up in bed.

"Yes, what is it?"

The worried face of Germaine Brown, on duty on the bridge, appeared on the small screen.

"Captain, the long range sensors on the moon Sinope have detected the approach of a fleet of seven unidentified ships coming from the Main Asteroid Belt. They are heading directly towards Callisto and will arrive in orbit above Callisto in approximately two hours."

All ideas of sleep evaporating, Tina swung her legs out of the bed while still looking at the intercom.

"Alright! Start moving the ship by gravity sail to close to the orbital cargo terminal, but make sure we keep at the same time a clear line of sight to where any ship orbiting above Callisto Prime would have to be. With luck, we will have them think we are in the process of loading some cargo. Is Callisto Prime on alert?"

"Yes, Captain! They in fact passed the alert to us."

"Then tell them on tight beam directional link not to call for our help, whatever happens. I want a chance at taking these bastards by surprise at close range. Have also 'Battle Stations' called across the ship."

“Uh, yes Captain!”

That said, Tina jumped out of bed and started dressing up in her coveralls as the ship’s alarm started whooping. She then put on her spacesuit and left her cabin, on her way to the bridge.

## **05:52 (Universal Time)**

### **Terran cruiser TCNS MUMBAY**

#### **Approaching Callisto**

Rear Admiral Sanjit Parwan put on a martial air before stepping on the command bridge of his flagship, the cruiser TCNS MUMBAY. Despite his apparent assurance, he knew that he could not afford to fail on this mission. It had taken all of his powerful political contacts to stop Commodore Misawa’s investigation from getting too close to him concerning the pirate ship encountered by the cargo ship KOSTROMA eight months ago. The performance of his sector fleet during the initial strike on Spacer worlds had also not made him look good. This was his last chance to avoid being relieved of command by an increasingly impatient Grand Admiral Wa.

Captain Joshua Nkomo, the commander of the MUMBAY, was in his command chair when Parwan entered the bridge. He, like the rest of the bridge crew, wore his spacesuit, but with its visor opened. Nkomo, twisting his head to look at Parwan, then saw that his superior was not wearing a spacesuit.

“Admiral, we will be in orbit over Callisto in less than twenty minutes and we are at Battle Stations. It would be prudent to don your spacesuit, sir.”

Parwan made a dismissive gesture of the hand and stood erect in the middle of the bridge.

“This won’t even be worthy of being called a battle, Captain Nkomo. Contrary to those consortium bandits of the Main Asteroid Belt, these Jovians haven’t bothered to arm themselves in the past years. How many ships are in orbit around or in proximity to Callisto?”

“We have a total of 58 ships and craft of various sizes within detection range, sir, including a passenger liner at the main orbital terminal and a super-heavy cargo ship at the cargo terminal. Four of the smaller craft have started to flee at our approach but most of the ships have stayed in their anchorage.”

"Show me the list of those ships on my command chair's display, please."

"Yes, Admiral."

Parwan walked lazily to his command chair and sat in it, but didn't bother buckling his safety harness before looking at his display screen. He nearly twitched when he saw the name 'MSS KOSTROMA' in the list, but managed to hide his reaction.

"I see that we have the famous KOSTROMA sitting at the cargo terminal. I suppose that we will have to be careful not to get within life pod shooting range of it." His joke made a few officers grin or laugh, but not Nkomo.

"It is still a huge ship, sir. I wouldn't care being rammed by it."

"Then we will make sure that it doesn't get within ramming range of us, won't we? Has Callisto Prime challenged us yet?"

"No, Admiral. We haven't contacted them yet, though."

"Then do it now, Captain."

"Yes, Admiral. Lieutenant Bashir, start transmitting our ultimatum."

The communications officer nodded, then spoke calmly but coldly in his microphone.

"Callisto Prime Control, this is Terran Task Force Five. You will surrender to us Governor Janet Robeson and the members of her cabinet, plus any leader of the so-called Spacers League still on Callisto. If you don't comply within the hour, we will start the bombardment of Callisto Prime and will keep up our fire until those persons are surrendered to us, over."

The lieutenant waited for a response for ten seconds before starting to repeat his message.

"Callisto Prime Control, this is Terran Task Force Five..."

On the bridge of the KOSTROMA, Tina gave a nod to her weapons systems operators.

"Fire Plan 'A'. Fire at will!"

The Terran fleet was 3,400 kilometers away from the cargo terminal and about to enter orbit when the laser beams from the KOSTROMA struck, the beams being invisible to the naked eye due to their infra-red frequency. The first visible indication of strikes came from the showers of sparks that flew from the hulls of the stricken ships. Each 250 megawatt laser beam took only milliseconds to vaporize the outer hull surfaces it struck and to burn through, digging deeper inside the ships while the outer compartments

experienced catastrophic explosive decompressions. The unfortunate crewmembers present in the holed compartments were brutally sucked towards the holes in the hulls, where they were either shredded to pieces while their bodies squeezed through the breaches or they were themselves vaporized by the continuous laser beams. With the laser beams moving over the surface of their targets, penetrating deeply within fractions of seconds, the Terran ships started suffering heavy damages before their bridge crews could even realize that they were being fired upon, unless of course the bridge itself had been hit by a laser beam. Six of the Terran ships, four frigates, one troopship and a light cruiser, were each targeted by one laser beam, while two laser beams concentrated their fire on the sides of the cruiser MUMBAY.

On the bridge of the MUMBAY, the first indication of an attack for Rear Admiral Parwan was the sudden ringing of alarm bells, followed by the flickering of the lights.

"What the..." Started to say Parwan, who was then interrupted by a scream from a technician.

"MULTIPLE HULL BREACHES AMIDSHIP! LASERS ARE BURNING THROUGH OUR SHIP!"

"WERE DO THESE LASERS COME FROM, DAMMIT?" Shouted Captain Nkomo. It took a few precious seconds for a sensors officer to find out via his infra-red detectors, seconds during which the laser beams burned through more compartments.

"THE LASER FIRE IS COMING FROM THE CARGO SHIP KOSTROMA, SIR." That froze Parwan with a mixture of utter surprise and rage. Before he could give an order, a technician sitting at a station at the rear of the bridge suddenly was cut in two, while sparks flew from the wall and floor. Still not attached to his command chair, Parwan was then sucked out of the bridge, shredded against the incandescent metal edges of the hole and pulled into the vacuum of space. All power to the bridge and to most of the ship then failed, preventing Nkomo and his crew from firing a single shot before the cruiser was bodily cut in two and became a space wreck. The laser fire continued on though, until what was left was clearly no longer a threat to Callisto Prime or to the KOSTROMA.

"CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! REPORT ANY DAMAGE!"

Martha Lang, acting as the bridge engineer, looked around at her status boards before answering Tina.

"NO APPARENT DAMAGE! WE HAVE NOT BEEN HIT, CAPTAIN!"

Tina breathed a sigh of relief at that announcement. She then looked at her chronometer. Incredibly, the battle had gone on for no more than fourteen seconds, with the Terran ships neutralized in the first eight seconds of firing. Dana Durning looked at her with a face still flush with tension.

"We did it, Tina. We did it!"

"Yes, we did it, Dana. Now, we will use this victory to the maximum, before Earth realizes that it has lost its task force, and how. I intend to depart now for Pallas without delay."

"What about possible survivors from those Terran ships?"

Tina gave a sad look at the viewing screens, then shook her head.

"No! Others here will have to go through the debris. For us, speed is now of the essence. Calculate a high-speed trajectory to Pallas. We will leave as soon as Governor Robeson is informed of the situation here. Patricia, connect me with the Governor via tight directional beam, please."

"You have the Governor on line two, Tina."

"Thank you!"

Switching to line two, Tina got Robeson's face staring anxiously at her on her screen.

"Captain Forster, is your ship alright?"

"It is, Madam Governor. We were not hit at all. In fact, it seems that the enemy never had time to fire before we cut their ships to pieces. We have thus accounted for two enemy cruisers, four frigates and a troopship operating under the designation of Task Force Five. I now intend to depart without delay for Pallas, while Earth still doesn't know about the loss of its flotilla and while surprise is still on our side. Your orbital craft can take care of the Terran survivors among the debris."

"Wait! Before you go, you must wait for Governor Watts and his party to return to your ship."

"But, why, Madam Governor? Governor Watts would be much safer here, on Callisto."

The face of Charles Watts, who politely pushed aside Janet Robeson to speak to Tina, then filled the screen.

"I may be safer here, Captain Forster, but it is not my planet and my people desperately needs me. We will be aboard in less than an hour. By the way, congratulation for your second space victory, Captain."

“Uh, you’re welcome, sir.” Could only say Tina, taken off balance. Janet Robeson then reappeared on the screen.

“Those Martian politicians can be so pushy. I will use that last opportunity to send to you by cargo shuttle our last available batch of missiles, along with Governor Watts, so that you can load them in your tubes during your trip. I will advise our friends by coded message to Pallas and Hygiea that you are departing now for Pallas. Everything should be ready there when you will arrive. After that, I can only wish you and your crew good luck.”

“Thank you, Madam Governor. And tell Governor Watts to step on it, or we will leave him behind on the sidewalk.”

“I will tell him, Captain.” Replied Robeson with a smile before cutting the link.

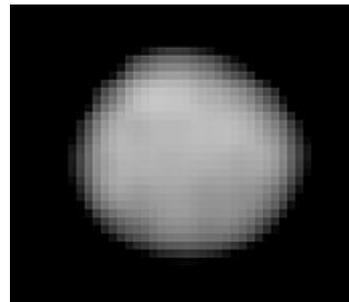
## **CHAPTER 7 – MARS EXPEDITION**

**15:49 (Universal Time)**

**Saturday, December 11, 2315**

**Pallas Prime Spaceport orbital terminal**

**Pallas, Main Asteroid Belt**



“I must say that it is a rather ugly ship, Mister Stein. It is however quite impressive.”

Jacobus Stein, standing on the observation deck of the orbital terminal with Captain Michel Koniev, gave the Sverdlovsk Group security officer an amused smile.

“Don’t repeat that in front of Captain Forster, or she could roast you in her fusion plasma exhausts. However, as you must already know, form goes with function in space, rather than with aerodynamic laws. The important thing is that the KOSTROMA has proven itself to be a formidable opponent in a space battle. It is also a very fast ship, especially now that it is next to empty of cargo, and has very long space endurance. It will be perfect for this expedition.”

Stein then returned his eyes on the approaching cargo ship, which already filled most of the dark space sky visible from the observation deck. His mind went again through all the obstacles and difficulties of the coming raid to Mars as the KOSTROMA maneuvered to dock at the orbital terminal. The grim truth was that it would probably take a minor miracle for that mission to succeed without incurring significant casualties. However, the fate of Mars, the most populous Spacer world in the Solar System, was in the balance.

Once the ship was securely docked and its communications tubes extended and sealed, Stein and Koniev led a group of over 200 men and women loaded with equipment, weapons and personal kits aboard the KOSTROMA. The great majority of them were security officers from the Sverdlovsk Group, while twenty men and women came from the unofficial Pallas Defense Forces. The group was greeted on the Promenade Deck by Tina Forster and Charles Watts, who shook hands with Jacobus Stein and Michel Koniev.

"Welcome aboard the KOSTROMA, gentlemen. I am Tina Forster, captain of this ship. You must know Governor Watts. Mister Stein, I presume?"

"Correct, Captain. And this is Captain Michel Koniev, from the Sverdlovsk Group security forces. We have with us your intended landing party, plus the support crews of two fighter craft of the Pallas Defense Forces that will soon fly into your hangars."

"We will certainly need all the help that we can get for that mission, gentlemen. Before we discuss further, let's get some accommodations for your people."

Distributing cabins to the newcomers on one of the passenger decks took half an hour, with Tina and Governor Watts then leading to the bridge Stein, Koniev and the flight crews of the two fighter craft that had just landed aboard. The small group took seats around the table of the small bridge conference room, in which a giant electronic 3D map of the Solar System was displayed atop the interactive conference table, along with a map of Mars on one corner of the table surface. Once seated, Tina looked at Jacobus Stein with concern.

"I first have to say that we have up to now very little intelligence on the actual situation on and around Mars, Mister Stein. Did you get some fresh information from your side, by chance?"

"Fortunately, yes. A number of merchant ships that had been on Mars or in orbit were able to leave before the Terrans could establish a solid blockade force around Mars. Some of those ships then stopped here, on Pallas. According to their reports, the Terrans have established a permanent orbital watch with two pairs of frigates, one stationed above the North Pole and the other pair above the South Pole. From there, they are able to cover all the approaches to Mars with their radars and other sensors. There are as well Terran parties aboard the various orbital installations around Mars, including the main space traffic control center on the moon Deimos. However, the word is that the Martians, short of other means, are massively practicing passive resistance, refusing to cooperate with the Terrans and even committing some small acts of sabotage. As a result, the usual traffic control network coverage is said to be spotty, to say the least. That should help your ship approach Mars undetected, at least for a few crucial hours."

"That still leaves these two pairs of frigates on orbital watch. They will be able to detect the KOSTROMA on their radars at a distance of up to about 200,000 kilometers, or much farther by optical and infra-red sensors if we fire up our fusion drive to

decelerate to achieve orbit around Mars. We need something to distract or draw away those frigates.”

Tina was thoughtful for a moment, then looked at Jacobus Stein.

“If I gave you a design made out of standard ship parts, could your shipyards produce it quickly, within a day or two at the most, Mister Stein?”

“If all the parts are in stock and if your design is simple enough, I believe so. We will certainly give it top priority if we decide to build whatever you have in mind.”

“Good! What I am thinking about is to build drones, to distract those frigates.”

The engineer in Jacobus Stein woke up at that notion and he smiled to Tina.

“Now, that is one interesting idea. Tell me what you have in mind exactly, Captain?”

“Please, just call me Tina, Mister Stein.”

“Very well, Tina. Show me a design sketch and I will have it built right away.”

Using the computer at her end of the table, Tina took a few minutes to draw a rough design, explaining as she went what she wanted to get and finally getting a nod from Stein.

“I can already tell you from memory that I have in my shipyards and warehouses all the parts for these drones. With such a simple design, they should be completed within 24 hours.”

“Excellent! Then, we will stand a much better chance of breaking through that Terran blockade of Mars undetected. Now, let’s talk about tactics once around Mars...”

## **22:07 (Universal Time)**

### **Boreal forest ecosystem, Bow Gravity Sail Deck**

#### **MSS KOSTROMA, docked to Pallas orbital terminal**

Tina was reading an old book while sitting on one of the wooden park benches of one of the two boreal forest ecosystems in her ship when Michel Koniev approached her, walking slowly along the path while admiring the trees around him. Tina smiled to him, discreetly admiring the tall, athletic and handsome blond man.

“A relaxing surrounding, isn’t it?”

“You certainly can say that. These ecosystems, along with the giant aquariums, are fantastic! I can’t think of a single ship other than yours that has this kind of environment. May I sit?”

"Please do!"

Sitting besides Tina, the young security officer eyed with curiosity the old-fashioned book in her hands.

"A paperback book? Aren't these considered collector items these days?"

"Correct! I found it, along with other books, during my last vacation on Earth, in an old antiques store in Vancouver."

"May I ask what the book is about?"

She answered by raising the book and showing its cover to Koniev. He looked with some confusion and incredulity at the image of an old sea-going ship at night.

"You are reading about old floating ships?"

Tina shook her head slowly, her face serious.

"Not simply about ships, Captain. This is an account and analysis of various major naval battles fought during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, during what was called World War Two. You wouldn't believe the amount of ingenuity and cunning that was displayed in those old battles, along with more than a little dose of incompetence and negligence mixed in."

"Uh, why study such old wars?"

"Because nobody now knows about real wars, since the last one was fought over a hundred years ago. Essentially, we now are all amateurs at this business of war. The TCN thinks it knows about it, but it is in reality little more than a glorified armed police force. The technology described in this book and other books I bought may be obsolete, but the general principles of war and basic tactics discussed in them are still relevant, in my opinion. In fact, the idea about the drones we are actually building came to me from one of my old books."

"It did? Maybe I should read them as well."

"It wouldn't be wasted time, I can assure you."

"About battles, were you thinking of painting victory marks on your ship? You did destroy quite a few Terran ships above Callisto."

Her reaction surprised him, along with its vehemence, as she glared at him.

"NEVER! Each of these ships destroyed represented the death of hundreds of men and women, mostly in horrible ways. I am fighting and killing now because I have to, to preserve our freedom and all that we cherish, not because I like war. The sooner we can repair this mess, the sooner I will be able to go back to cargo hauling."

"I'm sorry if I said something dumb." Said Koniev, trying to placate her and swearing mentally at himself for his question. "Please excuse my insensitivity." That seemed to mostly calm her down and she nodded once her head slowly.

"Forgive me in turn for barking at you like this. It is just that this whole business didn't need to happen."

"We didn't start it, Tina. Earth did, but now we have to finish it, or be gobbled up by those corrupt politicians on Earth. Right now, 186 million Martians need our help, badly. I will have to kill Terran troopers on Mars, but I will do it knowing that it is to free innocent civilians from a brutal, undemocratic rule. You will also have to kill, partly to protect your crew, but you shouldn't feel bad about it. For one thing, those old books of yours most probably say the same."

Tina lowered her head, some discouragement on her face.

"Yes, they do. These sailors from the past were mostly conscripts and regretted the killing they were involved in, but they did their duty nonetheless."

Closing her book, she then got up and gave an apologetic smile to Koniev.

"It is getting late and we have a lot to do tomorrow morning. I should be going to bed now. If you will excuse me, Michel."

"By all means, Tina."

Koniev watched her walk away towards the apartments ringing the ecosystems, her book in one hand, and couldn't help feel sorry for her: she was much too young for the kind of responsibilities she presently had on her shoulders. Even though he was himself one year younger than her at 27, at least his own responsibilities were much less overall than hers.

### **10:03 (Universal Time)**

**Sunday, December 12, 2315**

### **Bridge of the MSS KOSTROMA**

Tina was reviewing maps of Mars with Michel Koniev, Charles Watts and the crews of the two fighter craft now aboard the ship when they were interrupted by the intrusion of Patricia O'Neil, who looked apologetically at Tina.

"I'm sorry to disturb you like this, Captain, but we started to receive a system-wide broadcast: Grand Administrator Li is doing a declaration. It is on channel three."

Then adding action to words, she activated herself the giant wall display panel of the conference room and tuned it, making the image of a John Li speaking from a podium appear.

“...of over 2, 400 brave men and women of the Terran Customs Navy, cowardly ambushed by Spacers in the Jupiter System, leaves me and my government no other choice but to declare war on the so-called ‘Spacers League’. Earth will thus not rest until that illegal grouping of local politicians and industrial magnates is dismantled and its leaders punished as the traitors they are. Already, our forces have nipped in the bud one of the centers of this rebellion, Mars, and have captured a number of traitors in the process. Three hours ago, those traitors paid the price for their acts, after having been judged and found guilty of high treason.”

The image then switched to that of some kind of underground hangar with concrete walls, with twenty ISF lined up on one side, rifles in their hands. A mix of fourteen men and women dressed in civilian clothes were then pushed by more troopers within the field of view of the camera and in front of the waiting troopers. Many of them had difficulty walking, being in apparently poor shape. Some of them bore as well visible marks of severe beatings. The sight of one such woman with bruises on her face made Charles Watts suddenly scream with anguish.

“CAROLYN! NOOO!”

Tina immediately went to his side to try to support him, guessing what was going to come. It took as well the efforts of Michel Koniev to restraint the Martian governor as he screamed his despair at the spectacle on the display. Pushed brutally in front of a concrete wall, the fourteen civilians were made to line up facing the armed troopers, who then shouldered their rifles at the command of an officer. The detonations of the rifles discharging and the image of his wife crumbling to the ground, like the thirteen others, only made Charles Watts madder, with the image of a stern John Li coming back on.

“Thus will pay the traitors who tried to steal from the masses of the people in order to preserve their privileges.”

“YOU BASTARD, LI! YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS, I SWEAR!”

Watts then crumbled, shaken by violent sobs. Tina shouted at Patricia O’Neil while holding Watts steady in his chair.

“Quick, get Doctor Perez up here on the double!”

Less than six minutes later, Charles Watts was carried out on an anti-gravity gurney, having been heavily sedated by Maria Perez. Tina watched him go out, her own eyes still wide from the tragic scene they had witnessed. The hand of Michel Koniev on her shoulder then pulled her out of her trance.

"I am still ready to show mercy to a man or woman of the TCN, but not to any of these murderous goons from the ISF, Tina. Not after this."

"What you will do with them on Mars will be up to you, Michel." Replied Tina in a cold voice. "I don't care what will happen to them. As for those ISF I will catch up in space, may Gold help their souls!"

**06:11 (Universal Time)**

**Friday, December 17, 2315**

**Bridge of Terran frigate TCNS KARELIA**

**In Mars polar orbit**

"Captain, we have just detected two unidentified ships at the very limit of our radar range. They are approaching Mars from the direction of the Main Asteroid Belt." Commander John Marston immediately came out of his command chair to approach the main sensors data fusion display, a transparent sphere about three meters in diameter in which was projected a 3D holographic image of what the external sensors saw. The center of the sphere represented the position of his ship, with most of the lower part taken by the surface of Mars.

"Did we get any fusion drive flare signature?" He asked to one of the technicians, who shook her head.

"No, sir! Those ships seem to be approaching on gravity sails alone. They are now about 216,000 kilometers distant and are on a course to either enter a high orbit around Mars, or to pass close to Mars and continue on to Earth."

"Any identification beacons active?"

"None, sir! I should be able to give you a better estimate of their trajectory in a few minutes."

"Good!" Said Marston before looking at the officer of the deck. "CALL THE SHIP TO BATTLE STATIONS! HAVE THE CREW DON THEIR SPACESUITS IN ROTATION! ALERT THE TCNS ATTIKA!"

"AYE, SIR!"

As his crew ran to their combat stations, Marston went to his day cabin aft of the bridge to put on his own spacesuit. When he came back on the bridge, he returned to the sensors display sphere.

“Any more data now?”

“We have definitely trajectories towards Earth, sir, and that will skip Mars by about 60,000 kilometers, still close enough to do a gravity assist acceleration but much too far for our weapons. Those two ships also follow each other, with a separation of about 1,300 kilometers between them. They are totally silent electronically but are definitely under power: they just made a trajectory correction using gravity sails. If we stay in our present orbit, we will be unable to intercept them, sir.”

“Hmm.”

Marston saw at once that he could not allow those two ships to simply pass by without intercepting them: if allowed to approach Earth, they could then do some grievous damages to orbital installations...if the ships were armed. If he did nothing, Grand Admiral Wa would have his head on a platter.

“ALERT THE ATTIKA TO FOLLOW US ON AN INTERCEPT COURSE FOR THOSE TWO BOGEYS! ADVISE COMMODORE BARBANZON THAT WE HAVE TO VACATE OUR PICKET. NAVIGATOR! PLOT A MAXIMUM PERFORMANCE INTERCEPT COURSE!”

“PLOTTING, SIR!”

Less than three minutes later, the two frigates were powering up their thermonuclear drives and starting to climb out of orbit on two searing white trails of plasma.

## **06:32 (Universal Time)**

### **Bridge of Terran frigate TCNS ALGIERS**

#### **Southern polar orbit of Mars**

“Commodore, we have an urgent transmission from the frigate KARELIA. It and the ATTIKA just left orbit to intercept two unidentified ships breaching Mars and heading towards Earth. The message from Commander Marston is on channel 2.”

Commodore Lucius Barbanzon, in charge of the Mars Picket, took a minute to absorb the data and information from the KARELIA before looking at his communications officer.

“Retransmit this data to the TCN Headquarters on Earth and to our command center in Ares City. Then tell the ALASKA to go replace the KARELIA and ATTIKA over

the North Pole. We will stay here to cover the South Pole picket. Advise me instantly of any new info or data about those two approaching intruders.”

“Aye, sir!”

**06:49 (Universal Time)**

**Bridge of Terran frigate TCNS KARELIA**

**On intercept course above Mars**

“Do we have a better picture on those two intruders, Ensign Mayers? We will soon have to reverse thrust to break our speed and adjust course for our interception. Then, our plasma exhaust will obscure most of our sensors for precious moments.”

“I know, sir,” said apologetically the young woman in charge of the sensors display sphere, “but those two ships are playing the stealth game to the hilt. They have not emitted any electronic signal of any kind up to now, at least not in omnidirectional mode. They are also using only their gravity sails, which makes them much harder to spot via optical and infra-red means and prevents us from analyzing their drive flare for identification. Our view of them through our forward telescope is still no more than two separate dots. However, from their radar return strength, these are definitely ships of appreciable size, at least as big as our frigate. I would advise extreme caution, sir.”

“Your point is well taken, Ensign. Make sure that we send immediately any new data to Commodore Barbanzon via dedicated data link.”

“Will do, sir.”

Two minutes later, Marston ordered thrust to be reversed, to brake his ship and curve his trajectory towards the plotted course of the two unidentified ships. Tension was now high aboard the frigate, with the sudden and still unexplained destruction of seven warships above Callisto only eleven days earlier on everybody’s mind. The fusion drives burned at high rate for a bit over four minutes, then quieted down to idle power. Marston immediately looked at his chair’s display, plugged to the forward sensors. His heart accelerated when he saw that the picture of the nearest intruder now showed a definitive shape.

“Can you identify the ship class visually or by radar, Ensign Mayers?”

“Sorry, sir, but no! Our main telescope can make out their silhouette, but the computer cannot recognize it. It seems to be a totally new class of ship, sir. However, I

can tell you that it is definitely bigger than us, with a length overall of over 300 meters and a maximum diameter of ninety meters. The second ship appears to be of a similar class.”

“The Spacers League would already have two brand new ships? I find that hard to believe. Anyway, we are here to deal with them. Comms, hail them!”

After a minute of tense waiting, with the intruders now closer and closer on near parallel courses with the KARELIA and ATTIKA, the communications officer finally reported back to Marston.

“No answer at all on any frequency, sir!”

“Dammit, those buggers asked for it! Fire a visible laser beam across their bow! If they don’t react still to that, then we will fire for effect.”

“Aye, sir! Firing warning beam now.”

Even though Marston was expecting trouble, his stomach knotted up when Mayers shouted in alarm ten seconds after the laser beam was fired ahead of the first intruder.

“Sir, targeting radars just powered up on the intruders!”

“Damn! TO ALL THE CREW: SEAL YOUR SUITS NOW! WEAPONS OFFICER: TARGET THE FIRST INTRUDER FOR A 4-MISSILE SALVO AND STAND BY TO FIRE!”

Marston then saw on the display sphere that the ATTIKA was getting much closer than he liked to the second intruder. They were already well within standard missile range and getting so close would limit the time the laser batteries from the ATTIKA would have to intercept and destroy any incoming enemy missile. As it was, the laser firepower of TCN frigates was already too limited in Marston’s mind, so there was no need to tempt the devil like this.

“TELL ATTIKA TO WIDEN THE DISTANCE WITH THE SECOND INTRUDER! IT IS...”

“MULTIPLE MISSILE LAUNCHES FROM THE FIRST INTRUDER! THE SECOND INTRUDER IS ALSO FIRING MISSILES!”

“LASERS ON COUNTER-MISSILE AUTOMATIC MODE! FIRE ALL OUR FORWARD MISSILE TUBES!” Shouted immediately Marston. Another shout from his sensors officer then baffled him for a second.

“Sir, the intruders are firing massive salvos of some kind of radar-jamming material.”

“What?” Started to say Marston, who was then cut by another warning.

"EIGHT MISSILES INBOUND, ACCELERATING AT 20 Gs, SIR! ATTIKA ALSO HAS EIGHT MISSILES ON ITS BACK."

"Sir, our fire control radars are having a hard time seeing through the enemy counter-measures. Our missiles still have not acquired their target."

"What about our lasers? Are we getting hits on these incoming missiles?"

"Not yet, sir! Those missiles are still quite far and are also very fast. The hits ratio should however improve soon as the range diminishes."

Marston swore mentally at that remark. While a shorter range improved laser accuracy against small targets, it also meant that enemy missiles would be closer to hitting his ship. The problem was that his frigate could fire no more than two laser beams at a time, beams of limited durations due to heat dissipation constraints and of a maximum power of forty megawatts per beam. That was quite meager, not to say insufficient, to stop with good certainty eight incoming missiles. However, the powers that be had decided decades ago that the firepower of present frigate designs were quote perfectly adequate for their roles unquote. Now, Marston was stuck with being the one to prove them right...or wrong. A horrified shout then started answering that question.

"THE ATTIKA JUST EXPLODED, SIR!"

"WHAT?"

"IT WAS HIT BY AT LEAST FOUR MISSILES, SIR. THEY MUST HAVE HIT ITS MISSILE MAGAZINE, SIR."

"Sir, two of our missiles have impacted on the first intruder."

"Still five enemy missiles inbound! Three others destroyed by laser fire, sir."

Marston twitched on seeing how close the surviving enemy missiles now were: shooting them all down before impact on his ship would be a miracle indeed.

"Is the first intruder still in the fight?"

"Yes sir! Its targeting radar is still active and it is still maneuvering."

A fourth, then a fifth enemy missile was destroyed by laser fire from the KARELIA. Of the three remaining missiles, one barely missed the KARELIA, but the last two hit the frigate squarely and exploded, shaking the ship and making it tumble in space under the kinetic energy of the impacts. All lights went out on the bridge, to be replaced by emergency lights after a second.

"DAMAGE REPORT!"

"Main power is down across the ship, sir. Six of our aft compartments are holed and opened to vacuum, including the fusion generator room and the main drive fusion chamber compartment, sir."

Marston swore silently at that: his ship was now both powerless and dead in space.

"Casualties?"

"Reports are still incoming, sir. There are however no answers from the generator room and from the main drive fusion chamber compartment."

Which meant probably that his whole engineering team was dead or wounded, thought bitterly Marston.

"Ensign Mayers, can we still track and target these intruder ships?"

The young female officer looked at him through her closed helmet visor, fear visible in her eyes.

"Yes sir! They are presently pulling away on their original course and ignoring us."

Marston understood at once her fear: she was probably worried that any further attack on the intruders would attract more missiles and kill the survivors on the KARELIA. That was only humane on her part and he couldn't blame her for that. He however had to think in larger terms, like the fact that the two other frigates of the Mars Picket were about to face two tough and well armed opponents if he didn't try to even the odds further.

"Ensign, arm all our remaining missiles and target the lead intruder. Let's finish it!"

"Yes sir!" Replied the ensign after a short hesitation. Punching buttons on her console, she fired in quick succession their last four missiles. The enemy ships reacted by deploying more of their radar-jamming material and by firing four missiles at the KARELIA. With no electrical power for his lasers and his rail guns, Marston knew that he now had nothing to stop those incoming missiles. He however had the satisfaction of seeing two of his missiles explode against the lead intruder ship before his poor frigate got blasted by four powerful explosions. This time, the bridge itself was holed to vacuum, while fragments flew all around, cutting and ripping through spacesuits and flesh. Marston heard a number of his men and women scream on his spacesuit's radio headset while he was shaken in his command chair. His safety harness held, however, and he was able to look around him after a few seconds. The compartment was now totally dark, with not a single instrument or button illuminated. He thus switched on his

helmet's lamp, revealing a scene of chaos and carnage around him. To make matters worse, the artificial gravity was not working, something made evident by three corpses in spacesuits floating around the bridge. Seeing some movement near the sensors display sphere, Marston unbuckled his harness and, careful to keep hold of various furniture or equipment, made his way to the sphere. Two of the operators were dead, their spacesuits ripped open and bloodied, but he found young Ensign Mayers still strapped to her seat and conscious, but in an apparent state of shock. Blood and gore from another crewmember had splattered her helmet visor but she seemed physically intact. Using his forearm, Marston wiped off the worst of the gore on her visor and gently shook the female ensign.

"Mayers, are you okay?"

"I...I think so, sir." She answered, her eyes still haunted. "Wha...what are we going to do now, sir?"

"Let me first check for other survivors first, Ensign. Then we will assess the situation. Just stay in your seat for now."

A few minutes were enough for Marston to find that only one other member of the bridge crew, a communications technician, had survived, stuck in his seat by a jammed harness buckle. After some efforts, he was finally able to free the man, who returned with him at Mayers' side. Undoing her harness at Marston's request, she followed him and the technician towards the emergency access hatch of the bridge, opening it and floating in the central axis communications tube of the frigate, where the elevator shafts and staircase were. The communications tube was totally dark as well, making it a spooky sight in the glare of their headlamps as they proceeded slowly down the staircase, holding on to the handrails. At each level, Marston banged against the airtight doors, hoping to find a still-pressurized compartment or survivors. Three levels down, they met with four survivors in their spacesuits and continued on with them. Their search came to a halt amidships, when the central communications tube proved to be open totally to space. Marston looked around with a pinch of his heart as he held on to a twisted segment of handrail and stared at the stars: his ship had been bodily cut in two, with the stern section already a few hundred meters away, stumbling around in space. A strangled sob of despair on the radio then made him turn towards Linda Mayers. The young blonde was nearly hysterical and was sobbing uncontrollably.

"We are doomed! Nobody will come to save us now."

"Don't say that." Replied Marston, careful not to sound too harsh. "We are still alive and our two other frigates of the picket will certainly come and look for us."

"What if they get destroyed as well, sir?"

"They won't, Ensign! Now, let's find a functioning life pod: we will have much better chances of surviving once inside of one."

"WAIT, SIR! I SEE A SHIP APPROACHING!" Shouted one of the survivors while pointing above them. Looking up, Marston felt immense relief at the sight of a set of approaching navigation lights. Even if it proved to be an enemy ship, which was quite possible, it would still be infinitely better than eventually dying in space by running out of air. Linda Mayers' sobs then changed to tears of joy.

"Thank you, God. Thank you."

Within a minute, the incoming ship turned into a brightly painted light personnel shuttle of the kind widely used by shipping lines, attracting a surprised frown on Marston's face.

"A commercial shuttle, here and now?"

"It must be a Spacers shuttle, sir." Suggested a technician. "If it is, should we resist?"

"No! Not if they treat us correctly. Until further orders from me, you will obey our rescuers, whoever they are. If they are indeed Spacers, then the fact that they came looking for survivors will be to their merit."

Attracted by the headlamps of their spacesuits, the shuttle floated to a few meters only of the survivors, presenting them its access airlock, along with a painted logo.

"MSS KOSTROMA, Jovian Shipping Lines." Read Linda Mayers in a neutral tone. "They are Spacers alright, sir."

"Very well, then. Remember: no resistance for the moment."

"Good move!" Said a man's voice on the radio, prompting Marston to look angrily at his crewmembers.

"Who said that?"

"Don't blame your people, mister: I'm the pilot of the shuttle waiting for you to move your butts to my airlock. I will now open my outer airlock door, so that one of my crewmen can throw you a guide cable. Be ready to catch it and to then hold your end of it, to allow your people to safely board. Be warned that we are armed."

"Alright, mister: we get it." Said Marston, repressing his antipathy. The airlock door then opened, revealing two persons in spacesuits standing inside. One of them threw a rolled nylon cable towards the wreck, which was then caught by Marston and attached to a handrail. That done, the frigate commander looked at Linda Mayers.

"You first, Ensign: you're the youngest."

Mayers obeyed him without a word, pulling herself along the cable and entering the airlock within seconds. Since the airlock was of a limited volume, it had to be closed and pressurized twice in order to accommodate all seven survivors from the KARELIA. Marston went in last, pulled along by one of the Spacers. That Spacer turned out to be a young teenage boy, to the utter surprise of Marston.

"How old are you, boy, and what are you doing here?"

"First, my name is Jimmy, not boy, mister." Replied testily the teenager. "Second, the fact that I am thirteen should be of no consequence to you. Just obey the orders of Bjorn and he won't shoot you."

The Bjorn in question was a grown man and held a stun pistol in his right hand. The airlock was closed, then pressurized one more time to allow Marston to step inside the shuttle proper. There, he found his crewmen taking off their spacesuits under the watchful eyes of a big, muscular man armed with a stun pistol. Ordered as well to take off his spacesuit, Marston was quickly searched by a fourth Spacer, then told to sit with his six crewmembers in the passenger cabin. A young black woman soon came to speak to them, keeping a safe distance while two Spacers covered her with stun pistols.

"Before you start worrying about being possibly questioned and tortured, don't! We are not ISF thugs and we are decent people, whatever Grand Administrator Li says about us. You will be well treated, as long as you don't turn violent or do something real stupid."

"So, what happens next, miss?" Asked Marston, keeping a neutral tone of voice.

"Next, we will look for more survivors from your ship, then will go investigate another battle scene, where your other pair of frigates just lost a fight. After that, we will land on Mars, where you will be handed over to the local resistance."

"And what makes you think that there is such a thing as your so-called 'local resistance'?"

The young black woman glared at him before replying to him.

"Your ISF goons will soon enough have to deal with it, mister. Furthermore, Martians will be led in their fight by their legitimate governor, Charles Watts. You know,

the Charles Watts whose wife was tortured and then publicly executed by your troopers?”

Marston lowered his head at that, too ashamed to reply to her.

### **07:55 (Universal Time)**

#### **Hangar Deck, MSS KOSTROMA**

##### **Mars low orbit**

“Are you sure that you need to risk yourself in that kind of fight, sir?”

Charles Watts, wearing his spacesuit and accompanied by his two bodyguards and shuttle pilot, also in spacesuits, nodded his head firmly as he answered a concerned Tina Forster.

“Absolutely! My people need me, badly. My presence will help their morale and strengthen their resolve to fight. Besides, with you now controlling the space around Mars, the chances of the remaining Terran forces on and around Mars to hold on to their positions are down drastically. With some luck, they will see the writing on the wall and surrender.”

“Don’t count on those ISF goons to surrender, sir: they already have too much on their conscience not to know they will not get a nice treatment if taken prisoner.”

The mention of the ISF made the face of the governor harden for a moment.

“There will be no ISF troopers taken, Tina. They will reap what they sowed and will richly deserve it. TCN personnel and Terran civil servants will however be treated humanely. I will personally make sure of that.”

“Then, I can only wish you and your troopers good luck, sir.”

Tina then looked at Michel Koniev with a sober expression. She was getting more and more attracted by the handsome security officer but had not yet confessed her feelings towards him.

“Be careful, Michel, and take good care of Governor Watts.”

“I will, Tina.” Replied Koniev confidently. “Don’t worry about us. Good luck on your side as well.”

“Thank you! Well, I won’t hold you up further. The shuttles are ready to go.”

The 219 men and women, plus three young teenagers who had spent months on Mars in their youth and would act as guides for the mostly Hygiean troopers, then boarded the

small flotilla of shuttles that would carry them to the surface of the red planet. The shuttles were then launched in quick succession and started going down towards the surface, escorted by the two fighter craft from the Pallas Defense Forces.

In the lead assault shuttle, transporting 38 troopers and one teenage guide, plus Governor Watts and Michel Koniev, the latter examined again the electronic maps he had of Mars and of his first destination, the city of Olympia.

“What can you tell me of Mars and of Olympia that would not be on our maps and blueprints, Governor?”

“Plenty, actually, Captain Koniev. But the most important thing to understand is that our cities were built to protect our citizens from the environment of Mars, with its thin, unbreathable atmosphere and its continuous shower of radiations from space, not as some kind of fortresses. The access points to our cities are numerous and designed to be used by people on the outside even when there is a power outage. Those access points and airlocks also do not need operators inside to function. There are also a multitude of emergency access airlocks on the surface meant to provide shelter to anyone who had to go in the open on the surface. All this means that it is actually nearly impossible to guard or block all the access points to our cities. Even a general order on the computer systems of our cities will not block those airlocks, as their programming is hardwired to not let that happen. Even if ISF troopers are present in force in Olympia and in the other cities we are going to visit, they will not be able to stop us from entering, short of posting troopers at every access point. In the case of Olympia, that means 26 main craft and ship airlocks, plus 23 vehicle access airlocks and 77 emergency surface shelters with airlocks. It would take a massive ISF force to guard all those access points round the clock, a force they don't have on Mars. I expect them in fact to restrict themselves to Ares City only because of their lack of personnel. Even there, their control will be spotty, at best.”

“You seem to know Olympia quite well, Governor.”

Watts smiled with pride at that remark from Koniev.

“I actually grew up in Olympia, Captain Koniev, and eventually became its mayor before running for the post of governor of the planet. Believe me, I know Olympia from top to bottom.”

“So, what do you think of our initial entry plan, sir?”

"That it should work without trouble. The craft airlock we chose is one of the least used and is somewhat away from the main sections of the city. We will however nearly certainly find inside a small fleet of ground vehicles, which are normally used to carry maintenance workers and robots going out for repairs to surface installations. I counsel that only our shuttle shows up at first, time to secure the airlock and ascertain if there are any Terrans around. Then, the cargo shuttle that is following us will enter after us and we will transfer its load of weapons and ammunition to whatever vehicle we will find inside."

"Sounds perfect with me, sir. Just make sure that you stay behind my troopers at first, sir: no sense in putting you at risk this early in our operation. Uh, do you know how many police officers there are in Olympia, sir?"

"Approximately 420, if I remember well from my time as mayor. They are generally well trained, but lack experience with actual combat."

"Then my troopers will teach and lead them, sir." Replied Koniev, smiling. "We on Hygiea often have to face rather violent customers, sometimes even armed and drunk customers."

"I see! And is Hygiea as much the den of sins that it is made of to be, Captain?"

"Actually, its reputation is understated in my opinion, sir." Said Koniev, its smile becoming a grin. Watts looked at him with false indignation.

"Really? Then, I must visit it one day."

"If you do, then I would recommend to you the Zero-G Nirvana deep space brothel, sir: you can't find a more depraved place in the Solar System in terms of pleasures, both legal and illegal. Most of its customers come from deep space asteroid mining operations and don't see real civilization for months and years on end. Serving as a security guard in that brothel is a real eye opener, sir."

"Sounds like that place could use an exorcism or two, Captain."

"Yup!" Agreed Koniev, still grinning.

Their shuttle, wearing like the other shuttles of the raiding force new paint and logos in the colors of various Mars mining corporations, took a half hour to descend nearly vertically through the thin atmosphere of the planet, then started flying southeast close to the ground, to minimize the chances of being tracked by radar. The raiding force had by now split in five distinct groups, each group heading towards a different Martian city but also being careful to avoid passing close to Ares City. The two-shuttle

force led by Koniev and Watts headed for its part towards Olympus Mons, the tallest mountain in the Solar System, rising 24 kilometers above its surrounding plain and with a width at its base of about 500 kilometers. The city of Olympia, their target, was built inside the extinct volcano, which also contained a number of mines and other industrial installations, including a ground spaceport. Approaching at low altitude from the Southeast put the huge mass of Olympus Mons between the two shuttles and the radars of Ares City, something that Michel Koniev counted on to help his mission. With the sensors specialist of the shuttle checking nervously his displays for signs that any radar or active sensor was tracking them, the pilot concentrated on staying no more than fifty meters above the ground, with him having to jump occasionally over a ridge or hill. As they were approaching the majestic mass of Olympus Mons, the sensors operator spoke up, his voice tense.

“An air traffic control radar just painted us. It will raise an alarm if we don’t activate our transponder.”

“Where would the alarm be transmitted, sir?” Asked the copilot to Watts, who thought for a second.

“To have caught us this close to Olympus Mons probably means that this radar is one of the local automated traffic control radars connected to the Olympia traffic control center. If we don’t send a transponder signal, our blip will soon be handed over to a human operator. If we do send a signal, then the fact that we are a Jovian shuttle may not be automatically realized by the controllers. Activate your transponder and hope for the best, mister.”

“Understood, sir. Activating radar transponder now.”

The reaction from Olympia was swifter than they had expected or hoped, but it also surprised them. Less than a minute after activating his radar transponder, the sensors operator received a transmission from Olympia.

“Sir, I have a call from Olympia. It is a video call!”

“Damn!” Swore Michel Koniev. “Governor, you better stay away from the field of view of his station’s video camera. You, answer the call and try to keep to our cover as best you can!”

The sensors operator nodded, then accepted the call. The head of a pretty woman in her thirties wearing civilian clothes appeared on his display screen, with the woman staring with intense curiosity at him.

"This is Olympia traffic control center. We have received and recognized your transponder signal. You are clear for approach to the craft airlock 2-West. Be advised that the airlock is free of, uh, obstructions."

The woman smiled and winked on saying that last words, then cut the link, leaving the occupants of the shuttle's cockpit to look at each other in surprise and wonderment. On his part, Charles Watts nodded to the pilot.

"Head for the craft airlock 2-West, mister. I am sure that no ISF trooper will be waiting for us there."

"How can you be this certain, sir?" Objected Koniev. "We could be walking right into a trap."

"I don't think so, Captain. Call it instinct, but I believe that this woman understood who we are and did her best to help us without saying anything compromising on the radio. Mister Ashford, would you say that the TCN frigates' transmissions must have been heard around Mars when they were fighting our armed drone ships?"

The pilot of the shuttle nodded in turn.

"Most probably, especially when they started broadcasting distress signals. By now, the whole of Mars must know that the TCN orbital picket was obliterated by ships coming from the Main Asteroid Belt. These people in Olympia were thus probably hoping to see some help arrive sooner or later, which explained the speed at which they caught on to our identity. Very well, sir: we will head towards the designated airlock."

Michel Koniev was still not fully convinced but played along as the shuttle corrected its heading towards a large craft landing platform and airlock dug in the rocky slopes of Olympus Mons.

Only five persons were present on the inner side of the craft airlock when the two shuttles finished cycling through and slowly floated inside the large cavern that served as hangar. That, and the fact that they were unarmed civilians, reassured a lot Michel Koniev. He however got a fight in his hands when he tried to stop Watts from exiting the shuttle first. The politician gave him a no-nonsense look and didn't budge from the entrance of the shuttle's airlock.

"Captain, the best way to convince these people that we are here to help is for me to show myself to them. Either way, I am going out."

He then followed word with action, climbing down the access ramp of the shuttle with his two bodyguards, leaving Koniev to follow behind with his troopers. The civilian technicians waiting in the hangar stared open-mouthed when Watts came out, then started cheering with joy, with the senior technician coming to him to shake his hand with enthusiasm.

“Mister Governor, it is so nice to see you back on Mars. What can we do to help, sir?”

Watts shook back his hand firmly and grinned to the technician, feeling on top of the world.

“We will need vehicles to transport about forty men and 150 tons of weapons and ammunition to the downtown police headquarters. Are there any Terran soldiers or officials here in Olympia?”

“None that we know, Mister Governor. About fifty ISF troopers came here two weeks ago, to disarm our police force, but they left as quickly as they came with the confiscated weapons. Since then, the only thing we get from the Terrans is directives and regulations, transmitted electronically around the planet. The only place that they occupy in force is Ares City, but their rule there is most brutal, I must say.”

“They will soon pay for their atrocities, I swear to you. Now, let’s get these weapons and ammunition unloaded and transferred to ground trucks.”

“With pleasure, Mister Governor.” Said the technician, grinning, before looking at his employees. “ROLL ONE BUS AND THREE FLATBED CARRIERS BESIDES THOSE SHUTTLES, GUYS, ON THE DOUBLE!”

## **08:46 (Universal Time)**

### **Terran Customs Navy local headquarters**

#### **Ares City Spaceport, Mars**

Vice-Admiral Xian Liu Ming was reading through the latest TCN messages from Earth in the operations center of his headquarters in Ares City Spaceport, when a duty officer called for him from his work station.

“SIR, GOVERNOR VANDONG IS ON THE LINE FOR YOU!”

Swearing to himself and knowing in advance what Vandong would want, Ming hurried to the station and looked in the video display screen, where the head and torso of the interim governor of Mars, Nguyen Vandong, was visible.

"Yes, Governor Vandong?"

"Admiral Ming, I am calling to learn what is the latest concerning that Spacers attack that hit your ships."

"No change from my last report, Governor. Of the two ships that attacked our picket frigates, one was destroyed, while the other was severely damaged and possibly knocked out."

"And the relief convoy with the troop reinforcements, Admiral?"

"It will arrive in about four hours, sir. I have already asked that its escort force of one cruiser and two frigates be put under my command after the delivery of the troops and supplies carried by the convoy. However, I am still waiting for an answer on that from Earth."

"And what do we know about these attacking Spacer ships, Admiral? They must have been powerful ships to destroy twice their number in frigates."

Ming did his best to control his anger then: not once yet had Vandong worried or even inquired about the fate of the crews of those four unfortunate frigates since their destruction over two hours ago.

"From the telemetry sent by our frigates during their two separate battles, we have been able to ascertain that those Spacer ships were about the size of light cruisers and that they seemed devoid of laser armament. However, their missile batteries more than made up for that. They also used some kind of new and quite efficient radar jamming system and were incredibly tough ships. In fact, the lead intruder ship was able to absorb a total of eleven missile hits before it was knocked out, while laser fire seemed to have no effect at all on it. The second intruder, on its part, was able to withstand nine missile hits before continuing on its original course with heavy damage, and that after giving the coup de grace to Commodore Barbanzon's ship. It has since disappeared from sensor range. Unfortunately, as you must know already, our radar and infra-red coverage of space around Mars is very spotty at present, thanks to acts of sabotage or simple passive resistance on the part of the Martian technicians in charge of the traffic control network. I would like to be able eventually to replace those Martian technicians by Terran technicians but I don't have enough personnel for that, yet. Things will however get better once the relief convoy arrives with its 26,000 ISF troopers and their supplies. There are also 240 TCN technicians aboard that convoy that were requested by me a week ago to be able to man the traffic control network. Once I will have those

technicians in place, we will again be able to properly monitor space traffic around Mars.”

“And right now, Admiral?”

Ming clenched his teeth, knowing that Vandong was not going to like his answer.

“Right now, the only adequate space coverage I have is of the zone above our base in Ares City. We thus can control less than twenty percent of the orbital space around Mars right now. As for ground and atmospheric traffic, we control only the immediate surroundings of Ares City. The traffic control centers in the other Martian cities have refused so far to connect their networks to ours.”

Vandong nodded his head in understanding, while a cruel smile showed up on his face.

“I know already about that problem, Admiral. Once we have received those two ISF divisions, we will take effective control of the bigger urban centers of Mars. Then, those who did not collaborate with us or showed passive resistance will regret it.”

That only increased the antipathy Ming already felt for Vandong and he raised his voice to show his displeasure.

“If you mean by that that you are going to let those ISF troopers commit more abuses and atrocities, then think again about it, Governor. That kind of tactic will only backfire on us in the long term. Besides, I find those brutal interrogations and summary executions by the ISF to be a black mark on the name of the Federation.”

“Admiral Ming, if you dislike these methods so much, I can always ask Grand Administrator Li to have you replaced. Up to now, the performance of your personnel is nothing to shout about.”

That was too much for Ming, who glared at the interim governor.

“Over 800 men and women of my command were killed less than two hours ago while fighting superior enemy ships, and you dare doubt their courage and dedication while sitting in your safe downtown office of yours? We will see who gets relieved once I make my report to Grand Admiral Wa.”

Ming then cut the link before slamming his fist on the edge of the work station.

“The fucking bastard! How dare he insult our dead crewmembers like that?”

Taking a few deep breaths to calm down first, he next turned towards his operations officer.

“Commander Tomassi, have we received reports yet from the rescue shuttles we sent at the site of the battles fought by our frigates?”

"We just received a preliminary report from the shuttle sent towards the wrecks of Commodore Barbanzon's ships. Unfortunately, they have not found a single survivor yet. The shuttle sent to the wrecks of Commander Marston's group will arrive on the scene of battle in about fifteen minutes, sir. I will keep you informed of their progress as it goes."

"Thank you, Commander."

Ming returned to his chair and sat down, mentally reflecting on the fortunes, or rather the misfortunes, of the TCN in this conflict. Up to now, the TCN had lost in battle a good twelve percent of its ships, and that in barely three weeks. Against an enemy that had supposedly been unarmed at the start of the conflict, that was an alarming loss rate. And things could only get worse, as the Spacers built or modified ships for war, like they seemed to have done with that pair of light cruisers, which had probably been modified cargo ships in view of their lack of laser armament. The problem was that shipyard capacity heavily favored the Spacers against Earth. Worse, the TCN could draw only from a limited pool of volunteers with space experience to form new crews, while nearly all Spacers were by definition trained space crews. The Spacers also controlled five of the only seven facilities in the Solar System that produced cryogenic deuterium fuel for ships, another point in their favor. While Ming hated the idea, the fact was that he just could not see how Earth could win a prolonged space war against the Spacers League. If Grand Administrator Li had any good sense, he would push right now for a gentleman's understanding with the Spacers, in order to avoid a near certain defeat. The problem was that the excesses of Colonel Da Silva's troopers on Mars made such an understanding more and more unlikely as they executed summarily more Martian civilians on charges of treason. Right now, Ming could only hope for the safe arrival of the incoming convoy from Earth...and for some people to regain their common sense.

**08:51 (Universal Time)**

**Bridge, MSS KOSTROMA**

**Bottom of Stickney Crater, moon Phobos**

**In orbit 9,270 kilometers above Mars**

"Our four sensors probes are now in place on the surface of Phobos, Tina. We will have them hooked to us via fiber optic cables and directional repeaters in another

hour. Once that is done, we will have a complete coverage on passive sensors around Phobos.”

“Excellent, Patricia! Frida, how solidly are we anchored to the bottom of this crater?”

The first pilot checked again her instruments before answering.

“Our tractor beams are holding us in place without apparent difficulty, Tina. However, the surface of Phobos is quite fractured and not very strong. It would not take too much of a push to detach us from its surface.”

“As long as we can stay at the bottom and be invisible to radar and other sensors from most angles, I will be happy. Alright, lets stand down from battle stations and go to watch stations. I want as many of us to be able to rest for a few hours before any other action shows up. Make sure though that the sensors stations are properly manned for maximum surveillance capability. Have we received reports from our raiding parties yet?”

“Not since they sent the single codeword meaning that they had arrived without finding opposition at their destinations, Tina. They have since kept radio silence, as planned.”

“Good! Have Renée and the evening shift take over the watch. Me, you and the rest will now go rest for the next six hours. If nothing happens by then, the night shift will take over from the evening shift. Pass the word!”

“Understood, Tina!”

Quite satisfied with their accomplishments of the last few hours, Tina then got up from her command chair and started walking towards the elevator banks. She could feel the fatigue from the continued tension and stress of the last hours and could really use a few hours of sleep. If the old books she had been reading had told her anything, it was that tired or exhausted crews and commanders made mistakes, mistakes that often turned into disasters.

### **12:33 (Universal Time)**

#### **Terran cruiser TCNS RODNEY**

#### **Crossing the orbit of the moon Deimos, 23,400 kilometers above Mars**

“Crossing the orbit of Deimos now, sir. We will arrive in orbit in about 95 minutes.”

“Good!” Said Commodore Goran Bogdanovich from his command chair. “Any sign of enemy ships?”

“Not yet, sir. We are actively scanning with all our sensors in continuous mode but have not detected anything other than known commercial ships already docked in Mars orbit. The moon Phobos will pass in front of us in about an hour, just before we maneuver into orbit.”

Bogdanovich nodded in understanding at that last piece of information. Phobos, like Deimos, was an irregular-shaped asteroid captured long ago by Mars and measuring 28 kilometers at its largest point. It however flew in a most unusual orbit very close to Mars' surface, at least for a moon, and orbited the planet in a bit over seven and a half hours, a very fast orbit indeed. It always presented the same face to the planet, being in a synchronous orbit, and its proximity to Mars resulted in Phobos being shaken by gravity waves from the planet. All that had made Phobos unsuited for permanent space installations and it had stayed a simple space rock, empty of human artifacts save for a few ancient space probes on its surface. Right now, his mind was on possible enemy warships that could attack his convoy of twelve troopships, eight cargo or ammunition ships and two tanker ships. Apart of his RODNEY, he only had two frigates to protect all those vulnerable ships. TCN headquarters had not been able to gather more warships for this convoy, being scrambling to form a large attack force that would head towards Jupiter in the next few days and hopefully put an end to this Spacers insurrection.

One hour and four minutes later, as his convoy had crossed the orbit of Phobos and was maneuvering to place itself in orbit around Mars, Bogdanovich decided to order for himself a cup of coffee. A young female stewardess from the officers' mess promptly showed up with a service tray and a steaming pot of coffee. As she was pouring him a cup from besides his command chair, with Bogdanovich smiling to her, her right arm suddenly turned to ashes as a shower of sparks fell from the ceiling of the bridge. The unfortunate stewardess screamed horribly, while Bogdanovich could only look at her with utter surprise and horror. The same massive, invisible laser beam that had vaporized the woman's arm then moved across Bogdanovich's lap, vaporizing both of his legs just under the knees while also burning through the deck in a spectacular geyser of incandescent sparks. Bogdanovich had no time to scream before passing out from the massive wave of pain from his atrocious wounds. Fired in continuous mode, the 1.25 gigawatt beam burned through in a mere half second from one side of the cruiser to

the other, then slowly drifted against the hull, digging a half-meter wide furrow through the ship and opening in quick succession compartment after compartment to the vacuum of space. The beam then burned through one of the cruiser's missile magazines, touching off a series of powerful explosions that gutted the unlucky ship and ripped it in two jagged parts. The laser beam then was cut for a couple of seconds, to be replaced by four less powerful but still deadly beams of 300 megawatts each of power. The two frigates of the escort, along with two of the twelve troopships, were then promptly cut to shreds as their crews only started to understand that they were being attacked. The remaining troopships, lightly armed with weapons intended strictly for surface bombardment and with no lasers or space-to-space missiles, proved to be sitting ducks for the invisible laser beams that tore through them without mercy in mere seconds. The thousands of ISF troopers inside the troopships, preparing to board assault shuttles to fly down to the surface of Mars, died en mass when their ships experienced explosive decompressions. The troopships were turned in a mere thirty seconds into large flying coffins for the ISF troopers, with only a few rare crewmembers surviving in a handful of still pressurized compartments.

The crews of the cargo and ammunition ships, along with the two tanker ships, could only watch helplessly as the rest of their convoy was systematically destroyed and turned into space wrecks in less than a minute. All they could do was to send frantic messages for help on the radio to both the surface and towards Earth. Those last messages would however take twenty minutes to be received, due to the distance, apart from containing no truly helpful information on who had attacked the convoy. As the crews of the cargo ships prayed for a miracle, fully expecting to die in the next minutes, the laser beams were cut. Then, two minutes after the start of the attack, a radio message with no video input was received by the surviving Terran ships.

"To the eight Terran cargo ships and two tanker ships in medium orbit over Mars, this is the Spacers League Mars Task Force. You will stop immediately all transmissions, will refrain from firing up your main drives and will not maneuver further without our permission. If any ship disobeys our orders, it will be immediately destroyed. Each ship will now acknowledge our call and will identify itself at the same time, plus will state the nature of its cargo, over."

The senior captain of the cargo ships, an old space dog that held a reserve commission in the TCN, swallowed hard and wiped off the sweat on his forehead before answering first.

“Spacers League Task Force, this is the TCN cargo ship WANDERER, with a cargo of 16,000 tons of rations and fresh foodstuff, over.”

As the other surviving ships answered in turn, the captain of the WANDERER looked at his sensors operator.

“Where did the call come from, Yvan?”

“From Phobos, above us. From its present overwatch position, the enemy is in perfect position to watch us and destroy us if they decide to do so, Captain.”

“Damn! Then we better obey their orders to the letter. No sense in playing heroes now.”

Another operator then looked at the captain, his face showing uncertainty.

“Captain, the TCN headquarter in Ares City is demanding more information. Should...”

“DON'T ANSWER THEM!” Was the immediate response. “We will only talk on the radio to answer those Spacers above us.”

About fifteen minutes later, the sensors operator of the WANDERER made another announcement.

“Captain, we have three craft coming down towards us from Phobos.”

“What type of craft?”

“I can't say yet, Captain.”

“Very well. Tell me once you know more.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Mere seconds after that, another message from above was received.

“Terran supply ships in Mars orbit, this is Spacers League Mars Task Force. You will now follow our fighter craft towards the nearby Harmond Orbital Resort, where you will dock your ships and then vacate them. Once in the resort, you will take rooms there and stay there quietly. Don't worry about having to pay the bills for the resort: we will take care of that. Start moving now on gravity sail power.”

“How mighty generous of them!” Said sarcastically the captain of the WANDERER, attracting a forced smile from one of his bridge crewmembers.

"It could be worse, Captain: the Harmond Orbital Resort has a good reputation as a space hotel."

"I'm sure that TCN headquarters on Earth will be thrilled by that detail, Martin."

In Ares City, the news of the destruction of the convoy struck Vice-Admiral Ming like a lightning bolt, forcing him to sit down heavily. After a moment taken to recover from his shock, he looked up at his operations officer, himself pale.

"What do we know about the enemy force, Commander?"

"That it apparently lay in ambush at the surface of Phobos and that it possesses extremely powerful laser armament, which it used in exclusivity to destroy our escort ships and troopships in mere seconds. Our sensors have not yet seen the main enemy ships but three craft, supposedly fighter craft, came down from Phobos and are escorting our captured supply ships to the Harmond Orbital Resort, where their crews have orders to dock and then vacate their ships."

"The Harmond Orbital Resort? But, we have no TCN or ISF personnel there, since it was deemed a commercial installation of little consequence."

"That's correct, sir. That would allow the enemy to easily board our supply ships there and grab whatever they want."

Ming looked with alarm at Tomassi at those words.

"Quick, get me the manifest of what is in those supply ships!"

"Right away, sir!" Said the operations officers before walking away. He was back in front of Ming less than three minutes later with a paper printout counting a dozen pages, which he handed over silently to his admiral. Ming swore as he reviewed quickly the list.

"By the dragons, this is worse than I expected! We must do the utmost to stop the enemy from getting his hands on all this."

"But, sir, we have nothing left with to do that. We have only left here in Ares City a grand total of eight ISF armed patrol craft meant for atmospheric and surface combat. With the kind of laser firepower the enemy has, they stand absolutely no chance of even getting close to that space resort, sir."

"I know, but we can't simply do nothing right now. Look at the cargo of these two ammunition ships on the list and you will understand what I mean, Commander."

Tomassi took the list presented by Ming and reviewed the paragraphs of concern with growing alarm, to finally looking up from the list with a haggard look.

"I...I will give the orders for the ISF squadron to attack at once, sir."

As Tomassi had said, and as Ming had also suspected, the attack by the ISF patrol craft squadron turned quickly into a complete disaster, with all the craft destroyed by long range laser fire well before they could even approach the Harmond Orbital Resort and the precious supply ships docked there. The only positive outcome of that engagement was a piece of news that enraged Vice-Admiral Xian Liu Ming.

"One ship? The whole enemy task force consists of only one ship?"

"Yes, sir, but it is a huge ship, with 25 gigawatts of installed generator power, plenty to be able to supply gigawatt-class laser batteries. With its massive bow anti-radiation and anti-meteorite shield, this MSS KOSTROMA would deserve to be called a battleship, sir. Here are the official specifications of the KOSTROMA, as it left its last refit eight months ago."

Grabbing the electronic tablet offered by Tomassi, Ming read with intense interest the specifications and performances of the KOSTROMA. He couldn't help be impressed by his reading.

"You are right, Commander. This ship would deserve the title of 'battleship'. They must have rerouted the beams from their fusion startup laser batteries to outside optical directors. It would be an ingenious but still rather simple method to create a very powerful laser armament capability. It however doesn't apparently have any installation or magazine space that could have been turned into missile batteries. Our data on the convoy battle also makes no mention of enemy missile fire. Maybe this KOSTROMA has only laser armament?"

"Uh, I wouldn't bet my life on that, sir. It would be better to assume the worst right now. Besides, there are plenty of missiles in our ammunition ships that they could use."

"True! Let's see about its captain: he has proved up to now to be way too crafty to my taste."

Jumping to the crew list of the KOSTROMA, Ming was left staring with disbelief at a picture of Tina Forster for long seconds.

"A girl of 28 years of age? She could be my daughter, damn it! Very well, Commander. Transmit this intelligence to TCN headquarters on Earth, with top priority for transmission. This could be vital information for Grand Admiral Wa."

"Right away, sir."

Less than ten minutes later, as Ming had just finished informing Governor Vandong about the convoy disaster and the fruitless counter-attack, his communications officer ran to him, a shocked air on his face.

"Sir, there is something that you need to see immediately: the enemy is right now broadcasting to the whole Solar System, directly from the surface of Mars!"

"WHAT? SHOW ME!"

The officer used a nearby communications station and tuned it to the main public information channel of the planet, making the image of a man with grey-black hair appear. Ming recognized him at once, shouting in surprise.

"Governor Watts, here on Mars?"

He then listened on carefully as Watts spoke firmly in his microphone while facing a camera in a small recording studio, standing behind a lectern bearing the blazon of Mars.

"...has started its fight to regain freedom from the tyranny of Earth. Spacers League forces now control the orbit of Mars, after having inflicted stinging losses to the Terran Navy. For anyone who would doubt my words about that, here are selected recordings taken after the three battles lost up to now in orbit by the Terrans."

To Ming's fury, the broadcast then showed film footage of the debris of the four frigates of Barbanzon's picket force, plus debris from the convoy escort ships and troopships, with the camera zooming on ship's bow markings to identify the vanquished ships. The view then returned to Watts behind his lectern.

"To the Terran personnel still on Mars, I urge you to surrender in order to avoid unnecessary casualties. You are now isolated and cut from your supply route from Earth and are overmatched in terms of both firepower and numbers. If you surrender now, you will be treated well, unless you participated in one of the multitude of war crimes committed against Martian civilians, mostly by ISF troopers. If you continue to oppress the Martian people, though, then you can expect no mercy on our part. To the Terran Federation Council and to Grand Administrator Li, the true artisans of this totally unneeded war, I say this: enter now armistice talks with the Spacers League and stop this obscene waste of lives. If you don't, then the Spacers League will have no choice but to declare a space embargo on all space goods and resources normally sent to Earth. This will mean no more hydrocarbons, chemical or metals, no surplus food from us Spacers, no new ships and no cryogenic fuel for Earth. Your industries will grind to a

halt, your workers will find themselves out of a job and you will run out of many things you take for granted right now. All that to satisfy the monstrous egos of Grand Administrator Li and of his corrupt council. This peace offer will be made only once, now. Earth will have to understand that the current status quo on Earth, with continued uncontrolled population growth and irresponsible pilfering of irreplaceable natural resources, cannot go on. The people of Earth will have to wake up to reality, deal responsibly with the multiples problems of the planet and, especially, to stop following blindly politicians serving it empty promises and unrealistic dreams. We of the Spacers League only wish to live in peace and to be respected as equal partners rather than continue to be exploited as if we are only bottomless resource pits for the sole benefit of Earth. We did not wish this war, but now that the Terran Federation Council has forced it on us, we will not relent until we win our rights to freedom and independence. In the name of the Spacers League, this is Governor Charles Watts, speaking from Mars.”

Ming then realized that a heavy silence had fallen in the operations center and, looking around, saw that all his personnel was now looking at him, obviously hoping for some sort of directive from him. Right now, he was tempted to listen to his heart and to surrender to the enemy, in order to stop his men and women from dying needlessly. He knew however that Grand Admiral Wa and Grand Administrator Li would never pardon him for that. It thus came down to the good of his personnel versus his own professional survival. Something then snapped inside him and he rose slowly from his chair before speaking up to his personnel.

“Everybody will continue to man his or her station. I will be calling Governor Vandong in the meantime.”

Going to his private office, Ming hesitated one last time as he was about to call Vandong on his videophone. He finally decided to call first his wife, who lived like many TCN personnel family members in Ares City.

“Ziyi, it’s me. Did you watch Governor Watts’ address?... You did? Good! Then you can realize what kind of dilemma I am facing now... Yes, I fully realize that, Ziyi. However, I am more worried about the immediate repercussions for you and the kids. I have no confidence in Governor Vandong and certainly none in Colonel Da Silva. Those two are brainless bastards and are capable of anything. What I want you to do now is to quickly collect a suitcase worth of spare clothes, our valuables and as much cash as you can withdraw from the bank and to then disappear somewhere in town with the kids...”

That's right, you heard me well: I want you to disappear with the kids until further notice... Ziyi, I perfectly realize what I am risking personally, but I have to think about more than just myself right now. We have just lost over 30,000 men and women today and I have no wish to see more of them die, so do as I say and go! Don't waste time either: the ISF may react quickly and try to arrest you as well as me. Please, go, now! Whatever happens, know that I love you."

His heart heavy, Ming then closed the video link and waited ten minutes before doing his next call, to Commander Tomassi in the operations center.

"Commander, this is Admiral Ming. You will broadcast the following order to all the TCN personnel in and around Mars under my command: they are to surrender to the Spacers League at the first occasion and to stop immediately any hostile actions against Spacers. Make sure that those Spacer ships also get that broadcast. Then, tell all our headquarters personnel to go to their families and pack for eventual departure. Advise them to expect possible hostile reactions from ISF troopers and to make sure they have their personal weapons with them. Then leave the headquarters as well."

"But...and you, sir?"

"I will take care of myself, Commander. Now, execute my orders and then go."

"Yes sir! It was a privilege to serve under you, sir."

Tomassi then terminated the link. Shortly thereafter, Ming heard him pass his directives by loudspeaker across the building. Ming waited another ten minutes, as he could hear people running around the corridors of the headquarters, before doing another call, this time to Vandong. By now he had time to think about his personal options and had made a number of resolutions. His tone with Vandong was far from the one that he had used with his wife.

"Governor Vandong, this is Vice-Admiral Ming. I am calling to announce to you that I decided to accept to surrender the TCN forces and personnel on Mars to the Spacers League, in order to avoid further useless bloodshed. I would strongly urge you to consider the same option, sir."

"WHAT? HAVE YOU GONE MAD? YOU CAN'T SURRENDER LIKE THIS! IT WOULD BE TREASON!"

"No, sir: it is simply common sense. We already lost over 30,000 people today and I am not going to sacrifice another 2,000 people in a futile fight that is lost in advance. We have no more ships to fight with and the enemy is about to get their hands

on a stockpile of more than 900 heavy ship missiles, with which it could bombard at will our base here in Ares City, or blow to bits any relief fleet.”

“You coward! We just need to wait for more reinforcements from Earth and those Spacers will be then done for. You can’t give up this quickly, Admiral.”

“Governor, you better get out of your world of dreams, and quickly! As for my decision, it has been taken and I will abide by it. Feel free to do a last heroic stand of your own when the Spacers will come for you. Goodbye, Governor Vandong!”

Ming then closed the link and sat down, now feeling somewhat better. Taking out his personal sidearm, he made sure that a bullet was chambered and that its magazine was full, then put it back in its holster. Getting up, he did a last visit to the bathroom attached to his office, then waited patiently, his pistol in one hand, while contemplating the landscape of Mars through the thick armorglass panes of his office.

Ming had to wait about twenty minutes before the noise of booted feet in the corridor alerted him. He turned around to face the door and put his hands in his back before taking a deep breath. Thirty seconds later, his door was brutally kicked open and Lieutenant Colonel Da Silva walked inside with two ISF troopers brandishing automatic rifles. Da Silva was in combat attire himself and had his pistol in his hand as he eyed Ming with contempt.

“There you are, you coward! You are under arr...”

He never had the chance to finish his sentence before Ming suddenly raised his pistol and fired on full automatic fire mode, spraying Da Silva from belly to forehead and killing him nearly instantly. In turn, Ming was gunned down at once by the two ISF troopers and killed, leaving blood splattered on the armorglass as his body slid down to the carpet.

### **13:49 (Universal Time)**

#### **Avalon Spaceport Orbital Terminal**

##### **Low Earth Orbit**

Gustav Shomberg looked for a moment through the armorglass viewing ports of the Avalon Spaceport Orbital Terminal’ observation deck, examining with expert eyes the blunt arrowpoint-shaped ship he intended to board with his private secretary, Agneta Friedenhalter. He had designed the MSS FOR HIRE sixteen years ago and it had

proved to be a very successful design indeed, being then copied in good numbers. Built to carry hundreds of cargo containers across interplanetary space, it had the very useful capability to be able to enter planetary atmospheres and land vertically, including on Earth, thus delivering its cargo directly to its final destination, thanks to its huge gravity sail surfaces. It was nowhere as massive as the MSS KOSTROMA, having an empty mass of less than 100,000 tons, and it was not the fastest ship around but its versatility had made it a very profitable design, well liked by its crews and owners. The MSS FOR HIRE also had the additional benefit of having a captain who Gustav Shomberg knew well and trusted completely.

“Let’s go, Agneta. We should hurry before someone at the ISF or TCN wakes up and sends goons after us.”

“You really think that they will come for us, Gustav?” Asked the beautiful blonde in her thirties standing at his right side. Shomberg looked at his fateful private secretary and secret lover with a fatalistic expression.

“Would you prefer to wait for them to have an answer to that, Agneta? Believe me, if they would not find me, then they would look for you, to make you tell them where I am.”

The blonde, who was a lot more intelligent than some would judge just from her good looks and sexy curves, lowered her head, understanding full well what he meant.

“It is sad to see that things have come down to this for Humanity, Gustav, but I understand your stand and support you. Let’s go see your friend of yours.”

Towing the anti-gravity platform supporting their luggage, the couple walked down the observation deck and took an elevator that carried them to the gate entrance leading to the boarding airlock of the MSS FOR HIRE. To Shomberg’s relief, there was no customs officer or ISF trooper at the gate, only a boarding agent of the American Shipping Lines, which owned the cargo ship. He thus approached the agent with Agneta with apparent calm and assurance, stopping in front of the young man’s counter and smiling to him.

“Good afternoon, sir. Me and my secretary would like to purchase passage on the FOR HIRE to Juno asteroid. Could I first call Captain Erikson to tell him I am here: he is a good friend of mine.”

“Certainly, sir!” Said amiably the young agent, pointing the videophone set on his counter. “Use Line Three to call the FOR HIRE, sir.”

"Thank you!"

Letting the young agent admire discreetly his secretary, the ship designer quickly got connected with Captain Harold 'Red' Erikson, a bear of a man with red hair cut short.

"Harold! This is Gustav!"

Erikson smiled widely on recognizing Shomberg on his own video terminal.

"Gustav, my friend! And I can see your delectable secretary behind you. What can I do for you today?"

"Oh, not much, really. I am simply here to get passage to Juno for a little private vacation. Stress at work is getting too high to my taste and I need to change my mind a bit."

Shomberg did a discreet sign at the same time on the video pickup, a sign that Erikson caught and understood.

"Uh, just let me check if I have a V.I.P. cabin still available for you, my friend."

Erikson then looked at another display screen and punched a number of buttons, then waited. Shomberg saw his face harden a bit after a few seconds, before he looked back at him.

"Could you pass me the boarding agent at the gate, Gustav?"

"Sure, Harold!" Said Shomberg before turning the videophone unit towards the agent. "Captain Erikson wishes to speak to you, sir."

Shomberg hid his sudden attack of anxiety as the agent spoke to Erikson: from the reaction of the captain, something was clearly amiss. Unfortunately, Shomberg may have been a genius at ship design but he knew nothing about counterfeiting identity documents and still carried papers in his actual name. He saw the agent hesitate a moment when Erickson asked him to let him and Agneta board without registering, playing on his prerogatives as a ship captain and providing the agent with fake names for Gustav and Agneta. The young man finally relented and smiled to Shomberg.

"You may proceed and board the ship, sir. Have a good trip to Juno."

"Thank you, young man. Let's go, Agneta."

Forcing himself not to speed up his walk, Gustav went down the boarding tube with his secretary and their luggage platform and was greeted at the ship's airlock by a female crewmember that had just finished talking with someone on her greeting counter's videophone terminal. The young brunette saluted politely Shomberg and his secretary once he was inside.

"I have orders for my captain to escort you to your cabin, sir. We will be departing very soon."

This said, the brunette pushed a button, closing the thick airtight blast doors of the airlock before leading the couple down a long passageway, then up two levels by elevator, finally stopping in front of a cabin's door, which she opened for Shomberg.

"Your cabin, sir. The captain is on his way to see you."

"Thank you again, miss. You were most helpful."

Gustav and Agneta then entered the cabin with their platform and closed the door behind them. Only then did Shomberg let out a sigh of relief.

"I think that we did the good thing by fleeing this fast, Agneta. I believe that they are already looking for us."

He then told Agneta about Erikson's reaction on the videophone. Before she could comment on it, someone knocked loudly on the door of their cabin.

"That must be Harold, the captain: he never learned to buzz instead of pounding doors down."

Shomberg then opened the door, letting in the hulking red-haired captain, who eyed him critically at once.

"Alright, Gustav, what have you done to get yourself on the TCN wanted list? You realize what I am risking by sheltering you like this?"

"I do, Harold. To answer you, my crime has been to direct the refit of the cargo ship KOSTROMA eight months ago. The TCN probably wants to question me, not too gently, about that refit."

Erikson frowned for a moment, trying to understand.

"That's it? Nothing else? No secret smuggling compartments on that KOSTROMA?"

"Well, did you see the declaration made from Mars by Governor Watts less than an hour ago, about the defeats suffered in orbit by the TCN at the hands of the Spacers League?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Harold, I believe that the KOSTROMA destroyed those Terran ships. Officially, its refit did not involve the installation of any armament, but I told its captain how to get around that. I suppose that I could be accused of treason for that."

For a moment, Shomberg worried that his friend would drop him, but Erikson finally made a forced smile, still none too pleased.

“The things we have to do for friends. Like they say: a friend in need is a friend indeed. Alright, you may have just convinced me to do something I should have done days ago: defect to the Spacers League. I may be officially a Terran, but I have lived more than half of my life in space and I consider myself a Spacer. Besides, I was getting tired of all those insults and cold looks from these ignoramus on Earth. So, where do you really wish to go, you and your most lovely secretary?”

“Any Spacers League-controlled world will do.” Replied soberly the ship designer. “The further from Earth the better.”

## **CHAPTER 8 – BATTLE FOR MARS**

**09:24 (Shanghai Time)**

**Saturday, December 18, 2315**

**Grand Council chambers, government complex**

**Shanghai, China**

**Earth**



“...while our ISF battalion in Ares City has not been seriously challenged yet by Spacers, it does not have the manpower to extend itself to other Martian cities. The two divisions we lost yesterday in orbit to that KOSTROMA were meant to allow us to complete our occupation of the planet. Unfortunately, we are now back to square one.” As Field Marshal Reyat Khan finished speaking, all eyes switched to Grand Admiral Ming Wa, sitting besides Khan.

“So, what is your next move, Admiral Wa?” Asked Grand Administrator Li, not satisfied at all up to now with what he had heard. “Since the ISF can’t send more troops to Mars without the support of the TCN, we now all depend on you and the Navy...or can we?”

The underhanded criticism from Li infuriated Wa, a proud man with over thirty years of service, but he did his best to keep his tone neutral as he responded to Li.

“Sir, with all due respect, you are forgetting that the TCN is not and never has been a true combat fleet. It was formed over a century ago as a customs enforcement agency with a mandate and equipment list limited to the enforcement of space regulations and to fighting space contraband and piracy. The most powerful of our cruisers is still way outclassed in terms of firepower by that KOSTROMA, a lesson that was driven home yesterday at a dreadful cost to us.”

“But that KOSTROMA is only an armed merchant ship, and it is alone, dammit!” Objected the minister for commerce. Wa gave him a jaundiced look.

“Mister Sardakian, let me just give you a few simple numbers about that armed merchant ship. It has a total installed power of 25 gigawatts, compared to three gigawatts on our biggest cruiser. Its bow shield is made of two meter-thick ceramic-carbon composite, compared to forty centimeters on our cruisers and twenty centimeters

on our frigates. When empty of cargo, the KOSTROMA can boost away at accelerations of over ten Gs, more than our fastest frigate. You will probably ask why it is so powerful, but the answer is quite simple: it was made to haul over twenty million tons of cargo over long distances across the Solar System. Such a powerful cargo ship, with its sturdy construction and its long range, was a perfect candidate for conversion into what can only be called now a battleship. As for being alone, do you really believe that the Spacers are not rushing right now to convert more merchant ships, which they own in abundance, into warships? Should I remind you that most of our resources in metals, chemicals and cryogenic fuel came from Spacer worlds, resources that have now dried up? Even if we wanted to build up a real battle fleet, I doubt that what we have presently in reserve on Earth would be enough to supply our shipyards."

"This is nonsense!" Exploded the governor of Africa. "Are you telling us that less than 350 million Spacers can outfight eight billion Terrans?"

"And who are you thinking of sending up to fight the Spacers, Governor Zembelo? A bunch of illiterate farmers or social welfare recipients? And in what ships?"

"Why not requisition merchant ships presently in Earth orbit and then arm them?" Proposed the minister of industries. Admiral Wa nodded his head, finding that at least a practical idea.

"We could do that, Minister Titov. Unfortunately, our choice of ships presently available in orbit is severely limited."

"Oh, why?"

"First off, the large majority of interplanetary ships that presently exist are registered on Spacer-controlled worlds and have fled Earth orbit during the first days of this crisis. Of the rest, more than half of the ships registered on Earth have defected, most of them after the news of our defeat around Mars."

"The families of those traitors should be rounded up and interned." Growled Field Marshal Khan then, attracting a look of both contempt and revulsion from Wa.

"And you would do what with them then? Torture them? Execute them? What possible good would that do to us, apart from hardening the resolve of the Spacers? Besides, most Spacer families reside on their ships, not on the ground."

The big ISF commander glared at him, seemingly ready to jump on him.

"You speak like a weakling, presenting only excuses. Your people on Mars disgraced themselves when they surrendered to the Spacers yesterday. Are you also ready to surrender, Admiral?"

"GENTLEMEN, PLEASE!" Shouted John Li while slapping his hand down on the conference table. "We are not going to surrender, ever! However, we also have to face reality and take account of our limitations while formulating our plans. Minister Titov's idea of arming merchant ships in Earth orbit is an excellent one, but it will take weeks and months to do that. Admiral Wa, how long was that KOSTROMA in refit?"

"Over seven months, sir, and the work was centered mostly on its propulsion system. Modifying its lasers, even in secret, must have taken only a small fraction of that time. We could do the same to ships in orbit in a few weeks at most, on top of adding missile pods to them to complete their armament. The trouble is that training crews for war takes a lot longer than that. I hate to say so, but I wouldn't have much confidence in merchant crews pressed hurriedly into military service."

"And what about the crew of that KOSTROMA then?" Asked the governor of Europe, an Italian woman. "What has made these men and women so effective up to now, since they probably never got any military training?"

Admiral Wa thought over his answer carefully, dipping into his knowledge of history.

"The best example of a past analogy to our present situation would be the old War of American Independence, fought in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century between Great Britain and what was then its North American colonies, Madam Rossi. It started when the American colonists complained about not having a say in how the taxes collected from them by the British were used. Their rallying cry was 'no taxes without representation'. At the time, the British had the most powerful navy of the time and a tough, disciplined army and also held a huge empire, while the American colonists were poorly armed and had next to no military training. Despite of these handicaps, however, the American colonists fought on for years, sustaining many defeats, but eventually won through sheer resilience and strength of spirit. They did so mostly by using their knowledge of their land and by adapting their tactics to it, fighting a guerrilla war against the British, who were accustomed to regulated, set-piece battles. In this case, you could compare the Spacers to the American colonists. They fight in an environment they know well, space, but they also have the advantage of having a bigger navy than us. Most of all, they believe in their cause, and that is a factor we should not ignore."

"My soldiers believe in what they do, and they will cut to pieces these Spacers, once your navy finally brings them to the battlefield." Grumbled Marshal Khan, getting a dirty look from Wa.

"The only thing your troopers have been good at up to now has been in beating and killing unarmed civilians, Marshal Khan. They have in the process reinforced the resentment of the Spacers towards Earth, as well as their will to fight. Furthermore, this war will be won in Space, and not on the ground."

"You are right, Admiral Wa," cut in John Li, "but that is why we have to win now in space, before the Spacers could arm more merchant ships like that KOSTROMA and before Earth is strangled by a lack of mineral resources. We need to secure at least part of those space resources and we need to do it now! So, what are you going to do to achieve that, Admiral?"

Wa then knew that he could not tip toe any longer, or Li would not hesitate to replace him at the head of the TCN.

"Grand Administrator, we have up to now thrown our ships around in penny packets, mostly due to the multitude of tasks given to my navy. We need to concentrate our efforts in one significant push against a worthy objective. Right now, that objective must be Mars: it has many of the resources we need and it is the nearest to Earth. I thus intend to strike it with most of my fleet, or what is left of it. No troopships, just warships, so that we have a chance to overwhelm the Spacer ships defending Mars. I would also like to strike in more than one place at the same time around Mars. That way, if the KOSTROMA is really the only major ship the Spacers have around Mars, then we will be able to bypass it and, possibly, catch it in a pincer."

"Sounds like a good plan, Admiral. When could you launch such an attack against Mars?"

"My fleet could depart Earth orbit tomorrow evening, after fuelling up and filling its magazines. Give it five days more to get to Mars. Thus, we could start the battle for Mars around Friday evening, sir."

"Make it so, Admiral!" Replied at once Li in a firm tone.

**14:16 (Universal Time)**

**Wednesday, December 22, 2315**

**Downtown district of Ares City**

**Mars**

"THIRD SQUAD, GO, GO, GO!"

Michel Koniev, preaching by example, sprung out from his temporary cover and led his squad into a mad dash across the street and towards the main entrance of the government building, while two other squads laid down a hail of automatic fire to force the ISF troopers inside the building to keep their heads down. A couple of ISF troopers still managed to take a few pot shots and a young Martian policeman to the left of Koniev abruptly stopped running and rolled to the ground, dead, while a few bullets whistled past the ears of the Hygiean security officer. He and seven members of his squad made it to the relative safety of the entrance, hugging the walls on each side of the glass doors. Michel took a chance and stuck his head out for a second, time for a quick look inside the lobby through the shattered glass doors. He had time to see three ISF troopers hiding partially behind the reception desk and one column before he had to hurriedly jerk back his head, in time to avoid a burst of five bullets that dug furrows in the concrete of the entrance arch. Taking a grenade out of one pocket, he pulled the safety pin but held the arming lever, then made a sign to the Martian on the other side of the arch. The man nodded his understanding and readied his automatic rifle. On Michel's signal, he stepped quickly from behind the entrance corner and started spraying the entrance lobby with a long automatic burst. One second before that, Michel had released the arming lever of his grenade, starting the burning of the five second fuse. He then threw his grenade inside, making it bounce and roll on the floor. It finally came to rest against the outer surface of the reception desk. The grenade, part of the stocks of ammunition captured with the cargo ships of the Terran convoy destroyed by the KOSTROMA, was made of Metalex and designed to explode without producing deadly fragments. Metalex, an explosive with the surface hardness of aluminum and the density of steel, was however much more powerful than old-style chemical explosives of the past and produced tremendous blast and overpressure. The explosion of Michel's grenade blew out the whole glass front of the entrance, projected the reception counter and the two ISF troopers hiding behind against the nearest wall and killed by overpressure the three troopers. Michel did not even wait for the glass fragments to land on the ground before rushing inside the lobby, his rifle at the ready and with his seven fighters close behind him. He dispersed quickly his squad around the lobby and started climbing the main staircase at once, not wanting the enemy to have time to react properly. Just in case, he threw a second grenade before emerging on the first floor and waited after its explosion to climb the last steps. He fired a short burst, killing an ISF trooper that had just emerged from a room giving on the façade, then ran down the

hallway towards that room. He now could hear a machine gun firing from that room. Borrowing a grenade from the woman following him, he primed it and let the fuse burn for three seconds before throwing it inside the room. The machine gun firing stopped with the grenade's explosion, allowing Michel to step inside, his rifle at the ready. He found inside five dead Terran troopers, along with a machine gun on its support tripod. Through the blown windows, Michel was happy to see the rest of his platoon rushing in to enter the building, now that the ISF fire against them had died down. Confident that his fighters were going to secure the government building, Michel went out of the room and continued securing the building, one room at a time.

He was finishing clearing the fourth floor when he glimpsed through a shattered window a group of four ISF troopers and one man in civilian clothes that had somehow managed to find a way out and were now running across the rear lawn, trying to get to a parked air car. Michel then gave a short order to the four fighters that were with him.

"SHOOT THE BASTARDS DOWN!"

The Martians didn't have to be told twice, their hatred of the ISF soldiers having recently being reinforced by what they had found in the now liberated city jail, where the ISF had been holding and interrogating their prisoners. A hail of automatic fire cut down the four soldiers and the civilian, with more bullets fired at those that still moved afterwards. For good measure, Michel sprayed the air car, in case that a driver had been waiting inside, then ran down to the ground level to go inspect the dead. A mean grin came to his face when he turned over the dead civilian and recognized his face. Activating his helmet microphone, he then said a few words intended for his tactical command post, where Governor Watts was monitoring the fighting.

"Flag One, this is Koniev: Interim Governor Nguyen Vandong is now dead. Pass the word around, out."

ISF resistance, already shaky, soon crumbled, with the surviving ISF troopers retreating to their last stronghold on Mars: their underground base just outside of the limits of Ares City. That was however their death warrant, as the KOSTROMA then fired for the first time some of its heavy missiles to bombard the base, adding laser fire to them. With its sections systematically blown open to the rarified, unbreathable Martian atmosphere, the base became the tomb of the last Terran troopers. By the end of the day, Mars was back in the hands of its citizens and of Charles Watts, but the price paid

for that was steep. Of all forms of combat, urban warfare always has been the most costly in terms of lives and of expenditures in ammunition. Charles Watts and Michel Koniev couldn't care less about the ammunition expenditure, still having ample stocks taken from the ISF, but victory had cost them the lives of 184 Spacer fighters and had wounded another 209 men and women, including 35 Hygieans and two Jovians killed or wounded. Added to that was a total of 462 Martian citizens found murdered by the ISF while in captivity, with another 53 citizens freed in deplorable shape. The word of those Terran atrocities quickly went around the planet, then was retransmitted around the whole Solar System in what became the first war news coverage of ground fighting in over a hundred years in the history of Humanity. The Martians however fully realized that the war was still far from over and prepared with grim determination to repel the inevitable reaction from Earth, with the KOSTROMA overhead to protect Mars from orbit. Then, word came from Jupiter during the night: help was on its way.

**21:33 (Universal Time)**

**Friday, December 24, 2315**

**Bridge of the Terran craft carrier TCNS SARATOGA**

**One million kilometers from Mars**

Grand Admiral Wa was studying the sparse telemetry data recorded and sent to Earth during the previous orbital battles around Mars when a bridge officer came to attention besides him.

"Admiral, a high-power radar has just painted us. It was a wave from one of the radars of the Mars orbital traffic control network."

Wa nodded in acknowledgement.

"So, the Martians undid their sabotage work...in time to catch us during our final approach. Any sign yet of enemy ships?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Very well. I do not intend to rush in head first without looking, only to have the enemy chop it off. Launch our reconnaissance fighters. Their priority task will be to find that damn KOSTROMA."

"Understood, sir." Said the officer before turning around and walking away to pass Wa's orders. The latter then resumed his study of the battle telemetry. In the last battle, the KOSTROMA had used the moon Phoebe as a giant shield and hiding place to

ambush the convoy of Commodore Bogdanovich. It could still do that again, but he expected better from Captain Forster, who had amply demonstrated by now her craftiness and cunning. She could also use the moon Deimos or any of the six large manned orbital installations around Mars as cover, or she could simply come straight at him and challenge him. Somehow, though, Wa didn't think that Forster would choose that last approach. She had up to now done her best to minimize the risks to her ship and crew. While some would call that cowardice, Wa called it sensible prudence, especially when considering that the KOSTROMA was a converted merchant ship, and not a true warship. Wa also cared about his crews, which was why he didn't want to risk his fleet without having conducted first a reconnaissance sweep by his embarked fighters.

Fourteen minutes later, four of the fighter craft carried by the SARATOGA left their hangar and, powering up their fusion drives, sped away towards Mars. Wa watched them go with mixed feelings. On one hand, they were his best tools to prevent an ambush against his fleet of 38 warships. On the other hand, finding the KOSTROMA would most probably mean quick destruction for them and the death of their crews. Wa wished that he could return to the peaceful days of simply enforcing custom regulations and dealing with space claim jumpers, but he was now stuck in a war that had to be fought to the finish. Another six minutes later, his sensors officer came to his command chair with a worried expression on his face.

"Yes, Commander Parawak?"

"Sir, our long range optical and infra-red detectors have detected the fusion flares of five ships coming from the Main Asteroid Belt and heading for Mars."

"Show me on the sensors sphere!" Replied Wa, suddenly feeling dread, as he got out of his chair. Following Parawak to the three meter sphere that fused all the data collected by the sensors of the SARATOGA, Wa examined the five red dots barely inside the sphere, along with the symbols marking their direction of flight and deceleration. Parawak called up a detailed analysis of the dots on a separate display situated at the base of the sphere.

"From the visual magnitude and spectroscopic signature of those flares, sir, we can say that these are very powerful fusion drives. In fact, they are in the multi-megaton thrust range. They are also decelerating at five Gs, indicating that these ships are probably at only a fraction of their designed maximum mass."

"Empty cargo ships, big ones." Said Wa with a sinking feeling, making the commander nod.

"Yes, sir. Since they do not appear to carry a significant cargo load, that means that they are coming to Mars to fight, sir. They would not do so if they were not armed as well."

"So, we now have five heavy converted merchant ships like the KOSTROMA heading to Mars and ready to fight us. If they have anything like even a fraction of the firepower of Forster's ship, you can figure out our chances against those battleships in a straight fight, Commander."

Parawak looked at Wa with understandable concern: the crew of the SARATOGA, as well as the crews of the twelve cruisers and 25 frigates of the fleet, was very aware of the power of the KOSTROMA, their expected opponent. Many had reviewed their last will before departure and Wa had heard as well that a few lower ranking crewmembers had mumbled about the futility of their mission. Morale among the fleet was thus not optimum and the news that five more enemy battleships were on their way to Mars would do nothing to improve it.

"How long before those five ships enter Mars orbit, Commander?"

"Approximately 22 hours, Admiral. They also could still alter their trajectory to end up behind us. If they do that, then we will be caught in a giant pincer between them and Mars...and the KOSTROMA."

"Very well. I want a complete analysis of those flares. Try to identify the precise ship class of these newcomers and find how much installed power they would have available for heavy laser batteries, plus of course their performances and specifications."

"Right away, sir!"

Thanks to modern high-power computers, that analysis took only minutes, but Wa didn't like at all what Parawak told him as he presented him a printout.

"Sir, we have identified the incoming ships. They all have empty masses above one million tons and have maximum loaded masses of more than ten million tons. In fact, we are going to face six of the ten biggest ships in the Solar System, sir."

Many heads around the bridge snapped around when Parawak said that. On his part, Wa felt acid burn his stomach.

"What about their installed power?"

"Assuming that they were not extensively refitted since our ship listing databank was last updated, the potential power of any laser battery they could have would be between 400 and 700 megawatts...for each ship. As for missile carrying capacity, they could carry thousands of missiles without even feeling the extra mass, sir. Their bow shields also have a minimum thickness of eighty centimeters of ceramic-carbon composites."

Wa massaged his right temple with one hand while closing his eyes for a moment: his fleet was going to be hopelessly outgunned against these behemoths.

"Thank you, Commander. Continue tracking those five ships and inform me the moment that our fighters will detect something. I will be in my day cabin in the meantime."

Wa kept a straight face while walking out of the bridge and into his day cabin, which was directly connected to the bridge. Once inside his cabin and with the door closed, he sat heavily in his work chair and slammed a furious fist on his desk while letting out a swear word in Mandarin Chinese. He was now heading with his fleet into a battle he could not possibly win once those five new enemy ships showed up. He however could not avoid or refuse combat without incurring the wrath of Grand Administrator Li. On the other hand, the lives of the more than 18,000 men and women of his fleet were in his hands. He could still fight, and probably lose, but turning tail now would very possibly mean the arrest of not only himself, but also retaliations against his crewmembers by the goons of the ISF. That left him only with bad options...and a steadily diminishing amount of time to decide what to do.

## **22:25 (Universal Time)**

### **Terran fighter craft GREMLIN**

#### **Approaching the moon Deimos**

"Ted, put our data link with the SARATOGA on continuous mode. If we find what I expect to find behind Deimos, we will have only seconds to give the alert to the fleet."

And before dying, thought Serena White, the pilot of the fighter craft. She was as scared as she had ever been as her craft rounded the irregular-shaped little moon, which measured sixteen kilometers along its biggest axis. Her three comrades were at least as scared as her but, like her, were not about to confess to that and kept watching their

instruments or the space outside their cockpit, looking for the dreaded KOSTROMA. Serena's heart suddenly sank when a growing portion of what had to be the bow shield of a huge ship started to become visible from just behind Deimos.

"I HAVE THE KOSTROMA IN SIGHT! IT IS HIDDEN RIGHT BEHIND DEIMOS."

Serena was about to push her fusion engine to maximum power, to get the hell out of here, when she received a radio message through the headset of her spacesuit.

"Terran fighter craft, this is the MSS KOSTROMA, of the Spacers League Forces. Turn around now and do not open fire and we will not fire on you, over."

With blood draining from her face, she exchanged an incredulous look with her copilot before answering the call.

"Did you say that you are not going to fire on us, KOSTROMA?"

"Correct, GREMLIN. We can now read your craft name via our optical fire control directors but will hold fire if you turn around immediately and do not fire."

"But...why?"

A video link then was added to the transmission, letting Serena and her three comrades look at a young woman wearing a spacesuit with its visor open and sitting in a command chair.

"This is Tina Forster, Captain of the KOSTROMA. The why is simple, GREMLIN: we do not wish to spill blood needlessly. The incoming battle is futile in my mind and would only result in the deaths of thousands of brave men and women, people with which I have no personal enmity. Tell your three other fighters to turn around as well. If they continue on, then I will withdraw my offer of a truce and will attack your fleet."

"A...a truce, KOSTROMA?"

"Correct, GREMLIN. Now, turn around at once, along with your three other craft, and tell your admiral that I want to speak to him. KOSTROMA out!"

"What the hell was that about?" Blurted Serena's weapons officer, making her shake her head as she turned her craft around.

"Don't care, Ryan! The only important thing is that we are not going to be vaporized. ALL CRAFT OF BLUE FOX FLIGHT, THIS IS GREMLIN: TURN AROUND IMMEDIATELY AND RETURN TO THE CARRIER."

On the SARATOGA, Wa was alerted within seconds and rushed out of his day cabin to go examine the sensors sphere with Commander Parawak and with the captain

of the SARATOGA, Captain Vernon Hall, and Captain Theresa Margolis, Wa's operations officer. He reviewed twice the retransmission of the conversation between the GREMLIN and the KOSTROMA, then passed a hand on his face.

"A truce? Who would have believed that?"

"I do!" Said Hall, somber. "This Captain Forster seems to be a sentimental at heart, even if she has proved to be gifted at space tactics."

Wa gave a cautious look at Hall: the captain of his flagship had insinuated a few times during the past days his doubts about the wisdom of the Federation Council's policies in its ways of dealing with Spacers. He had also been clearly critical of the conduct of ISF troopers towards Spacer civilians on Mars.

"So, you think that this girl is serious about an offer of a truce, Captain Hall?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Even if she is, sir," cut in Theresa Margolis, "we cannot possibly accept such a truce. We represent the interests of eight billion Terrans and cannot abandon our mission just to avoid casualties. We have to push on and destroy that KOSTROMA."

Wa, while he admired the keen intelligence and mastery of space tactics of his operations officer, also knew that she was an extremely ambitious woman with little feelings for others. As such she was quite unpopular in the fleet but she enjoyed strong political support and Wa could not deny her competence.

"You do realize the kind of casualties we will suffer in a fight against the KOSTROMA, Captain Margolis?"

"I do, sir." Said Margolis, unrepentant. "However, if we let time for those five other big Spacer ships to arrive and link up with the KOSTROMA, then our task will become impossible rather than just difficult."

Wa sighed with resignation: Margolis was right, like she often was.

"Very well. I will politely reject Forster's offer of a truce but I intend for us to fight clean in this battle. If we find Spacer survivors after the battle, we rescue them and treat them decently. Also, under no circumstances will we bombard cities, unless we have clear, pinpoint military targets. I want no repeats of the excesses the ISF committed on Mars. Is that clear, Captain Margolis?"

"Very clear, sir." Said the woman, coming to attention. "What about our attack plan against the KOSTROMA, sir?"

"As we expected, the KOSTROMA is using the cover and protection of a moon, this time Deimos, to await battle. It gives it very good protection against long range laser

fire and missile attacks, but it also gives us a chance to outflank it and take it in a multiple pincer. We will thus proceed with our initial plan of attack, with our central objective being the KOSTROMA, behind Deimos. Rear Admiral Fu Lao Thai will take charge of our deep penetration force, while we will lead the main charge against the KOSTROMA. Commodores Henley and Visaya will lead the flanking forces. Start deploying the fleet for battle while I contact the KOSTROMA.”

“Yes sir!” Responded in unison Hall and Margolis. Then letting his two senior subalterns, so unlike from each other, take care of the fleet deployment, Wa returned to his day cabin and asked for a radio link with the KOSTROMA on the general space distress frequency. At this distance, the time delay between sending and receiving would be a bit over three seconds, something still manageable for a conversation. He got a video link within a minute, ending up with the head of Tina Forster on his video display.

“Captain Forster, this is Grand Admiral Ming Wa, aboard the TCNS SARATOGA. First, let me thank you for having given a chance to live to my fighter crews. Your sense of humanity is appreciated and has been well noted. Be assured that, whatever happens next, my forces will conduct themselves honorably and according to the laws of war.”

“Thank you, Admiral Wa. I would however prefer that we avoid battle altogether. There is surely a better way than fighting to resolve our differences. As the old British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is always better to jaw jaw than to war war.”

Wa genuinely smiled on hearing that.

“An interesting historical quote, I must say. I will have to research it later. Did you learn your tactical cunning from history books, Captain Forster?”

“Partly, Admiral. Another old military quote says that, while professionals are predictable, the World is full of amateurs.”

Wa laughed at that.

“Meaning that I am the professional and you are the amateur, albeit a gifted one. Well, enough of pleasantries. While I appreciated your offer of a truce, I must regrettably refuse it, Captain Forster. My orders leave me no choice but to impose the will of the Federation Council on Mars and on the Spacers League. However, in return, I am asking for you to surrender to my fleet. Such a surrender would be quite honorable in view of the odds against you. You must have by now taken stock of the size of my fleet.

You may inflict heavy losses on my ships but, ultimately, your KOSTROMA will be overwhelmed...and destroyed.”

“And I must refuse, Admiral Wa. What I am defending is bigger than my KOSTROMA, or even Mars. We Spacers have declared our independence so that we could be free of the tyranny of your corrupt and short-sighted political leaders, and we are ready to die to defend that cause. Be assured that we will also fight cleanly, although I cannot promise you that I don’t have a few surprises for you. I must warn you as well, before you decide to attack, that Spacer reinforcements will soon make your efforts fruitless.”

“I am well aware of the approach of your five battleships, Captain Forster. They just decided me that I could wait no further before acting on my orders. I can only wish that you and most of your crew will be able to survive this battle. Goodbye, Captain Forster.”

“And goodbye to you, Admiral Wa.”

Wa then terminated the link and sighed, his heart heavy. He really would have wished to be able to avoid this.

### **23:51 (Universal Time)**

#### **Bridge of MSS KOSTROMA**

#### **Floating behind the moon Deimos**

“Their fighters are now within extreme laser range, Tina.”

Tina, her spacesuit visor now closed and sealed, sighed with regret as she looked at the waves of Terran ships and craft coming at her. Wa was concentrating his carrier and nine cruisers, plus two dozen fighters, in a massive frontal attack against Deimos and the KOSTROMA. His flanking attacks by a total of two cruisers and ten frigates, as well as his secondary attack, with one cruiser and fifteen frigates racing towards Mars itself, had not escaped her attention. In fact, with all the sensor systems in orbit around Mars sending their data to her and to Governor Watts command post in Ares City, she was aware with precision of every move made by the enemy. That still didn’t make her less bitter about this.

“Nine minutes before Christmas. What a lousy time to start a battle! Very well, Patricia: start firing! Pick up your targets in succession before they could come within missile range.”

"Aye, Captain!"

Patricia O'Neil, who had become the unofficial weapons officer of the KOSTROMA, then started firing single laser beams at a time via the sole fire control director not masked by the moon Deimos. Tina was holding the KOSTROMA just below the moon's terminator, thus hiding from the Terrans the majority of her ship's bulk from their fire. The targets being small and very distant, it took about a second of laser fire before the beam brushed against one of the 24 fighter craft rushing ahead of the line of cruisers. At 2.1 gigawatt of power, that beam was however powerful enough to burn through the hull of the craft in microseconds and cause catastrophic damage. With the warhead of one of the missiles carried by the fighter touched off by the laser beam, the craft exploded in a ball of flames. Picking off her targets systematically and helped by the main computer of the ship, Spirit, which refined her aim, Patricia took less than three minutes to destroy the whole advance screen of 24 fighters. By then, the line of charging cruisers were still well beyond missile range of the KOSTROMA. However, the cruisers were now themselves within lethal range of one of the surprises Tina had reserved for the Terrans. Glancing at the sensors data fusion sphere, she saw that both of the Terran flanking forces, as well as the secondary attack force, were about to cross inside the equatorial geosynchronous orbit of Mars, along which were positioned dozens of satellites of various kinds, including the powerful radar stations of the Mars space traffic control system.

"Continue firing with lasers at the lead cruiser, Patricia. Let's hold still with our missile fire until all the Terran ships are within lethal range. Frida, starts slow axial rotation of the ship."

"Aye, concentrating fire on the TCNS MOSKVA." Said Patricia, while Frida Skarsgard made the KOSTROMA slowly rotate around its longitudinal axis. That made its massive bow shield rotate as well, ensuring that any laser beam that hit it now could not delve on a single spot for more than a microsecond. In ships with light shields, that precaution would be next to useless, but against the two meter-thick shield of the KOSTROMA, the typical 150 megawatt laser beam from a Terran cruiser would normally take nearly a second to burn through and start to cause true damage. Against a rotating shield, that meant that a particular beam would wander continuously over the surface of the shield and simply dig furrows in it, without penetrating it.

The unfortunate MOSKVA had not yet opened fire with its own lasers when the KOSTROMA's beam hit its bow shield squarely. In a most ironic twist, the cuts to space programs ordered by the Federation Council months ago now played against the Terrans. The MOSKVA, like its sister ships, was already well over forty years old and had been due for an extensive refit to modernize its sensors suite and computers, on top of rebuilding its engines. However, that refit program, scheduled to be done by the Avalon Space Yards, had been cancelled and the MOSKVA still had the same old sensors and computers, now fully three generations behind in terms of top technology. Some of the new sensors and computers meant for the MOSKVA and its sister ships were now aboard the KOSTROMA, giving it a definite edge in sensors definition and accuracy. The 2.1 gigawatt laser beam burned through the bow shield of the cruiser in two tenths of a second and then dug its way along its central axis, piercing deck after deck. In a basic replay of what had happened to the cruiser of the unfortunate Commodore Bogdanovich, the MOSKVA was irretrievably damaged within seconds, with its central missile magazine hit and exploding after six seconds of firing. The internal explosion blew open nearly all the bulkheads of the ship before tearing the cruiser to pieces, killing all of its 430 crewmembers in the huge explosion.

As the catastrophic loss of the MOSKVA registered on the rest of the shaken Terran main force, Patricia O'Neil switched her fire to the nearby cruiser PARIS, shredding that cruiser to pieces in fifteen seconds of fire and leaving it dead in space, its radars, propulsion and main power offline. The cruiser MADRID was next in the KOSTROMA's collimator. By now, even if Admiral Wa realized that his own fire would lack accuracy at this range, the surviving Terran cruisers and the carrier SARATOGA started firing their own laser batteries. The large majority of their fire missed by hundreds of meters or hit the surface of Deimos, wasting their power on simple dirt and rocks. Only two laser beams hit the part of the KOSTROMA that was visible, and then were not even able to stay steady on target, the servos on their fire control optics lacking the precision needed at such long range. With the axial rotation of the KOSTROMA aggravating the Terrans problems, they thus caused nothing more than a series of shallow furrows in the tough ceramic-carbon composite of the shield. The MADRID then exploded, weakening the Terran laser fire against the KOSTROMA.

On the SARATOGA, Admiral Wa followed the action from his command chair, cringing at the beating his cruisers were taking. The KOSTROMA was however in an excellent tactical defensive position and had all the advantages...up to now. Wa saw that his flanking forces and Rear Admiral Thai's force were now past the equatorial geosynchronous orbit of Mars and were starting to get into the rear of the enemy battleship. A few more minutes and the KOSTROMA would find itself inside a three-pincer pocket, with a powerful Terran force heading towards the low orbits of Mars. Forster would soon have to decide either to withdraw in order to protect the low orbits of the planet and avoid encirclement, or stay in place and die fighting. A shout from Commander Parawak, at the sensors, came just as Wa lost a fourth cruiser, the SINGAPORE, cut into two huge pieces.

"SIR, THE KOSTROMA IS STARTING TO BACK OFF FROM DEIMOS WHILE STILL FIRING. IT IS PULLING AWAY ON GRAVITY SAILS AT AN ACCELERATION OF 3 Gs."

Wa was impressed by that piece of data: three Gs on gravity sails alone, while backing off? The important thing, though, was that the enemy was withdrawing, as he had hoped for.

"Continue the charge and our laser fire! Do not let any respite to the KOSTROMA while our flanking forces are progressing."

"Aye, sir!"

The cruisers assault force was well within the equatorial geosynchronous orbit of Mars and within 5,000 kilometers from Deimos, close enough to shoot missiles at the moon but not from the still retreating KOSTROMA, when Commander Parawak shouted again to Wa, near panic in his voice.

"WE HAVE MASSIVE MISSILE FIRING AGAINST OUR SHIPS FROM MULTIPLE POINTS, SIR."

"WHAT? FROM WHERE EXACTLY? HOW MANY MISSILES?"

"FROM VARIOUS SATELLITES IN GEOSYNCHRONOUS ORBIT AND FROM THE SURFACE OF DEIMOS, SIR. I COUNT OVER 200 MISSILES ON THE WAY."

"DAMN! SWITCH ALL LASER FIRE TO DEFENSIVE COUNTER-MISSILE FIRE, AUTOMATIC CONTROL, NOW! FORGET THE KOSTROMA FOR THE MOMENT."

Wa swore mentally as he understood what Forster had done: she had used all those captured missiles from the ISF convoy, missiles preloaded in launch boxes made to fit on Terran fighters and frigates, and positioned them on unmanned satellites. Those satellites had the advantage for Forster of being already equipped with sophisticated sensors because of their original purposes. Forster then had only to monitor the advance of his ships and then send remote command signals to trigger the firing of selected missile batteries. His cruiser assault force had already suffered heavily, with seven of his nine cruisers now either destroyed or dead in space, reduced to impotent hulks. His own SARATOGA had now been the target of the KOSTROMA for a very long minute, with grievous damage and casualties increasing steadily, and now he had to deal with about eighty missiles rushing towards his three ship-formation, if he could judge from his view of the sensors data fusion sphere. His flanking forces and his deep attack force were also under missile fire, trapped in pockets of expertly chosen killing zones between the equatorial geosynchronous orbit and the high altitude orbits of Mars. Wa felt his stomach turn acid as he watched the waves of missiles raining down on his ships, which were now desperately firing their laser batteries at the approaching tiny, speedy points. The cruiser CAPETOWN was first to be hit by at least two missiles, followed closely by the SARATOGA and then the BANGKOK. Out of eighty missiles fired at the main cruiser force, 64 were either destroyed by laser fire or missed, a very creditable performance by the Terran defenders of the cruisers. That however still left sixteen missiles to slam in the three ships and explode inside their hulls. The SARATOGA, being much bigger and bulkier than its two escort cruisers, attracted the worse of it, absorbing seven of the missiles, while the CAPETOWN took five hits and the BANGKOK four hits. Alarms rang inside the carrier and lights flickered while it shook from the hits, with main power failing after the sixth hit. Wa, sealed inside his spacesuit and still strapped to his command chair, could see thick black smoke starting to spew out of the air vents of the bridge. That smoke, coming from burning electrical cables, was toxic and would asphyxiate any crewmember whose spacesuit was not already sealed. That point suddenly became academic, as a geyser of sparks exploded from the ceiling of the bridge, with another geyser of sparks from the deck floor opposite it. Luckily, the laser beam from the KOSTROMA did not cut across the bridge, rather moving towards the outer hull. That still left the bridge open to space vacuum, with a hurricane sweeping through the compartment and sucking out anything not firmly fixed in place. A number of unfortunate crewmembers, including Captain Margolis, disappeared

through the jagged holes, dismembered or ripped apart before ending in space, their spacesuits shred to pieces and not protecting them anymore. Wa gripped the armrests of his command chair with desperate strength to resist the storm, all the while powerless as he watched his men and women die around him. After about ten seconds the storm calmed down, leaving the shattered bridge in a dark vacuum. Only emergency power was on, coming from local batteries in the nearby damage control compartment. With no way to direct or even observe the continuing battle from the bridge, Wa was now useless. Captain Hall then shouted orders on the radio, asking for damage and casualty reports. The answers he got in the next minutes were grim: the SARATOGA was out of the fight for good and could not even propel itself in space, now being little more than a floating hulk. Nearly half of the crew was either dead or missing, not responding to calls to their compartments, and all life support systems were offline. After listening for nine minutes to this, Wa took a painful decision and activated his helmet microphone, speaking in as calm a tone as he could.

“Captain Hall, the ship is as good as dead. No sense in risking more lives in futile damage repair efforts.”

Hall looked at him for a moment, obviously hating to take the decision that this left him, then nodded slowly.

“Understood, Admiral.”

Hall then switched to ship-wide call and gave firmly an order.

“ABANDON SHIP! I SAY AGAIN, ABANDON SHIP! ALL CREWMEMBERS TO THE LIFE PODS!”

On the bridge of the KOSTROMA, Tina had directed the fighting of her ship and the remote-controlled firing of her prepositioned missile batteries with an apparent impassive expression. In reality, each symbol on the sensors sphere that denoted a ship hit or destroyed added to her emotional distress. The voice of Patricia O’Neil then got her attention.

“Tina, the main cruiser force can now be considered eliminated. I’m receiving life pod distress beacon signals from around all the cruisers and the carrier, with none firing anymore.”

“Good! What about the other enemy forces?”

“The port side flanking force is now down to one cruiser and two frigates, while the starboard side flanking force is left with two frigates. The deep strike force is

however still relatively intact, having lost only four of its fifteen frigates and being still led by one cruiser. That deep strike force is still pushing towards Mars lower orbits.”

“Will it pass close enough to Phobos to come within range of its missile batteries?”

Patricia took a few seconds to check that before answering.

“Affirmative! They will be in missile range of Phobos in about 26 minutes.”

“Then let’s hurry there, to block their path from behind Phobos. Frida, go to maximum power on gravity sails! Get us as quickly as possible in an orbit 2,000 kilometers below Phobos. Patricia, if you get chances at laser long range shots on that deep strike force while we are moving, take them!”

“Got it, Tina! What about the flanking forces?”

Tina thought for a moment before answering the redhead.

“I will call them in the meantime. Our main worry now is that deep strike force. If it can get to low orbit, it could then seize Mars’ main orbital installations.”

Tina then switched to the frequency the Terrans had been using up to now.

“To all surviving Terran ships still heading towards Mars, this is the Spacers League ship KOSTROMA. Be advised that we will not fire further on you if you turn around now and go retrieve the life pods containing the survivors of your cruiser force before leaving the Mars System. I say again...”

She repeated three times her call, not receiving answers or acknowledgement. Anwar Duharto, monitoring the communications and electronic intercept suite, then spoke.

“Captain, I am detecting an exchange of encrypted radio traffic between the three surviving enemy forces. I can’t break the encryption, though.”

“Hum, they probably are deciding what to do now. Let’s hope that they lost their appetite for battle by now.”

Tina’s pious wish did not come to pass, however. Three minutes later, the surviving ships of the flanking forces turned around and powered their fusion drives to return towards the remains of their main force, but the deep strike force kept going towards Mars. Tina clenched her teeth, mentally swearing at the stubbornness and stupidity of that enemy commander.

“What the hell is that imbecile hoping to accomplish against us with one cruiser and eleven frigates, while we are still essentially intact and with five more big ships on the way?”

"Maybe he is hoping to be able to blackmail us by pointing his missiles at Martian cities?" Suggested Frida Skarsgard from her pilot's seat. Tina's face hardened at that.

"If he really tries that, then there will be no pity for him. Are we going to be able to get ahead of him before he gets to Phobos?"

"By the skin of our teeth, Tina. We always could go to fusion drive at maximum, but then we would have to endure a felt gravity of three Gs inside the ship, despite our gravity controls. If our gravity controls fail, then we will end up crushed to the deck."

"Then let's do it! TO ALL CREWMEMBERS, PREPARE IMMEDIATELY FOR A LONG, SUSTAINED BOOST WITH A FELT THREE Gs OF GRAVITY. YOU HAVE TWO MINUTES TO GET SAFELY INTO PADDED SEATS, OR BEDS FOR THOSE NOT AT ESSENTIAL BATTLE STATIONS."

After waiting for the two minute delay to pass, Tina braced herself in her command chair, then looked at Frida Skarsgard.

"Go to maximum power as soon as I give the last warning, Frida. TO ALL CREWMEMBERS, WE ARE NOW GOING TO MAXIMUM BOOST. IF YOU ARE NOT IN A SAFE POSITION YET, LAY DOWN ON THE DECK AND HOPE FOR THE BEST. Light it up, Frida!"

With the pilot pushing her fusion drive settings to the maximum, Tina and the others on the bridge were pushed deep in their padded seats, suddenly feeling three times their normal weight. They had to breathe in quick, shallow breaths, while their arms felt like they weighed a ton. The 27 million tons of thrust came out of the plasma exhaust chambers in blinding flares of lights tens of kilometers long, visible from the surface of Mars.

On the bridge of the Terran cruiser KOLKATA, Rear Admiral Fu Lao Thai, who already had his ships at their maximum acceleration rate of five Gs, snapped his head around in disbelief when one of his sensors operator announced that the KOSTROMA was burning a path towards them at eleven Gs.

"ELEVEN Gs? BUT THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE! THE KOSTROMA IS A CARGO SHIP, NOT A TRUE WARSHIP."

"I'm sorry, sir, but that's what our sensors say. It will be able to block our path to Mars before we could get past the orbit of Phobos, sir."

"Should we change course and evade, sir?" Asked the captain of the KOLKATA, strapped in his chair near the one of Fu Lao Thai. The latter shook his head angrily.

"NO! Our main force paid a dear price to allow us to go this far. We are not going to flee now, when we have yet to accomplish anything worthwhile."

"But, sir, we are clearly no match for the KOSTROMA, and..."

"Are you questioning my orders, Captain?" Shot back Thai, glaring at the captain, who clenched his teeth and shook his head meekly.

"No sir!"

Fu Lao Thai got the first reason to regret his decision sixteen minutes later, when the KOSTROMA started firing its lasers at him from a distance he could not even hope to match. His cruiser, along with two frigates, quickly started accumulating damages and casualties as the laser beams turned the three ships into Swiss cheese. One of the frigates blew up first, with another then taking its place as one of the designated targets of the KOSTROMA. The KOLKATA then lost its main propulsion drive and continued on its course with only the limited help of its gravity sails. A second frigate blew up, victim of the utter lack of armoring around its missile magazines. Then, it was the turn of the KOLKATA to blow up, leaving only nine surviving frigates to rush towards Phobos and Mars. The crews of those nine frigates, already quite scared and expecting to die in the minutes and hours to come, never made it past Phobos. Tina Forster, watching closely their progress, remotely fired the missile batteries positioned on Phobos when the enemy force got within a mere 700 kilometers from the moon. The nine frigates were then confronted by a wave of forty missiles shot at them from what was essentially point blank range, with only seconds for them to react. With the laser fire from the KOSTROMA still chewing up their starboard sides, the Terran ships collided head-on with 33 of the forty missiles at a combined speed of seventeen kilometers per second. The sheer kinetic energy of the impacts was added to the explosive power of the missiles' warheads, blowing to small bits the two leading frigates and ripping apart six other frigates. The last frigate in line, severely damage by a missile hit, was then finished by laser fire from the KOSTROMA that cut it in two parts. Those parts impacted the surface of Phobos, shattering its surface and sending big chunks of it flying off the moon.

On the KOSTROMA, now reversed and braking madly with the help of its fusion drive, Tina lowered her head at the destruction of the last attacking enemy ship. The threat to Mars was now over, at least for now, but at what was for her an awful price in terms of human blood spilled. That she had not suffered a single casualty aboard her ship, which bore only a few furrows on its bow shield as battle damage, was a relief to her, but she would never be able to forget all those dead men and women. Pushing a few buttons on the panels of her command chair, she switched her headset to the link with Governor Watts' command post, in Ares City. Once the governor appeared on her display, she nodded somberly to him.

"Governor Watts, I can now announce to you that the enemy fleet has been defeated. The surviving cruiser and four frigates of their fleet are now busy rescuing the survivors from their cruiser group, 25,000 kilometers above Mars. The rest is now space junk. On my part, I have suffered no human casualties and only negligible damage to my bow shield. I intend to scour the debris from a group I just finished off, then I will go watch over the rescue of the survivors of the cruiser group. Shall I then take them prisoner or let them go back to Earth?"

Watts, ecstatic at those news, still managed to answer her calmly.

"Watch them but let them go, once you are sure they are not coming back towards Mars. That was an incredible feat you and your ship just pulled off, Tina. Mars will be forever in your debt."

"Thank you, Governor. However, all those dead men and women represent an awful price for our victory, even if they were our enemies."

"I understand full well what you mean, Tina, and it is to your credit as a human being. Again, well done, you and your mighty KOSTROMA."

Watts then cut the link, leaving Tina to her thoughts.

"The mighty KOSTROMA... That has a ring to it."

**03:17 (Universal Time)**

**Saturday, December 25, 2315**

**Bridge of Terran cruiser TCNS NOVGOROD**

**At site of debris field from the main cruiser squadron**

**High orbit over Mars**

Commodore Shandra Visaya, commander of the remnants of the outer flanking force, was reviewing the progress of the rescue efforts with Admiral Ming Wa, just rescued from his life pod and then brought to the bridge of the NOVGOROD, when the sensors officer shouted a warning.

“SIR, THE KOSTROMA IS HEADING TOWARDS US! IT WILL BE HERE IN FORTY MINUTES.”

“Dear gods!” Said weakly Visaya, sudden worry on his brown face. “I hope that it is not coming to finish us. We have too little left to even hurt it.”

Wa patted his shoulder to reassure him.

“Commodore, if I have read that Captain Forster correctly, then I believe that she is not coming to fight, but rather to help.”

“Help us, Admiral?” Said Visaya, incredulous. Wa nodded.

“You heard me right, Commodore. I believe that Forster is one of those sentimental idealists us professional military men tend to dismiss as fools. The problem for us is that she has proven to be no fool. Anyway, the best we could do now is to contact her and ask about her intentions. I will handle that part. Continue to direct the rescue efforts in the meantime.”

“Uh, understood, sir.”

Going to the V.I.P. command chair of the bridge, Wa sat in it and had an operator call the KOSTROMA, then transfer the call to his station. The face of Tina Forster broke into a genuine smile on seeing Wa in her video screen.

“Admiral Wa, you made it alive! I was hoping you would, along with as much of your crews as possible.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Captain Forster. May I ask you why your ship is approaching us as we are picking up our survivors?”

“You may, Admiral: I intend to offer my help and the medical facilities of my ship, which are extensive, to help treat your wounded. You have my word that any Terran wounded treated on my ship will be promptly returned to Earth once healed.”

Wa only had to weigh that for a second before agreeing.

“Very well, Captain Forster. On my part, you have my word that my ships and crews will not commit hostile acts against your ship during our joint rescue effort. Does that satisfy you?”

“Yes, Admiral Wa. I will reserve one craft airlock for the reception of your medical shuttles and will also have teams of hull repair technicians ready in case you need to get to isolated compartments. Know that we have portable airlocks and pressurized casualty carrying capsules, plus plenty of emergency spacesuits.”

“Those could become handy, Captain Forster. I will tell the staff of the NOVGOROD to keep this channel open in order to facilitate the coordination of our rescue efforts. Hopefully, I will be able to see you face to face during the next few hours.”

Wa then notified the communications officer about letting the radio channel opened and monitored, before returning to Visaya to speak with him.

#### **04:25 (Universal Time)**

#### **Hangar Deck of the MSS KOSTROMA**

Admiral Wa was pleased to see surprise on the face of Tina Forster when he disembarked from the first shuttle to bring wounded Terrans aboard the KOSTROMA for treatment. He however quickly went down the ramp to get out of the way of the medics and crewmen bringing out the wounded on anti-gravity stretchers. It was then the turn of Wa to be surprised at the sight of the collection of young teenage Spacers, led by a handful of adults, that were waiting to take charge of the stretchers. Tina joined him at the foot of the shuttle’s ramp and presented her right hand, which Wa shook after a brief hesitation.

“Welcome aboard the KOSTROMA, Admiral Wa. I hope that we will be able to forget about our differences, at least for a few hours or days.”

“I hope so as well, Captain Forster. For the moment, though, the only thing that is on my mind is the care of my wounded men and women.”

“And they shall be well cared for, Admiral. Let’s follow those stretchers to our medical center.”

“You have a medical center rather than a simple infirmary? I am jealous, Captain. By the way, why are those kids here, in a ship at war?”

“They are the children of our crewmembers and they normally reside on our ship with their families. I wanted to send them to a safe place, along with our youngest children, but they insisted on volunteering for war service. They actually proved quite

useful, beefing up my medical evacuation teams and filling other low skill positions. I am very proud of them.”

“So you should be.” Said Wa while eyeing a girl of maybe thirteen years of age comforting a wounded Terran crewmember by holding his hand while she helped also guide the anti-gravity stretcher along.

Going up with the stretcher cases in a cargo elevator to the Human Services Deck, on Level 16, Wa walked side by side with Tina Forster to the medical center, entering it via the emergency triage area. There, Doctor Maria Perez was already waiting with her medical staff for the incoming casualties and immediately sorted out the patients, with the most serious cases prepared at once to be operated on. Wa watched the process for a moment before nodding his head in satisfaction.

“I can see that your medical staff is very professional, Captain Forster. Your facilities are also quite impressive.”

“Would you like a tour of our medical center, Admiral?”

“If it does not inconvenience you, I would like it very much.”

“It would actually be a pleasure, Admiral.”

Tina then treated Wa to an hour-long tour of the medical center and of its pediatric section, situated next to the ship’s primary school. The fact that the KOSTROMA contained functioning schools from the levels of kindergarten to junior high, plus a large playground, astonished Wa.

“You have all this on your ship?”

“And a lot more, Admiral. Don’t forget that, for Spacers, our ships are not only our way to earn a living: they are our homes as well. My KOSTROMA is fully certified by the Jovian authorities as a space community, partly because we have all the basic services available aboard for our crew and passengers and because we could even sustain a deep space scientific expedition for a year or more. Let me show you something else, Admiral.”

Wa, already quite impressed, followed her out into one of the radial corridors running out from the ship’s central axis. Tina led him to the end of the corridor and opened a large armored sliding door on the outer wall. Taking a few steps, she stopped as they emerged into one of the boreal ecosystems inside the Bow Gravity Shield Deck and let Wa a few seconds to look around him. The old admiral was speechless at first, never having expected such a sight. He finally looked at Tina with wide eyes.

"This is absolutely incredible, Captain Forster. A forest on a space ship?"

"Actually, four forests, separated by airtight partitions to avoid losing everything in case of a single hull breach. Surrounding those forests are giant aquariums full of fish and marine life, topped by three levels of apartments with views on the forests. My crew and their families are now lodged in those apartments, having recently vacated their old quarters near the central axis."

"This must have cost a fortune to put in your ship, no?"

Tina then turned somber, replying in a calm but firm voice.

"Yes, Admiral, it cost a fortune, but I used by own money for that. Why? So that my crew could live on this ship and still have contact daily with true natural beauty. I did all this without using public money, contrary to what many ignoramus on Earth would insinuate. It may look like an expensive luxury to Terrans, but for us it is our only way to have close to a life considered normal on Earth. We Spacers cherish nature, because we see so little of it, while too many on Earth have treated nature as something to be exploited for short-term gains. That still goes on today, while your government refused to take the measures necessary to stop this continued, irresponsible population growth on Earth that caused the overexploitation of the planet's resources. The Earth is polluted and poor because of Terrans, not because of Spacers, and we have been supporting our mother Earth for decades now, not the other way around. Yet, the government of Grand Administrator Li decided to paint us as the spoiled exploiters in the eyes of the Earth masses, and that to hide the failings of his own policies and that of his predecessors, switching the blame on us Spacers. Now we are at war because of this, with thousands of good men and women dead for nothing."

Wa, who had listened to her with an impassive face, then spoke in a quiet tone, avoiding to appear hostile to her.

"And why are you telling me this, Captain Forster?"

"Why? So that you can repeat my words to Grand Administrator Li. Hopefully, they will convince him to become reasonable and stop the hostilities against us Spacers. He should now realize that he can't win this war, while Earth will soon start to feel the economic pinch from our trade embargo. I am sure that the leaders of the Spacers League would be ready to listen to any reasonable offers of peace from Grand Administrator Li. Dropping his negative publicity campaign against the Spacers would be a good start on Li's part."

“Very well, Captain Forster, I will convey your words to Grand Administrator Li. I however can’t guarantee you that he will be swayed by them, or that he will even listen to them. I may be Grand Admiral, but he is my superior and he makes the policies, not me.”

“I fully realize that, Admiral Wa, but just conveying my message will already be a good step. Hopefully, common sense will then prevail.”

“Hopefully. Time will tell.”

## **CHAPTER 9 – COUP D'ÉTAT**

**10:49 (Shanghai Time)**

**Tuesday, January 4, 2316**

**Office of Grand Administrator Li**

**Federal government complex, Shanghai**

**China, Earth**



Grand Administrator John Li was silent for a long moment as he stared at Grand Admiral Wa, who was standing at attention in front of his desk and had just delivered his mission report as well as Tina Forster's message. The details of the Terran debacle around Mars had shaken him badly and he tended to agree with Wa, and with Tina Forster, that winning this war was becoming more and more problematic. Already, petrochemical industries around Earth had to cut drastically their production, their reserves of hydrocarbons, all from Spacer worlds, drying out quickly. Soon, other chemical industries would have to cut their production as well, with predictably nasty consequences for the general economy of Earth. Li's pride however made it hard for him to concede defeat yet. Besides, he may be Grand Administrator but he could not take such a decision alone.

"Admiral Wa, the news of the death of so many of our men and women pains me, but we must consider the problem in the perspective of Earth as a whole. I will thus call an emergency meeting of the Grand Council for tomorrow morning at nine, Shanghai Time. Have a detailed presentation ready to show then about the battles around Mars, along with your operational recommendations."

"Understood, Grand Administrator. I will be ready."

"Good! One last thing: are you confident that the Spacers will treat our wounded correctly, Admiral?"

"Absolutely, Grand Administrator. Captain Forster struck me as a woman of honor and a humanist, sir."

"Very well, Admiral. You are dismissed."

Wa saluted him before turning around and walking out of Li's office. Li then sat back in his swivel chair, his mind in turmoil. The public didn't know yet about the disaster

around Mars, thanks to official censorship, but it eventually would through leaks from officials or from returning survivors of the battle fleet. The political reactions then could be very fierce indeed.

**08:51 (Shanghai Time)**

**Wednesday, January 5, 2316**

**Federation Council's chambers**

**Federal government complex, Shanghai**

**China**

Wa didn't like the atmosphere he found when he entered the conference room to be used by the Federation Council meeting this morning. Many of the ministers and governors looked either unsettled, angry or worried, not good states of mind to take rational decisions. Wearing his parade dress with medals, Wa went to the seat assigned to him around the big table. Thankfully, he was not going to have to sit besides Marshal Reyat Khan, who he was getting to dislike more and more. The man could have been easily called a psychopath, with little or no feelings for others and with an endless thirst for power. He was, in Wa's mind, too much like the thugs that formed the majority of his ISF troops. This time, he got to sit besides the minister responsible for the customs services, Yoko Hajime, a dignified lady in her late fifties. The room filled quickly in the next minutes, with Grand Administrator Li arriving last with his aides. Li banged his ceremonial gavel on the table as soon as he was sitting.

"I declare this meeting of the Federation Council opened. Ladies and gentlemen, we are here this morning to discuss a grave issue: our war with the Spacers League. Most of you have not heard anything or know much about the results of our last move against the Spacers on Mars, thanks to our censorship. I thus regret to announce to you that our fleet met with disaster, with only five out of 38 ships returning from Mars. Grand Admiral Wa, who was in command of the fleet and had to abandon his crippled flagship, is here to give us the details of the actions around Mars. Admiral Wa..."

Wa activated the recorded briefing he had prepared as stunned exclamations and remarks ran around the table. Commenting each map or video recording as they passed on the giant plasma display of the conference room, he described the approach of his fleet to Mars, the detection of five incoming enemy battleships, then the running battle with the KOSTROMA. Most participants to the meeting kept quiet all that time,

save for a few whispered comments between neighbors. Wa saw Marshal Khan exchange a few such comments with Governor Zembelo, of Africa, and thought that the pair was well assorted indeed. The meeting started to get animated when Wa described how the KOSTROMA had come to help with the wounded and repeated the words from Tina Forster. As Wa expected, Khan was the first to object, by slamming his fist on the table.

“To bend in front of these Spacers? NEVER!”

Wa couldn't help countering him at once.

“They don't ask us to bend in front of them, Marshal Khan: they ask to be treated on an equal footing with us.”

“That's ridiculous!” Exclaimed Zembelo. “We have twelve times their population and we were the ones who paid for and built their space homes and ships. They have a debt towards Earth and they haven't paid it yet.”

Minister Hajime then cut in, to the relief of Wa, who didn't want to appear to be alone in advocating restraint.

“Governor Zembelo, your statement is misleading, to say the least. According to the statistics compiled by my ministry, the Spacers are well in the black when it comes to the balance they owe to Earth and have been so for decades now. Apart from the Mars Terramorphing Project, a huge enterprise beyond the means of Mars itself, all the habitats and ships used by the Spacers are built by the Spacers and out of their own pockets. What mineral or chemical resources we were getting from the Spacers, we got at the same prices that our own mining companies charge us. This popular notion that the Spacers are fleecing Earth is false. To continue a war on false pretences would not only be wrong, it would also be stupid and very costly to us. Half of the men and women of my customs services are now dead, wounded or prisoners of the Spacers. I will not sacrifice the rest to defend a falsehood. Grand Administrator Li, I am of the opinion that we should start peace talks with the Spacers without delay.”

“That question is in fact the main reason for this meeting, Minister Hajime. We have to decide this morning if we continue the war or if we talk peace with the Spacers League. Any more comments for or against either of these courses of action?”

“I say, go for peace talks.” Said Anton Sardakian, the minister of commerce. “Despite the shipments of minerals we still get from Terran companies operating in the Main Asteroid Belt, our industries are already starting to grind to a halt. The petrochemical industry in particular is hurting, since our sole sources of hydrocarbons

come from Spacer worlds, mainly from Titan, in the Saturn System. Even if we wanted to continue this war, our industries will be unable to sustain it for much longer.”

“I concur with Minister Sardakian.” Said the minister of industries, Sergei Titov. “Our refineries are now down to a mere two months of raw hydrocarbon reserves. If they are not replenished soon, then we will see our economy on Earth grind to a quick halt, with massive unemployment and poverty as a result. Simple pride is not worth that kind of price. Besides, the social repercussions of such a crisis would have grave political consequences.”

Many ministers and governors nodded slowly at those words, while John Li appeared to take them in stride. That was when Reyat Khan showed his cards.

“What about feigning to want to talk peace with the Spacers, then using that respite to hit their space worlds hard and invade them?”

“With what ships, Marshal Khan?” Replied at once Wa, his face hard. “My navy has only about thirty frigates and transport ships left, and no cruisers or capital ships. Furthermore, our industries are incapable of building quickly a new battle fleet. And you want us to defeat an enemy that has battleships? Are you crazy?”

Khan threw him a dark look but held on to his idea.

“Maybe with a more energetic leadership your navy would have performed better, Admiral Wa. What I am proposing won’t take a fleet of ship anyway. I would need only to infiltrate a few dozen resolute men on Spacer worlds and then our problems will be mostly solved.”

John Li looked at Khan with skepticism, frowning.

“And what exactly are you proposing, Marshal Khan?”

“What I am proposing is to use lethal chemical agents that will be prepositioned by my infiltrators in the various space habitats of the Spacers, releasing these agents at a predetermined time. This way, Spacer installations will fall intact in our hands and we would then need only to come and occupy them. Our military scientists have rediscovered the chemical formulae for an extremely toxic nerve-impeding lethal agent that was last used over three centuries ago, during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A simple droplet or one sniff of that gas would be enough to kill a person in seconds.”

Wa was at once on his feet, overcome with indignation and disgust.

“You want to murder over 340 million men, women and children while we would pretend to have peace talks with the Spacers? What kind of monster are you?”

Many others around the table, including John Li, also looked genuinely shocked by the proposition from Khan.

"Marshal Khan," Said frostily John Li, "I may be known to be a politician with a firm hand, but I am not ready to condone such a butchery. Besides, chemical, biological and nuclear weapons have been banned for nearly two hundred years now and I am not about to lift that ban, in view of all the misery these weapons caused in our history. If any of that lethal chemical agent has been produced yet by your scientists, then I want it destroyed right away. Is that clear, Marshal Khan?"

Hiding his disdain, Khan nodded his head while sitting upright.

"Yes, Grand Administrator, very clear."

"Good! Now, I think that we have seen all the relevant facts in this case. I thus say that we conduct an open vote on the question of continuing the war or suing for peace. Those for war, raise your hand!"

Only four members of the council, including Khan and Zembelo, raised their right hand then.

"All those agreeing to sue for peace, raise your hand!"

This time, all the other members, including Li, raised their hands, to the satisfaction of Admiral Wa. Li also seemed relieved by the results of the vote, probably grasping at last the consequences of his past policies.

"This council thus votes to start peace negotiations with the Spacers League, on terms that will be decided by me in the coming days. Any counter-proposition by the Spacers will then be presented to this council for approval. Admiral Wa, in the meantime you will send a transport ship to Mars, in order to recuperate our wounded presently being cared for by Spacers there."

"Understood, Grand Administrator. Our ship will depart tomorrow, at the latest."

"Excellent! If nobody has more to say now, we will then adjourn this meeting... Nothing? Then this meeting is adjourned!"

As Wa got up from his chair, Yoko Hajime shook her head, looking upset.

"What is it, Madam Minister?"

"That Khan! That anyone would propose so coldly to exterminate 340 million humans is beyond my comprehension."

"There is unfortunately little to comprehend there, Madam Minister." Replied Wa. "It is called human nature, capable of the best but also of the worst. I agree with

you though that a man such as Khan should not hold the kind of power he is presently holding.”

Looking troubled, Yoko Hajime stared in Wa’s eyes.

“Could your Marines fight off Khan’s ISF troopers if we ever have to stop that man?”

“Only for a few hours at the most, Madam Minister. The ISF, even after the Mars debacle, still counts over three million soldiers, soldiers who are more loyal to Khan than to the council. On our part, we have only 2,400 Marines left. Grand Administrator Li should seriously think about removing Khan from power before we come to regret having put him in charge of the ISF.”

“You are right, Admiral. I will try to go speak with Li later in the day.”

Khan, who was still fuming at the rebuke he had received from Li, was accosted by Horace Zembelo as he walked out of the conference room. The governor of Africa gave him a sympathetic look while walking alongside him.

“I must say that Grand Administrator Li’s response to your proposal greatly disappointed me, Marshal. I expected him to be more ready to do what has to be done.” Zembelo then lowered his voice to a whisper.

“Have you produced yet any of that lethal chemical agent you spoke about?”

Khan looked at him for a moment before deciding that Zembelo could be an ally he could count on.

“Enough to have tested it on live specimens. My technicians are presently busy building a secret production line for that agent. Why do you ask, Governor Zembelo?”

“Because now could well be the time to have executive power transferred into hands that are ready to take whatever decisions need to be taken for the sake of Earth. Li has just proven that he is unfit for his office. Unfortunately, the majority of the council is behind him, thus democratic measures won’t do anymore.”

Khan stopped in the middle of the hallway, then signaled Zembelo to go with him inside a deserted side corridor before speaking to him in a low voice.

“What do you have exactly in mind, Governor?”

“An alliance between me and you. You have the military power to chase Li and his minions from his post, and I am ready to take all the measures necessary to defeat those damn Spacers...once in power.”

A mean smile came to Khan’s face as he presented his right hand to Zembelo.

"Governor, I believe that we are meant to understand each other. Let's go to my office, to discuss further in private about your, uh, ideas."

### **17:28 (Shanghai Time)**

#### **Grand Admiral Wa's residence**

#### **Navy compound, Shanghai Spaceport**

Ming Wa smiled with genuine pleasure when he opened his front door to greet his older son Ling and his daughter-in-law Zang.

"Please, come in: it is quite cold outside."

"Thanks, Dad!" Said Ling Wa, wearing a civilian suit instead of his uniform of captain of a TCN transport ship. He let his wife go in first, then stepped in and took off his winter coat, which his father suspended inside the vestibule's closet, alongside Zang's coat. The trio then walked into the large lounge of the house, comfortably furnished as one would expect of a grand admiral's residence.

"So, Dad, what do I owe your invitation to supper to?"

"Come on, Son! Can't a father invite his own son without a hidden motive? Would you and Zang like something to drink?"

"A white wine would do, if you have some."

"Same for me." Added Zang, a beautiful woman in her late twenties.

"White wine it will be. I believe that I still have a bottle of that German sweet wine you like so much. I won't be long."

Ming disappeared in his kitchen for a couple of minutes, to return with two cups full of chilled white wine for his guests. He then served himself a scotch on the rocks and sat in his favorite easy chair.

"So, Zang, I hope that you don't resent me too much for sending your husband on a three week space trip?"

The young woman shrugged with a resigned expression.

"I knew that I was marrying a Navy officer, so I can't say that I was not forewarned about all those separations, Mister Wa. At least, that mission is going to be a humanitarian one, which makes it most worthwhile."

"True!" Said her husband, sitting besides her. "When I joined the Navy, I never expected that we would be one day involved in a space war. Uh, you told me yesterday that you were able to visit that Spacer battleship, the KOSTROMA, Dad. How was it?"

"Full of surprises and wonders, I must say. Its owner and captain had it extensively refitted a few months ago and spent quite a few extra million credits to make it an even more livable ship than it was before."

Ming then spent a good ten minutes describing what he had seen on the KOSTROMA, where Tina Forster had given him a limited tour of her ship. The description of the forest ecosystems and of the giant aquariums on the KOSTROMA made wonderment appear on Zang's face.

"Oh, my! I would love to see that one day."

"Well, the KOSTROMA is a mixed cargo-passenger ship. Once peace is back, maybe you will be able to travel aboard it. You certainly will be impressed if you do."

"But are we going to see peace return soon, Dad?"

Ming stared somberly at his son, debating what to tell him in front of his wife.

"I believe that, following the events around Mars, Grand Administrator Li now has little choice but to sue for peace. I certainly advised him to do so today, at a meeting of the Federation Council."

"Hopefully, common sense will prevail." Said Ling philosophically. That decided Ming, who then got up from his easy chair and smiled to Zang.

"Do you mind if I kidnap Ling for a minute or two? I have some classified instructions to give him for his mission tomorrow."

"Do I really have a say about that, Mister Wa?"

"Nope, but I won't be long, I promise." Answered Ming, grinning, before guiding his son towards the staircase leading to the upper floor. To Ling's surprise, his father didn't lead him to his private study, instead pushing him inside a walk-in closet and closing the door behind him, then switching on the small light fixture of the closet.

"But...why are we here, Dad?"

"Because I am not sure that my study is not bugged, Son. What I have to say has to stay strictly between you, me and the captain of the KOSTROMA."

Ling looked at his father with shock.

"The captain of the KOSTROMA? You're not..."

"No, I am not a secret agent of the Spacers, Son. It is just that I heard something truly monstrous this morning at the council meeting. While Grand

Administrator Li killed that idea, to his personal credit, I am not sure that the moron who proposed that idea will not pursue it without the authorization of Li. I want you to pass a secret letter from me to Captain Forster of the KOSTROMA, to warn her of that scheme in case some bastard decide to bypass Li's directives."

Ming then repeated to his son the words of Marshal Khan, leaving Ling utterly horrified.

"How could anyone sane propose to kill 340 million people? That man should be arrested, or at the least fired from his position."

"That could happen soon, with some luck. So, Son, will you be ready to pass that letter in secret to Captain Forster?"

His mind in turmoil, Ling could not however deny the disgust he had felt instantly on hearing of Khan's proposal. He thus finally nodded his head and spoke weakly.

"Yes, I will, Dad."

"Another thing, Son: while you are in space, heading for Mars, make sure that your lovely wife and kids do not stay in Shanghai, or in any location known by the ISF. I wouldn't put anything above that Khan and his allies in the council. Khan hates my guts enough already. If he learns somehow about my secret letter, then he could very well do something very stupid."

"You think that he could come after your family?"

"Son, remember what happened to the wife of Governor Watts on Mars. Khan is capable of anything, so let's not take any chances with him. How loyal to you are your ship's crewmembers?"

"Loyal enough. None of them are actually hot for the present war, I have to say."

"A good point, actually. If you want some close protection for your family while they are out of Shanghai, I can provide them the services of a few Marines utterly loyal to me."

Thoroughly shaken by all this, Ling nodded again.

"I think that I will take you on your offer, Dad."

**02:03 (Shanghai Time)**

**Sunday, January 9, 2316**

**Grand Administrator's residence**

**Shanghai, China**

John Li was abruptly awakened in bed when a loud pistol detonation resonated inside his house, coming from the ground floor. His wife was also awakened and grabbed his right arm, understandably scared.

"What could this be, John?"

"Maybe one of our bodyguards discharged his pistol accidentally." Said Li, not believing that himself and feeling worried. "I am..."

Two more pistol shots, along with cries of alarms, then cut him off.

"THE ISF! THEY..."

What sounded like a silencer-equipped rifle then let out a burst, which John Li barely heard. Now feeling dread, he threw away his bed sheets and jumped out of bed, grabbing the pistol he always kept in his bedside table. He barely had time to face the door of his bedroom before someone kicked it open, sending wood splinters flying. John Li shot immediately at the dark shape that then jumped inside the bedroom with a pointed rifle, firing four times and hitting squarely the newcomer. The intruder grunted in pain under the impacts and collapsed, only to reveal a second dark shape behind him. John Li did not have time to fire again before a burst of automatic fire cut him down. His assailant then turned his rifle on Li's screaming wife, mercilessly killing her with one burst.

At the Navy compound, the ISF troopers sent to kill Grand Admiral Wa didn't have as easy a job as at Li's residence. TCN Marines, put discreetly on alert by Wa, were posted in strength around the compound and Wa's residence and opposed a determined resistance to the ISF troopers trying to infiltrate their perimeter. The fight quickly turned into a full-scale battle of a rare ferocity, with no quarters given on both sides. The infiltrators soon had to call in some heavy support, with a column of armored cars then showing up at the two main gates of the compound. The Marines responded by scrambling off four heavily armed assault shuttles, while the alert was sent by radio to all the TCN garrisons and ships that a coup by the ISF was in progress. With its armored cars quickly decimated by the assault shuttles, the ISF replied by sending its own assault shuttles and more ground troops, turning the battle into an epic confrontation that transformed the Navy compound into a field of ruins within an hour. Many Navy and Marine personnel were able to escape the compound and disappear into the night before the ISF managed finally to take it at the cost of over 500 troopers killed or wounded.

At the spaceport itself, one of the two frigates parked on the tarmac managed to take off before assaulting ISF troopers could board it, then quickly climbed to a low Earth orbit while transmitting more alert messages on the radio. It unfortunately then became a target for one of the big armored orbital fortresses manned by the ISF around Earth. Hit repeatedly by powerful laser beams from the fortress, the unlucky frigate was quickly cut to shreds and reentered the planet's atmosphere, out of control. The 240 meter-long ship broke up during its fiery descent, to finally crash in the Pacific Ocean, causing a small tsunami that thankfully didn't cause more than minor damage on the nearby coasts.

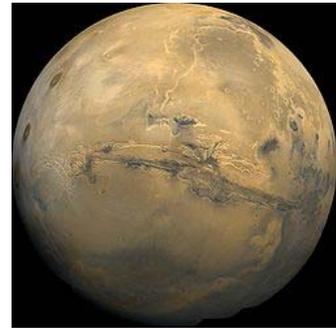
Shanghai was far from being the only location to see ISF assault teams assassinate elected officials allied to John Li or to liberal members of the Federal Council. The ISF forces were generally successful in taking control, especially in regions where they had major bases, most of which were around Africa, the Middle East, the Indian Sub-continent and the Pacific area. It however hit stubborn resistance from TCN bases and local police forces where the ISF always had been weak. In particular, the northern regions of North America, Scandinavia and Russia, plus Australia, were able to repulse the ISF attacks on its local officials, albeit at a high human cost because of the habit of the ISF to use its firepower indiscriminately. Thus, Khan's plan to grab power militarily all over the planet succeeded only partially, allowing him and Horace Zembelo to claim control of Earth after the first day of fighting. In reality, they managed mostly to undo the one major advancement of Humanity in its long history: its political unity, gained a century ago after its last war. By the morning of January 10, 2316, the Earth was separated into opposing factions again...and at war on both its surface and in space.

## **CHAPTER 10 – NORTH AGAINST SOUTH**

**06:39 (Universal Time)**

**Friday, January 14, 2316**

**MSS KOSTROMA, in low Mars orbit**



The first impression of Ling Wa about the KOSTROMA was how huge it was. The second was to think that it was ugly. Things changed however once he set foot on the Promenade Deck after his ship, the TCNS VAGABOND, had docked with the KOSTROMA in orbit around Mars. The jumble of the external structures were now replaced by functional but artistic architecture, enhanced by an abundance of trees, bushes and flowers planted along the promenade. Along with the neon façades, Ling could think that he was now in a commercial arcade on a Spacer moon. A tall brunette in her late twenties with grey eyes greeted her once he was out of the entrance airlock, with a beefy man carrying a stun pistol watching him from a few feet away. The brunette met him politely, extending her right hand, which he shook.

“Welcome on the KOSTROMA, Captain Wa. I am Tina Forster, captain and owner of this ship. You wouldn’t be related with Grand Admiral Wa, by chance? You do look like him.”

“I am effectively his eldest son, Captain Forster. It seems that the events of the last few days kind of made my original mission redundant. I am not going to carry back our wounded men and women to Earth if it means for them to be arrested by the ISF...or worse.”

“Quite true, Captain Wa. Do you know if your father managed to escape the ISF? Those thugs have not bragged yet about catching or killing him.”

“To be frank, I do not know what happened to my father. However, he is an experienced, crafty man and he had lots of friends and contacts around Shanghai. I am thus keeping my hopes up. Captain Forster, my original mission may now be pointless, but I still have a reason to have met with you. The day before I left for Mars, my father invited me to his house, where he told me something in utter confidence, to pass urgently to you and the Spacers League. This letter describes what he told me. It may shock you, but please remember that Marshal Khan of the ISF had this idea, and that most of the Federal Council, including Grand Administrator Li, opposed it immediately.”

Already worried, Tina took the letter and opened it, extracting a single sheet of old-fashioned paper and unfolding it before reading it. Her face paled as she read on and she looked back with utter horror at Ling when she was finished.

“How could anyone even think of such a monstrosity?”

“My father’s opinion was that Marshal Khan is a certified psychopath. I believe that this tends to demonstrate it, Captain Forster. My father wanted you to see this, so that you could alert all the Spacers to this danger and be prepared to prevent or counter it.”

“And your father proved to be a decent man by doing this, Captain Wa. In the name of the Spacers League, I thank you and your father from the bottom of our hearts. Be assured that our leaders will be informed of this right away.”

“Then I feel better already, Captain Forster. That leaves me with a dilemma, though: what do I and my ship do, now that we can’t return to Earth without risking immediate arrest? After the bloody coup that the ISF committed, they have proved that they could do about anything.”

“Do you know if any TCN ship was able to escape Earth after the start of the coup, Captain Wa?”

“Unfortunately, none could. Those that tried to leave for deep space were destroyed without hesitation by the ISF orbital fortresses in orbit around Earth.”

“What can you tell us about those fortresses, Captain? We know that there are 26 of them and that they are eight-faceted cubes measuring 900 meters from end to end, but that is about all.”

“My father once discussed with me about them and their original purpose, which was to prevent attacks by pirates against shipping in Earth orbit. They were built nearly a century ago but have been constantly refitted and updated by the ISF. Their mobility is extremely limited, having only small gravity sails that allow them at most to change orbit if need be, and then rather slowly. They are however very heavily armored, since their designers didn’t have to worry about their mass, which is about two million tons. They are armed solely with high power lasers, to avoid errand missiles and rail gun projectiles that could have been fired from them from reentering the atmosphere and possibly cause damage on Earth. Those lasers are however extremely powerful, in the gigawatt class, and can range far, due to their orbital position. They can also be fired through the atmosphere at low-flying craft or ships if need be, but with less efficiency due to

atmospheric dissipation of the beams. The fortresses also house a few small assault craft, to help patrol Earth's orbits. That is about all that I know myself, Captain Forster."

"That is already plenty, Captain Wa. About you and your ship, you are welcomed to go land at the Ares City Spaceport. The TCN personnel there have returned to their posts at your local headquarters, after having pledged an alliance with us against the ISF. Your wounded personnel has already been transferred to the surface, in the main Ares City hospital. Could I have your word of honor that you and your ship will not commit any hostile act against the Spacers League, Captain Wa?"

"Captain Forster, you have my solemn word on that." Replied Ming Wa. It was then his turn to extend his right hand to share a handshake with Tina.

### **11:22 (Universal Time)**

#### **Bridge of the MSS KOSTROMA**

##### **Low Mars orbit**

Alerted by Patricia O'Neil, Tina stepped on the bridge and went immediately to the communications officer's station. Patricia didn't wait for a request from her before handing her a message printout.

"It arrived three minutes ago from Callisto Prime by tight directional beam, Tina. It seems that your message about that ISF plan to use chemical weapons have really kicked a hornet's nest there."

"I was hoping so." Replied Tina before reading the short message. "Well, we are recalled urgently to Callisto Prime, where I am to discuss our next move with the League's leaders. Wow! It seems that I am now considered the master tactician of the Spacers League, if I can believe this message."

"And you aren't?" Said Patricia, smiling, earning for herself a slap at the back of her head with the paper sheet in Tina's hand. Tina then looked at Dana Durning and Frida Skarsgard.

"The big cheeses want us back around Callisto ASAP. Let's see if we can break a few speed records, girls."

"Could we stop at Vesta on the way to do some shopping?" Asked with a grin Ingrid Holtz from her sensors station. Tina answered her by pulling out her tongue at her.

**14:06 (Universal Time)**

**Wednesday, February 2, 2315**

**Government complex, Callisto Prime**

**Callisto, Jupiter System**

Janet Robeson gave Tina an amused look when the latter entered the conference room where the leaders of the Spacers League were discussing the war.

“Did you go out and push your ship to get this fast here, Captain Forster? A nineteen day trip from Mars to Callisto sounds like a record to me.”

“Naah, I didn’t even push my KOSTROMA to its true limits. The one time I did that, during the fight for Mars, my crew ended up picking from the deck half of the fruits from our trees, fruits that fell off under the excess felt gravity. Since many of them were not ripe yet, we had to throw away most of it, which was a true shame. So, I limited myself to an eight G constant acceleration/deceleration from start to end this time.”

“Eight Gs constant from Mars to Callisto?” Exclaimed Jacobus Stein. “And how much Gs did you pull during that fight around Mars?”

“Oh, just eleven Gs, applied during a bit over an hour.”

Juan Perez, the governor of Saturn, wiggled his hand while making a face.

“Your big ship, doing eleven Gs? Decidedly, it will never cease to amaze me.”

“Well, enough gloating about the performances of the KOSTROMA, ladies and gentlemen.” Said Janet Robeson, becoming serious. “We have a war to fight. Please, take a seat, Captain Forster.”

Tina did so, choosing an empty seat besides the one occupied by Gustav Shomberg, who had most probably been called in for his expertise in ship design and his knowledge of Terran ships. The engineer shook hands energetically with Tina, a happy smile on his face.

“You certainly made me proud of my work, Tina.”

“And you have every right to be, Gustav.” Said Tina before switching her attention to the others around the table. Most of the Spacers League leaders were present, except for Governor Watts, who was on Mars, defending his planet. Shinjo Suzuki, whose asteroid of Ceres had been retaken by Spacers forces a few days ago, was also present. Janet Robeson then took on her to put her up to date with their discussions to date.

“To put you up to speed with what we have decided already, Captain Forster, know that we have taken a near unanimous decision to help the countries of the Northern Hemisphere resisting the ISF on Earth. We have however not decided yet how to do it. The main problem is those big ISF orbital fortresses blocking the approaches to Earth.”

Seeing Tina frown at the words ‘near unanimous decision’, Shinjo Suzuki took on him to explain.

“I was the one to object, Captain Forster. My view is that, since Zembelo and Khan have painted themselves in a corner and have caused by their coup to dry out their last sources of minerals and chemicals from space, there is no sense in fighting them actively. We just need them to run out of resources for the war and implode.”

Tina eyed him with evident skepticism, if not with contempt. Suzuki was a powerful, very rich man who had made his money at the head of the Ceres Consortium by becoming the biggest food producer in the Outer System. He was also a convinced pacifist and an advocate of ecology, but many thought that he had pushed his convictions well past the limits of reality. That other Spacers had to fight, and lose people, to free Ceres while Suzuki still advocated nothing more than passive resistance had riled many.

“Mister Suzuki, you are right to say that the new regime on Earth has cut its own throat by alienating their last providers of space resources and that they will eventually collapse economically. However, that could take months, maybe years, before it finally happens. During those months, the ISF will be free to arrest, beat, torture and execute thousands, if not tens of thousands of innocent people that have little means to defend themselves from ISF aggression and excesses. We saw that exact pattern on Mars during their short occupation and I am not ready to simply sit around and do nothing while more innocents suffer. Peace at all cost is a notion that has been amply discredited in Humanity’s history, sir, especially when those calling for peace are not the ones paying for it.”

A flash of anger came to Suzuki’s face at the last sentence from Tina, but a dark look from Karl Langemann, head of the Vesta Consortium, cut off his reply.

“She stated the simple truth, whether you like it or not, Shinjo. Horace Zembelo and Reyat Khan make a fine pair of power-hungry psychopaths and they shouldn’t be allowed to crush those countries resisting them on Earth. If you want to withdraw from our alliance, it is your prerogative, but then don’t expect our men and women to defend

you further. The members of your board of directors may have something to say about that anyway.”

Seeing all the others around the table staring without sympathy at him, Suzuki swallowed his pride and nodded once his head.

“Very well, let’s see what can be suggested to help take down the ISF.”

“Good!” Said Janet Robeson, acting as chairman of the meeting. “Ideally, we would like to send weapons and ships to the Northern Alliance on Earth, to help them resist the ISF and to prevent Khan from using his lethal chemical gas weapon on us or on other Terrans. However, the problem is the obstacle created by the ISF orbital fortresses. Each one of these fortresses is better protected and armed than even our most powerful ship, the KOSTROMA. They also mutually protect each other in orbit by their laser crossfire, so they can’t be outflanked. Whether we like it or not, we will have to take them out, one way or the other. The question is how? Any suggestions?”

Even Tina was silent at first, having studied that problem at length during her trip from Mars and having come blank. Gustav Shomberg then spoke, on seeing that no one else would.

“Those fortresses are armed solely with high power lasers and have no missile armament, except for those carried by their attack craft. We thus must concentrate on making our ships able to withstand heavy laser fire long enough to close in and fire heavy missiles at those fortresses.”

“And how does one protect against such laser fire?” Asked Juan Perez, from Saturn. “It would take such a thick shield that it would slow down our ships to a crawl.”

“So?” Replied Shomberg, warming up. “Those fortresses are themselves nearly static. We don’t need to be able to dance around them, just to be able to get close enough to them to destroy them.”

“And to destroy them with what?” Asked Nadia Suslov, of the Sverdlovsk Group. “Normal missiles will barely scratch a dent on their armor and laser fire would take minutes to burn through.”

“Well, I agree that we would need to devise new weapons as well as new shields to deal with those fortresses.” Recognized Shomberg. Karl Langemann suddenly seemed to have an inspiration and looked at Tina.

“Captain Forster, could you show me the general specifications of your ship? I think that I have an idea.”

Surprised, Tina did however take out her electronic notepad and opened the file on her ship stored in it before passing it to the geologist and industrialist. The whole group watched in silence as Langemann studied the file with utter concentration and made a few calculations. The geologist finally looked up from the notepad, smiling.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I think that I found a solution to our dilemma: let’s throw rocks at those fortresses!”

**16:09 (Universal Time)**

**Saturday, February 19, 2316**

**Vesta Consortium’s light shuttle**

**Asteroid V-6398, 35,000 kilometers from Vesta**

**Main Asteroid Belt**

“There it is, Captain Forster: Asteroid V-6398 in all its splendor!”

“What a poetic name for it!” Said Tina, smiling, while eyeing the two kilometer-long, potato-shaped asteroid. Karl Langemann, sitting besides her in the cockpit of the light shuttle, laughed briefly at that.

“I have to agree that those naming the asteroids in the Belt didn’t show much poetic sense when doing their job. This piece of rock is however going to be the centerpiece of our Operation Stonehenge. It measures approximately 1,900 meters long by 1, 500 meters wide and its original mass was around six billion tons. It has however been extensively mined during the years and is now little more than a hollow rock shell. In view of its size and empty core state, I devised a plan to turn it into a giant space dry dock, able to repair or build the biggest ship in pressurized conditions and also to be able to move by itself if need be. The project was nearly completed when this damn war erupted.”

“It can move by itself? How fast?”

“It can sustain prolonged accelerations of up to 0.3 on gravity sails. Not too shabby for a mass of approximately half a billion tons.”

Tina’s eyes widened at those numbers.

“But, then, the installed electrical power on your asteroid must be mind-boggling.”

Langemann then had a mysterious smile.

“Correct! Enough as well to power some pretty awesome laser batteries. The concept imagined by Gustav Shomberg, of using the fusion startup laser banks of your ship and reroute them to laser firing turrets, was a true stroke of genius. When I had my initial idea of using this asteroid to attack the ISF orbital fortresses, I also decided to apply Shomberg’s concept to it and thus give a strong armament to my asteroid. In truth, it is now more like a slow giant carrier than just a space dry dock. We are going in now.”

Tina returned her attention to the asteroid, which now filled the view from the armorglass surfaces of the cockpit. One extremity of the asteroid was actually one big hole with a diameter of at least one kilometer. The inside of the asteroid had clearly been extensively worked over and fitted with a dense matrix of steel lattices to preserve its structural cohesion. Tina noticed the thousands of individual gravity sail plates fixed to the lattices, plus the various prefabricated modules hooked to the side walls inside the asteroid. She didn’t miss as well the thousands of workers in spacesuits and the robots engaged in feverish work inside, particularly around a massive structure forming four successive rings, with docking clamps attached to the inside of the rings. There was also a lot of drilling being done through the crust of the asteroid. Langemann pointed with his right index the rings and their docking clamps.

“This will be the main docking frame, meant to solidly mate with whatever ship is being repaired, refitted or built. It is big enough to accommodate your KOSTROMA.”

“And that drilling work?”

“Tunnels to link the laser banks inside with firing optics outside and to connect the control center with a multitude of surface sensors, all well protected, of course. This will be a fully functioning ship of space, once completed in a couple of weeks. Only the main access doors to the dock, at the rear, will be left out: it would take too much time to complete them and, as you know, time is of the essence.”

“Talking of that, how is the situation on Earth?”

Langemann’ mood then turned distinctly, to one of grimness.

“Not very good, unfortunately. The ISF, with its massive numeric superiority and near monopoly on weapons, has overtaken most of Western Europe and is presently busy ‘purging’ Europe of anyone ready or able to resist its rule. According to news bulletins from the Northern Alliance, thousands of people are arrested, killed or simply disappear each week in Europe. In truth, Zembelo and Khan have produced what is possibly the most criminal regime in Humanity’s history. Please do me one favor when

you will be fighting those ISF thugs again: don't show them any pity! They are nothing more than vermin only worth exterminating."

"I will keep that in mind, Mister Langemann." Replied Tina in a somber tone. "What about the main armament of your asteroid?"

"It is being produced right now. While it consists of huge pieces and is very powerful in terms of hitting power, it represents only very simple technology. It will be ready well before the asteroid itself."

"Then, that leaves only the question of the name for this asteroid." Said quietly Tina, attracting a confused look from Langemann.

"A name? But, it already has one, Captain Forster."  
Tina gave him a no-nonsense look.

"Come on, sir! We are going to accomplish possibly one of the most epic raids in the history of Humanity with a thing called simply 'V-6398'? Where is your sense of the grandiose?"

"Uh, maybe you're right about that." Said the geologist in a meek voice.

### **09:11 (Vancouver Time)**

**Tuesday, March 28, 2316**

**Secret resistance forces command center, Kelowna**

**British-Columbia, Canada**

**Earth**

"Madam Governor, the news from Seattle have been confirmed. Mayor Cummings is dead, killed by the ISF. They are now looting the city and rounding up people."

This report from one of her aides, coming on top of all the other bad news of the past weeks, brought tears of frustration and despair to Claudia d'Arcy, legitimate governor of North America.

"Those damn barbarians! May Zembelo and Khan rot in hell for their crimes! How are the defensive preparations progressing around Vancouver?"

"We are as ready there as we could ever be, Madam Governor. However, our stocks of weapons and ammunition are grossly insufficient to repel any assault in strength by the ISF. We do have plenty of volunteers, though."

"Weapons! It all turns around getting enough weapons. These goons from the ISF are not so brave when they meet an equally armed foe. They certainly got their butts kicked in Texas."

"But this is not Texas, Madam Governor. Unfortunately, the..."

Another aide suddenly rushed in the room, all excited.

"MADAM GOVERNOR! WE JUST RECEIVED A MESSAGE FROM THE SPACERS LEAGUE: A SPACERS FLEET IS NEARING EARTH!"

"Thank God, at last!" Could only say the long-suffering governor.

### **14:55 (Universal Time)**

#### **ISF Orbital Fortress 08**

##### **In polar orbit around Earth**

"Sir, our long range radar has detected a single large object approaching Earth."

"What is it exactly?" Asked the ISF major in charge of the orbital fortress. His sensors officer frowned while looking at his displays.

"According to its spectroscopic signature, it is a big piece of rock, sir. The problem is that it is decelerating towards us."

"A rock? Decelerating? You're not making much sense, Captain Omongo."

"I know, sir, but that's what our sensors say. It is now within 5,400 kilometers and has just altered slightly its trajectory. It will now pass between us and Earth."

"I don't like this one bit. The Spacers have been too quiet for too long now. Sound battle stations and send a warning message to the other fortresses and to ISF GHQ on Earth."

"Aye, sir!"

A few minutes later, the commander of the fortress got another report, this time from his optical telescopes.

"Sir, visual observation shows the approaching object to be an asteroid."

"But it can't be an asteroid if it altered course! How big is it?"

"It is approximately two kilometers in diameter, sir. Its mass must be at least a couple of billion tons."

"Damn, I wouldn't want to collide with that, armor or no armor. Can you see anything else?"

"Uh, no sir, not at this distance."

"Very well. Hail it!"

Omongo gave his commander a funny look, then shrugged and started calling the newcomer on the space distress frequency. After repeating his message six times without an answer, the commander of the fortress ran out of patience.

"Alright! Whoever that is, he asked for it. LASER BATTERIES, TARGET THAT ASTEROID AND FIRE AT WILL!"

Fifteen seconds later, the first one gigawatt laser beam stabbed the dark space with its blue ray. Within thirty seconds of firing, the fortress got two reactions from the asteroid.

"Sir, the asteroid has started to slowly rotate around its main axis. That thing is actually a ship."

"They are trying to prevent our beams from burning through their hull." Commented the commander, now getting nervous. "We..."

"MULTIPLE LASER BEAMS FROM THE ASTEROID!" Shouted another operator on the command bridge. "WE ARE BEING HIT!"

"Ah! Good luck to them to burn through our hull."

"SIR, DAMAGE REPORTS FROM DECKS 23 AND 45! THOSE BEAMS HAVE HOLED OUR HULL."

"Uh?!" Could only say the incredulous ISF officer. He then got his second shock of the encounter.

"Sir, something on the surface of that asteroid has just rocketed off and is speeding towards us."

"Is it a missile?"

"I don't know, sir, but it is big: about one hundred meters in diameter. The spectroscopes read its surface as being rock, but it is powered by a fusion rocket. At its present acceleration rate, it will hit us at a relative velocity of 2.6 kilometers per second." The commander of the fortress then became really worried.

"CONTINUE FIRING LASERS! TARGET THAT INCOMING THING! ALERT THE COMMAND: A CONVERTED ASTEROID IS ATTACKING US WITH LASERS AND MISSILES."

The major then followed with increasing dread the course of the missile, which seemed to laugh off the fortress' laser beams. On the other hand, the laser beams from the asteroid were proving incredibly powerful and were burning through after only a couple seconds of firing, causing more and more damage inside the orbital fortress. One of the

main fusion generators of the fortress was hit and taken off line by a penetrating laser beam after one minute of combat. Then, Captain Omongo managed to capture a good view of the incoming missile forty seconds before impact. The commander felt his heart sink as he eyed the big piece of rock coming at him, over one hundred meters wide and with jagged edges. It had to have a mass of well over a million tons.

“Good God!” Could he simply say then. The asteroid had gone down to a lower orbit when the piece of rock, actually more massive than the fortress at 2.4 million tons but much more compact and dense, impacted squarely the octagonal cube of steel and ceramic armor at 2.58 kilometers per second. The kinetic energy of the impact, equivalent to that of a large nuclear weapon, made the rock smash clean through the hull of the fortress. The initial shock was enough to kill the whole crew instantly by projecting its men and women against the walls, where they smashed their heads and bones on the steel bulkheads and the machinery of the fortress. The rock broke on impact but only to have its pieces fly inside the hull of the fortress, causing mayhem and destruction. The rock didn’t have an explosive warhead but didn’t need one to utterly destroy the giant orbital fortress through simple kinetic energy transfer. What was not destroyed by impact was roasted out by the hot molten rock lava created as the small asteroid was nearly vaporized in the process. In less than a second, Orbital Fortress 08 was turned into a deformed, gutted and burned out steel hulk rotating out of control in orbit.

The 25 other orbital fortresses watched the drama through the telemetry from the doomed fortress before its destruction, then saw the blinding flash of the collision through their optical sensors. The orbital fortresses commanders that at first had shown utter confidence that the intruder would be destroyed then became close to panic, as the converted asteroid continued downward on its polar orbit, heading towards the fortresses in equatorial orbit around Earth. Three of the equatorial fortresses were engaged on that first pass with propelled asteroids, with similar results to the first fortress. One of the three fortresses, hit squarely in its center of mass, saw the asteroid hitting it go clean from one side to the other, blasting an exit hole over 600 meters in diameter. All that time, the mother asteroid kept going, always presenting its thickest side to the orbital fortresses it was flying under and firing its own lasers while shrugging off the ISF laser fire. With now four fortresses utterly destroyed, the mother asteroid kept on its southward course, targeting next the fortress in southern polar orbit. When

that one got destroyed as well, some of the fortresses' commanders started asking permission from the ISF Grand Headquarters to evacuate their stations. When that permission was frostily refused by a furious Marshal Reyat Khan himself, a few commanders, seeing the futility of trying to fight the mother asteroid and its terrifying projectiles, decided to ignore Khan's orders and told their crews to evacuate their fortresses. When Khan was informed that some fortresses' crews were fleeing their posts, he flew into a rage and ordered the other fortresses to fire on the craft evacuating the crews and destroy them. That order, given as three more fortresses of the equatorial rings got smashed, was the last straw for most of the surviving commanders, who gave the order to abandon their stations. One fanatical commander that insisted on his crew to stay and fight on saw his men mutiny on him and was eventually killed in a shootout between members of his bridge crew.

All the while, the mother asteroid went on along its carousel of orbital destruction, smashing fortress after fortress, whether manned or evacuated. According to directives discussed on Callisto Prime and approved by all but Shinjo Suzuki, any ISF craft trying to flee the fortresses and passing within range of the mother asteroid's lasers was destroyed mercilessly. Even Tina Forster, with her humanist side, had agreed that no ISF member would be spared, in view of their record of war crimes. After seven hours of methodical destruction and three completed orbits by the mother asteroid, all of the original 26 orbital fortresses were reduced to twisted, lifeless hulks. Its main job now completed, the mother asteroid sent a coded message by tight beam towards the fleet of Spacer ships that had been trailing it from a safe distance, telling it that the way to Earth was open. A total of 63 transport ships loaded with weapons, ammunition, troops and attack craft and escorted by four giant cargo ships transformed into battleships then headed towards their surface objectives. The mother asteroid was however not finished yet with the ISF.

**22:17 (Universal Time)**

**Bridge of the MSS KOSTROMA**

**Internal dock of Battle Station MJOLNIR**

**Earth polar orbit**

“Docking clamps are retracted. We are free to pull out, Tina.”

“Then pull us out gently on gravity sail, Frida.”

Frida Skarsgard, strapped in her pilot’s seat and wearing her spacesuit, like the other crewmembers of the KOSTROMA, carefully worked her controls, making the nearly three million tons mass of their ship back out slowly from the docking cradle. It took a good four minutes of cautious maneuvering for the giant cargo ship to emerge fully from the aft of the battle station MJOLNIR<sup>2</sup>, earlier known as Asteroid V-6398. Once the KOSTROMA was out and floating freely in orbit over the Earth, the twelve fighter craft that had also been carried by the battle station flew out to escort it. Tina, strapped to her command chair, waited for the fighters to be deployed before giving her next order.

“Frida, move us to the vertical of Adana.”

“Aye, Captain!”

Followed by the twelve fighter craft, the KOSTROMA took up speed on gravity sail, heading towards Turkey and the base sheltering the ISF Grand Headquarters, near Adana. Apart of housing the ISF GHQ, the base contained the central arsenal of the ISF, along with the facilities and barracks of a full field division. All that had decided Tina and the members of the Spacers League leadership to make the base one of their priority targets in this operation.

As Tina had expected, no ship or fighter craft rose to challenge her ship in orbit. By alienating the TCN, the ISF had lost most of its space and air cover, having nearly solely assault shuttles and craft as flying machines. The few fighter craft it had had been assigned to the orbital fortresses and were thus now destroyed. However, Tina knew that the main ISF ground bases had defensive turrets, including a few laser batteries of relatively low power made to deal with small craft or vehicles. She could not allow herself to be complacent now, for the sake of her crew. Once at the vertical of Adana, situated on the Mediterranean coast of Eastern Turkey, Tina took a good twenty minutes to visually inspect the ISF base from orbit, using the bow telescope of the KOSTROMA. She also checked for any electronic signal coming from the base, finding out that the ISF had a rather powerful long range surveillance radar active in Adana, along with three fire control radars probably linked to the six laser turrets visible from above. The base also possessed a dozen launchers for light missiles. Dana Durning hovered besides Tina as

---

<sup>2</sup> Mjolnir : Name of the magical war hammer of the Nordic god of thunder, Thor.

the latter was looking at a magnified view of the core building of the base, seen through infra-red sensors.

“How do you plan to proceed, Tina?”

“I am not sure yet, Dana. Those laser turrets and light missile launchers will have to be taken out first, but sending our fighters after them could cost us quite a few craft. We could ask MJOLNIR to bombard the base from orbit with a propelled asteroid, but the impact would cause a serious local earthquake that could kill many innocent civilians in the region.”

“How about using our own ship’s lasers? The sky above the base is presently free of clouds. Even though some of the beams’ power will be dissipated while burning through the atmosphere, enough power should be left to take out those defenses.”

“You’re right. Let’s do so! Apart of the laser turrets and missile launchers, we will also take out the radars and the ground defense bunkers. Then, we will come down on top of the base, as we discussed yesterday.”

Dana hesitated, unsure that she agreed completely with that part of the plan.

“Are you sure that you want to do that, Tina? It would be tantamount to using a thermonuclear weapon on that base.”

Tina looked up from the viewing table, a pained expression on her face.

“Dana, I do not like it more than you do, but destroying the ISF Grand Headquarters will be essential if we really want to free the Earth from these murderous goons. Too many innocents have already suffered or died at the hands of the ISF. Zembelo and Khan were on their part more than ready to exterminate us with chemical weapons. If we let them more time, they will eventually succeed in sending a few men with lethal gas canisters. Then, tens of thousands could pay the price for our hesitations today.”

Dana thought for a moment, then nodded her head.

“Very well, Tina. I will go plot our fire plan right away.”

“Thank you, Dana.”

Half an hour later, Dana announced that her fire plan was ready and the targets locked in. Tina nodded, still standing in front of the display table showing the base through the bow telescope.

“Then commence firing!”

“Aye, Captain!”

The visual effect of firing their laser batteries through the Earth's atmosphere was a lot more spectacular than when fired in space, especially at night. The deadly beams of light brutally heated up the air along their paths, creating halos around them at the same time that an ear-busting crack similar to thunder was heard for tens of kilometers around. While a good part of the power of the beams was effectively wasted creating all that thunder and lightning effect, more than enough of it was left to hit hard the surface of the planet. The missile launchers were the easiest to take out, their missiles exploding when touched off by laser beams. The radars' electronic arrays proved nearly as vulnerable, but the laser turrets and ground defense bunkers took more time, the beams having to burn through thick slabs of concrete. In all, fourteen minutes were necessary for Dana Durning to conduct her fire plan and declare her targets destroyed. Tina, her face impassive, acknowledged Dana's statement and went to sit in her command chair, buckling her harness before giving her next orders.

"To all the crew, strap yourselves in your seats and brace for incoming turbulences. Frida, take us down on gravity sails. Engineering, be ready to fire up the main fusion drive."

In the underground command bunker built under the main headquarters building of the base, Marshal Reyat Khan was pestering his subalterns to act, even though there was in reality very little they could do now but wait and hope. There were no fighter craft to call in and no air defense batteries left to activate. Then, a sensors operator that was using a radar picture received from an antenna situated over fifty kilometers from the base spoke up.

"SIR, A BIG SHIP IS COMING DOWN FROM ORBIT, STRAIGHT ON TOP OF US."

"GIVE ME A VISUAL OF THAT SHIP, NOW!"

The operator, playing with his connections, took a few seconds to switch his display to an external infra-red camera and point it upward, zooming to maximum magnification. Khan felt his blood chill in his veins when he recognized the massive shape coming down from orbit in the night sky, easily visible even at its altitude of 86 kilometers thanks to its lighted navigation lights.

"The KOSTROMA? But, it is supposed to be a non-atmospheric capable cargo ship. And why come down like this?"

One of his aides, with a better technical education than that of the graying marshal, proposed cautiously an answer.

“Sir, if it does not go through the atmosphere at speeds above a couple of hundreds of kilometers per hour, then any ship could enter a dense atmosphere in a vertical descent, with their speed relative to the ground at near zero.”

“But why come down at all? They could have continued to fire their big lasers from orbit.”

“That, I don’t know, sir.” Said meekly the aid. “However, it may be a good idea for you to leave the base at once, before the enemy fires again.”

Khan gave him a dark look but quickly had to recognize that his aide’s counsel was judicious. There was anyway very little he could do here anymore.

“Very well, Captain. Have my runabout ready for immediate departure from the underground garage. I will be ready in a couple minutes.”

Then walking quickly to the small office he used in the bunker, one much less luxurious than his main office on the top floor of the headquarters building, Khan gathered quickly in a briefcase his most sensitive files and data cubes, plus a large sum in cash money and diamonds kept in a small safe. The head of the dreaded ISF was soon running towards the underground garage via a tunnel connecting it with the command bunker.

On the bridge of the KOSTROMA, Patricia O’Neil frowned as she watched her sensors, then looked at Tina.

“A small craft, an air car or runabout, just flew out of an underground garage under the headquarters building, Tina.”

Tina snapped her head towards the sensors display, then gave a firm order.

“SHOOT IT DOWN AT ONCE! NO CRAFT OR VEHICLE IS TO BE ALLOWED TO ESCAPE THIS BASE. GO TO WEAPONS FREE MODE!”

“Aye, Captain!”

After only six more seconds, Patricia reported again.

“Craft destroyed, Captain.”

“Good! Soon, these thugs are going to pay for their crimes.” Said Tina, not realizing that they had just made one of the worst thugs pay.

The people living around the base and in the surrounding towns and villages of the region, awakened by the noise and light from the laser beams, soon started

gathering outside their homes or on their balconies, peering up at the huge object now visible in the night sky, descending silently at the vertical towards the ISF base and with multitudes of red, blue and green lights switched on around its hull. The KOSTROMA was now visible from dozens of kilometers around and made for an astounding sight for the local inhabitants, many of them having never seen a spaceship before in their life. Few realized the true size of the ship until it came to a hover above the ISF base at an altitude of 2,000 meters. The four exhaust nozzles of the main fusion drive of the KOSTROMA suddenly roared to life in titanic blasts, projecting long, blinding plumes of hot plasma that expanded on hitting the ground. The whole base area and its immediate surroundings were awash in thermonuclear plasma within fractions of a second, with the air around also quickly heated to temperatures of thousands of degrees centigrade. Under the sustained plasma exhausts of the KOSTROMA, everything at the surface of the base melted first, then started evaporating as well. The underground bunkers and facilities were not spared either, with hot plasma filling them first via their ventilation outtakes, then with hot lava pouring in from the surface. After two minutes of ignition, the KOSTROMA's main engine throttled down to idle and the big cargo ship rose in the air on gravity sail power, climbing quickly to high altitude. The stunned and shaken inhabitants of the region, or at least the ones far enough from the ISF base to have survived, were then left to gape at the huge cauldron of red-hot magma left where the base had been. The first pictures of the magma cauldron were sent to various news agencies within minutes of the departure of the KOSTROMA, the ship itself having already been filmed in action by amateur cameramen and photographers. The impact of those images was immediate on the World's public...and on the morale inside the ISF.

**13:39 (Shanghai Time)**

**Wednesday, Marsh 29, 2316**

**Federal government complex**

**Shanghai, China**

The military liaison officer from the ISF hesitated before approaching the office of Grand Administrator Horace Zembelo: the latter didn't like bad news and he had already received plenty of those in the past hours. Arming himself with courage, the major presented his identification pass to the two ISF soldiers guarding the door of the office, who then let him go inside the antechamber used by Zembelo's secretary, a fine looking

African young woman. Normally suave and all smiles, the poor secretary was visibly on edge, probably from being screamed at repeatedly by Zembelo, who had a well deserved reputation as a horrible boss. The liaison officer thought that the poor girl really deserved better. She still forced a smile on her face when she received the major.

“What can I do for your, Major Mavutu?”

“Unfortunately, I am here to bring bad news...important bad news, Miss Zuma.”

The secretary’s face twitched on hearing the words ‘bad news’ but she didn’t say a word about that.

“Er, I will see if the Grand Administrator can receive you now, Major.”

“Thank you, Miss Zuma.”

Going to stand in a corner and wait patiently, Henry Mavutu was finally admitted after four minutes, to find Horace Zembelo staring at him with a dark look.

“What is it now, Major?”

“Grand Administrator, I am sorry to have to bring you more bad news, but the KOSTROMA just attacked and completely destroyed the ISF main training base and regional headquarters near Capetown. It happened twenty minutes ago.”

Zembelo flared up with rage, but managed to keep his voice to a decent level.

“How was it destroyed, Major?”

“The same way as the ISF GHQ in Adana, sir. The whole population of Capetown saw the destruction of the base. The KOSTROMA then made a small detour and melted down as well your private residence before climbing back into orbit.”

That little detail touched off Zembelo like a hot wire put to the priming hole of an old black powder cannon. That so-called private residence outside of Capetown had been in reality like a European Renaissance castle and had cost tens of millions of credits to build and furnish, with the lot paid with the help of the public funds skimmed off by Zembelo during his tenure as governor of Africa.

“WHAT? MY CAPETOWN RESIDENCE, DESTROYED? AND WHAT WAS THE REACTIONS OF OUR DEFENSE FORCES TO THAT ATTACK?”

Jumping over the fact that Zembelo had just shown more care about his residence than about the close to 34,000 men and women vaporized in Capetown, Mavutu answered with an impassive face.

“A squadron of assault shuttles based in Capetown took off to intercept the KOSTROMA but was totally destroyed within seconds by laser fire, sir. The same thing happened to the ground defenses of the training base.”

“THAT’S COMPLETELY UNSATISFACTORY! I WANT THE REGIONAL ISF COMMANDER TO BE SACKED FOR INCOMPETENCE. AS FOR THAT DAMN KOSTROMA, I EXPECT OUR REACTIONS TO BE BETTER NEXT TIME THAT IT COMES DOWN FROM ORBIT.”

“Yes, Grand Administrator!” Could only say Mavutu before saluting Zembelo and turning around to leave. He found Miss Zuma standing in a corner of the antechamber, apparently trying to overcome the stresses of her day by walking around, thoughtful. Mavutu then took a decision and approached her, giving her a sympathetic smile.

“Miss Zuma, I am sorry to have indirectly caused you more stress. Would you accept to have supper with me tonight, once you are free from your work.”

“Uh, the Grand Administrator may keep me quite late tonight, Major, the way things are going.”

Mavutu took out one of his calling cards and gave it to the secretary.

“I don’t mind waiting, Miss Zuma. Call me when you are free. We could also talk a bit at the same time.”

“Talk? About what, Major?” Asked the secretary, becoming a bit suspicious. Mavutu then lowered his voice to a near whisper.

“About what the near future will bring us, miss. Things may soon become quite hot here, if you see what I mean.”

The secretary, who was no empty-headed doll, nodded once and answered also in a whisper, while taking the calling card.

“I will be happy to accept your invitation once free, Major.”

“Thank you, Miss Zuma.” Replied Mavutu, smiling warmly, before leaving her to return to his own office.

**22:50 (Seattle Time)**  
**Apartment building in Seattle**  
**Pacific Coast of North America**

“Kevin, dammit, get away from the windows!”

“But, Mom,” protested the eight year-old boy to his mother, who was huddling in a far corner of the darkened family lounge with her two other children, “they can’t see me with our apartment left in the dark.”

"But if they see you, they could shoot at you. Come back here, now! You saw what happened to those who did not obey their curfew orders."

"They won't see me, Mom, I tell..."

A blinding ray of blue light outside suddenly lit up the whole apartment at the same time as an incredibly loud cracking noise shook the windows, making the small boy and his family jump from fright and surprise. A second blue lightning bolt followed the first after three seconds, followed by a third one. To her mother's utter frustration and fear, the little boy stuck his head again above the window sill, then shouted excitedly.

"MOM! MOM! COME SEE THAT! THE TRUCKS OF THE SOLDIERS ARE BURNING NOW."

At first, the mother didn't know if she should scream at her boy or go see. The dancing lights of flames coming from street level finally decided her to go to the window, where her first move was to forcibly pull down her son and wiggle an index at him.

"Kevin, I should spank you for this! Next time, you better listen to me at once. This is not a game."

Only then did the mother dare look cautiously through the window, towards the ISF check point where two civilian cars had been stopped earlier and their occupants summarily executed for having broken the eight o'clock curfew. To her astonishment, the three armored vehicles of the ISF checkpoint were now burning, twisted wrecks and many of the soldiers lay still on the pavement or were obviously wounded. A fourth blue bolt of light then nearly blinded the mother when it hit a group of soldiers that were dragging a wounded away from one of the burning vehicles. The handful of soldiers left alive then apparently panicked and ran away, leaving their dead and wounded comrades in the middle of the street.

Sending her son join his two siblings with words that left no place for discussion, the woman prayed that her husband, a city policeman that had gone underground at the start of the ISF invasion of Seattle, was still alive and safe. As she looked again at the burning ISF vehicles, wondering what had hit them, she was shocked to see two dark silhouettes come out from one of the apartment buildings lining the avenue and run to the wrecks. Now fearing the worst for the two foolhardy men, the mother watched them start to collect and sling the troopers abandoned weapons and ammunition. Another man, then two more, this time a teenage boy and a girl, soon joined in the looting. Two ISF soldiers who lay wounded on the pavement were mercilessly finished off with

repeated blows from the bats and steel bars carried by the looters. Then, nearly as quickly as they had appeared, the looters dispersed and disappeared, each one of them now carrying at least one weapon. That pleased the mother, until she thought about the reaction of other ISF soldiers when they would find their men dead and disarmed. At the least, they were going to search methodically the whole neighborhood to find back those weapons. They could also possibly take hostages as a reprisal measure, something they were said to often do. Her fears materialized ten minutes later, when four big armored carriers came rolling to the destroyed checkpoint and started disgorging dozens of ISF soldiers. Before they could form up or disperse, though, a concentration of four large blue beams coming down from the sky struck the ISF force with a thunderous crackling noise. This time, they were continuous beams, instead of short bolts, and danced around the street, vaporizing both vehicles and soldiers. This time, there were no weapons or ammunition left intact to be looted, while a good fifty meters of the avenue was turned into a puddle of red-hot lava. As she was staring wide-eyed at that scene, the woman's wrist videophone buzzed. She gasped when she saw that the caller's number was that of her husband and hurried to activate her phone.

"Bill, is that you? The screen is dark."

"It's me, honey." Said a voice she knew well, making her sob with joy.

"Thank God you're alive! Where are you?"

"Sorry, can't say that on the phone, honey. I am safe and with some friends. How are things with you and the kids? Did soldiers come to look for me?"

"Not yet, Bill. However, a total of seven ISF vehicles have been destroyed by blue rays from the sky just under our windows, plus many soldiers killed. What is going on?"

"That," answered her husband in a triumphant tone, "is laser fire from Spacer ships in orbit above Seattle. From what I have heard from the underground up to now, ISF vehicles and installations around Seattle are being systematically chased down and destroyed from orbit by the Spacers. If it continues at the present rhythm, the ISF may well be forced to abandon Seattle within days."

"Bill, some local people looted the weapons of the dead soldiers. Couldn't that attract retaliations?"

"It could, honey, but that is something we were hoping to be able to do. We need more weapons if we are to stand a chance against the ISF. Until further notice, do not go out of the apartment and do not let the kids out as well, even during daylight:

things may get very tense for the coming days. No school, no work, honey, and please ration whatever food you have left. What you have now will have to do for the next few days.”

“I..I understand, Bill. Please be careful on your side.”

“I will, honey. I will now have to shut down my phone and move to a new location, before the ISF can trace my call. Tell the kids that I love them.”

“We love you too, Bill.” Said the mother just before the line was cut. Now alone again with her kids in the dark apartment, the woman started sobbing, living through the worst time of her life yet.

**18:16 (Shanghai Time) / 02:16 (Seattle Time)**

**Federal government complex, Shanghai**

**China**

“So, where are we going for supper, Major Mavutu?”

Henry Mavutu, still in uniform, smiled while admiring Winnie Zuma, who had finally been able to leave her job for the night.

“Well, first, maybe we should go to your place, so that you can change for the occasion.”

“But, isn’t my business dress fashionable enough?”

Henry made a show of kissing her hand in front of the others passing through the main lobby of the government building, speaking to Winnie in a whisper.

“Trust me and let’s go to your place.”

Having heard a succession of bad news come in during the day and understanding that what he had in mind had to stay secret from others, Winnie played the game and followed him to a runabout parked in one of the spots reserved for officials in front of the building. Once inside, she was about to ask him what was going on when he made a gesture for her to keep silent. Mavutu then bent down and worked briefly with some wires under the instrument panel. When he straightened up, he smiled at Winnie and spoke in a normal tone.

“We can now speak freely, miss: I have disconnected the microphone hidden in the instrument panel.”

Winnie looked at him with alarm.

“Your runabout was bugged? By whom?”

"By the ISF Counter-Intelligence Branch. It is not that I was considered a security risk, but these guys are truly paranoid: they suspect everybody."

"Including me?"

"Including you, my dear. Why do you think that their branch swallows such a huge budget? They have paid snitches and electronic bugs everywhere. Their problem is that they can't believe that some other people are smarter than them."

"Some people like you, Major?"

"Yes! And please, call me simply Henry. What I am going to tell you will probably shock you, but it is the simple reality, Winnie. The days of the ISF and of Horace Zembelo are counted. The Spacers have firmly seized control of space and of Earth's orbit and are actually busy destroying the bases and installations of the ISF one by one. They even have started harassing with laser fire our troops occupying cities in the Northern Hemisphere. Allied with their stranglehold on Earth's imports from space, that means that they have for all intents and purposes won the war today, with the destruction of our orbital fortresses. It is now only a question of days and weeks before they chase down and destroy what's left of the ISF and of Zembelo's regime."

The young secretary paled at those words and put one hand on her heart.

"But, us..."

"We will also be chased down...if we stay with Zembelo and the ISF. Please don't think that I am simply an opportunist ready to jump ship at the first storm, Winnie. When I joined the ISF twelve years ago, I believed in its stated goals to uphold order and oppose those who would exploit the people. I was then young and naïve, but have since seen the true nature of the ISF: a corrupt entity pursuing power for itself. The coup against Grand Administrator Li finished opening my eyes to that. Leaving then would however have probably meant my death on suspicions of disloyalty, so I played the game and stayed on. In a sense, I was happy to work on Zembelo's staff, as I was thus able to avoid having to commit atrocities myself as part of our field troops."

"And what if you would have been selected for a combat unit? Would you have obeyed orders to kill unarmed civilians?" Asked Winnie while staring at him. Henry lowered his head, answering in a soft voice.

"I don't know if I would have had the courage to refuse such orders, Winnie. You know what can happen to those who question orders, do you?"

Winnie's expression softened and she patted gently his shoulder.

"At least you answered me honestly, Henry. If you wanted to know about me, I can tell you that my present job is just that, a job that gives me a way to pay my bills and live in fair comfort. I am no Zembelo fan, far from it."

"And he never tried to abuse his position with you?"

Henry realized at once that he had asked a wrong question when she turned her head away and hesitated.

"I'm sorry for having asked that, Winnie. I shouldn't have. Please excuse me."

"No need to, Henry." She said in a bitter tone. "Zembelo has imposed himself on many successive secretaries already. I am only the latest of what he considers his personal trophies. Unfortunately, getting him angry can have far worse consequences than just losing my job. So, what were you planning to do really tonight, Henry?"

Mavutu eyed her for a moment in silence, then decided that he could trust her and took hold of her left hand.

"What I had in mind is to go to your place, to let you pack a suitcase, then to go ask for political asylum to the Spacers."

"You, an ISF major? What makes you think that the Spacers won't kill you on sight?"

"Normally they probably would, but I have a few aces up my sleeve. Trust me, Winnie."

### **13:27 (Universal Time) / 21:27 (Shanghai Time)**

#### **Hangar Deck, MSS KOSTROMA**

##### **Low Earth orbit**

"What do we have here exactly, Bill?" Asked Tina to her head of security the moment she entered the small craft hangar. Bill Morrison showed her a display screen which gave them a view of one of the craft airlocks. A green runabout bearing ISF markings sat in the airlock, which was now pressurized, with men in spacesuits apparently inspecting it carefully inside and out.

"One of our patrolling escort fighters intercepted that runabout as it was climbing to low Earth orbit while emitting messages on the distress frequency. Supposedly, we have a pair of defectors asking for political asylum. One of them is an ISF officer, the other a government secretary. My men are presently making sure that no lethal

chemical agent or other nefarious item is aboard before letting it inside the hangar proper.”

“An excellent precaution, Bill.” Said Tina approvingly. “An ISF officer and a secretary, you said? That sounds nearly like a loving couple on the run.”

Morrison strangled a laugh at that and nodded his head.

“A few would think so, I suppose, Tina. However, that ISF officer better give us some very good reasons to treat him gently.”

“Same for me here, Bill. Well, we will soon see.”

After nine more minutes, the runabout was declared safe and was moved to the hangar. With four armed men backing him, Bill Morrison signaled to the pilot, a tall African man, to open his access hatch, which he did. Pistol in hand, Morrison shouted an order to the two occupants.

“ALRIGHT, COME OUT NOW WITH YOUR HANDS HIGH!”

The man and woman, both Africans, cautiously came out, some fear visible on the face of the woman. They were immediately searched in detail, with Tina taking care of searching the woman.

“No weapons on them, Bill.” Announced one of the security men, Lars Niström. “They however have pieces of luggage inside the runabout.”

“Then search those while I talk with those two, Lars.” Replied Morrison before eyeing the African man.

“Who are you and why do you want to defect from the ISF?”

“I am Major Henry Mavutu and I was up to now member of the military liaison team attached to the office of Grand Administrator Horace Zembelo, in Shanghai. My friend, Winnie Zuma, was the executive secretary of Zembelo. We want to defect because we disapproved of the recent policies and conduct of the ISF and of Zembelo.”

“You realized that the same day the fortunes of the ISF abruptly changed? How convenient!”

Mavutu frowned, realizing full well how flimsy his pretext could appear to be.

“Look, mister, I never did field combat duty with the ISF. I am a computer specialist by formation and have no taste for all that killing. However, in the ISF, you either follow orders and shut up or you get in trouble. I defected today because your successes gave me an opening to flee.”

"And you, Miss Zuma?" Asked Tina, who had up to now stayed in the background during the questioning. "Why are you defecting?"

"Because my job as executive secretary of Horace Zembelo was becoming more unbearable by the day and because Major Mavutu offered me an occasion to leave with him. For me, my job was just that, a job. Well-paying jobs are not common in Africa these days. However, Zembelo proved to be an abusive employer. The problem for me was that you don't just quit on Horace Zembelo."

"I see!" Said Tina, impassive. Somehow, she was tempted to believe Winnie Zuma's story. More importantly, she must have had access to many classified documents that could interest her a lot.

"Did Zembelo let you see classified documents, miss?"

"Of course! I was his executive secretary and handled all of his documents."

"Excellent! Would you be ready to discuss those documents with us?"

"If you wish so, yes."

"Then, did you see anything about the production of a lethal chemical agent, Miss Zuma?"

That made Mavutu's head snap in surprise.

"You know about that? I was going to tell you about it...on a few conditions."

Tina stepped forward to get closer to Mavutu, while leaving her security men able to cover him with their weapons. She then spoke in a cold, hard voice.

"What conditions, Major? And what do you know about them?"

"Uh, who are you, if I may ask?" Said the African man, not wanting to give up his information to just anyone.

"My name is Tina Forster, captain and owner of the KOSTROMA. So, am I important enough for you now?"

She was surprised to see a smile then appear on Mavutu's face.

"Captain Forster, you have no idea how often Horace Zembelo or Marshal Khan cursed your name in terms quite pungent."

"Really?" Said Tina, smiling in turn. "I am flattered. So, what do you know about that lethal chemical agent?"

"First, Captain Forster, I would like to negotiate what I and Winnie would get out of providing you such information."

"How about this, Major: you give me enough to satisfy me and I promise to have you two dropped safely in any location of your choice on Earth, and to forget about you afterwards. You would however have to wait in cells while I verify your information."

Mavutu exchanged a look with Winnie, who nodded her head.

"That sounds reasonable, Henry."

"I think so too." Replied Mavutu before facing back Tina. "That lethal agent is a 300 years old formula recently rediscovered by the ISF. It is extremely toxic and can act by breathing its vapors or by skin contact with droplets. It then kills within a minute by disrupting the messages sent via the nerves around the body. I don't know its chemical formula but the ISF researchers said that the only counter-measure is an immediate injection of atropine. It is presently under production in a plant hidden inside an old mine complex near Lagos, in Nigeria. That plant is heavily guarded, though. I could pinpoint that location for you on a map."

"We will certainly do that later, mister. When was the ISF planning to use it?"

"As soon as enough stocks would have been produced to be able to send infiltrators all around the Solar System. The latest estimates for that were about ten days from now. Over sixty tons of it has already been produced."

"Sixty tons!" Exclaimed Tina, horrified. "And how much of it is needed to kill a man?"

"A simple droplet on the floor of a small room would create enough lethal vapor to kill everyone in that room, Captain Forster. One man with a thermos bottle full of that agent could kill everyone in a large ship or space habitat by pouring the content in the ventilation system."

Tina exchanged a worried look with Bill Morrison.

"If that's true, then we will have to move fast."

"It is true, Captain." Assured Mavutu. "That plan to use this chemical agent was part of the reasons for me to defect: I refuse to have any part in it."

"Very well, Mister Mavutu." Said gravely Tina, dropping ostensibly the 'Major' when addressing him. "You show us the location of that secret plant and, if your info proves accurate, you and your friend will be free to go. What do you say to that?"

"That it sounds like a fair deal, Captain."

Tina nodded her head, then took out her electronic notepad and opened on it a map of Africa, zooming it to the area of Lagos and showing it to Mavutu.

"Show me the location of that plant, mister."

Mavutu obliged, using a pen to pinpoint a precise location on the map.

“It’s here, about twenty kilometers to the North-East of Lagos, on the eastern slopes of that hill. There is a small landing pad near the cave entrance of the plant.”

Marking electronically that point, Tina pocketed back her notepad and glanced at Bill Morrison.

“Alright, Bill, you can lead them to cells. They will be treated politely and will eat standard ship food from the cafeteria while we check this info out. Let them have access to their luggage, so that they can change if they want to.”

“Understood, Tina. Alright you two: follow me and no funny moves, or you will regret it.”

Winnie Zuma gave a last anxious look at Tina as she was led away with her companion. Somehow, that look convinced Tina that she and Mavutu had said the truth.

## **14:46 (Universal Time)**

### **Bridge of the MSS KOSTROMA**

“From all our overhead imagery and sensors pictures, I would say that this is indeed an underground installation of importance, Tina.” Said Patricia O’Neil, bent like Tina over a large electronic display table showing a detailed view from above of the old mine complex near Lagos. “According to archive data, this mine complex ran dry of ore over sixty years ago, yet it is evidently in activity. Even more, security around it is very tight, something an old mine would not warrant. I can count the equivalent of a full ISF battalion guarding that hill and its accesses. The thermal signatures of the air ventilation shafts of the mine show that it is occupied and active, yet no ore cart or other mining equipment is visible, apart from that pile of rusting equipment half covered with vegetation on this side of the mine. If it is not a secret government plant or installation, then I don’t know what it is.”

“Hum, with that kind of security around it, it would be near impossible to send a ground reconnaissance team there without risking heavy casualties. On the other hand, if we can believe that Mavutu, we don’t have much time left. It has to be destroyed, and quickly.”

Bill Morrison, who had been asked by Tina to attend the meeting due to his security expertise, then spoke up.

"But how? A ground assault, even with laser supporting fire from our ship, would be costly in men. Those ISF troopers would have a big advantage, defending from inside mine tunnels. Our heavy lasers might be able to burn through that hill, but we would never be sure if we really destroyed what we wanted to hit. That leaves our ship heavy missiles but, again, there would be no way for us to know if they did the job right. Don't forget that, once alerted, it would need only one ISF scientist to escape with the formula and samples of that chemical agent to perpetuate that nightmare. If we destroy that plant, then it must be destroyed completely and suddenly, so that none of the key personnel of that plant can escape."

"How about sealing all the exits of that mine complex with missile strikes and letting those bastards inside rot to hell." Suggested Patricia, making Tina think for a moment before shaking her head.

"A nice idea, if we were sure we knew where all the exits are. If they extensively modified that mine for their purpose, these bastards could as well have dug extra exit tunnels. With the jungle surrounding that hill, such exits would be very hard to find from up here. Right now, I can think of only one weapon that could do the work here. However, it is a weapon I do not want to use so close to a major city like Lagos. I am talking about one of the rock missiles of our battle station, MJOLNIR."

Patricia opened her mouth in shock while staring at Tina.

"But, such a strike would have the equivalent destructive power of a multi-megaton thermonuclear device, Tina. Millions would die in and around Lagos."

"I know, Patricia, and that is why I do not wish to use that weapon unless we absolutely have to. God, I never wanted to have to take these kind of decisions anyway."

"What about a repeat of what we did with the KOSTROMA over Adana and the Capetown base?" Suggested Morrison, again making Tina shake her head.

"Remember that it took us a good hour to descend from orbit on both occasions. With radars operational in Lagos airport, the ISF would know we are coming down well before we could be in position, thus giving them time to evacuate their key personnel and, maybe, their stocks of chemical agent as well."

"Damn, you're right about that!"

"As much as I hate to say this, I must pass the buck to someone higher than me on this, my friends. I am not ready to be responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent civilians. Patricia, have our physicists calculate the effects of a rock missile

strike from the MJOLNIR on that mine complex and its surrounding region. In the meantime, I will be preparing a message for the leaders of the Spacers League, to which I will attach our physicists' findings. Let those politicians take these kinds of decisions: they are paid to do that, not me or anyone else on this ship.”

“I certainly wouldn't want to have that on my conscience, Tina.” Agreed Patricia O'Neil.

### **19:18 (Universal Time)**

#### **Captain's day cabin, Bridge Level**

#### **MSS KOSTROMA**

Tina had taken to the habit of having a few short naps daily in her day cabin since Operation Stonehenge had started. With the multitudes of sudden decisions to take and tasks to complete, she had not had a true night of sleep in days and needed those naps to be able to keep on. In that she was no different from many past admirals and generals in human history who had to deal with the stress and exhaustion of war. This time, she was shaken awake by Patricia O'Neil, instead of being awakened by her alarm clock.

“Tina...Tina...wake up!”

“Uh?” Said groggily Tina before rubbing her eyes and looking at her clock. She had been able to sleep for thirty-five minutes this time.

“What is it, Patricia?”

“A response from the Spacers League Council came back about the strike on that mine near Lagos: the word is that a rock missile strike has been authorized. The MJOLNIR is now moving onto a new orbit to effect that strike.”

Waking up fully at those words, Tina swung her legs out of her bed and sat on its edge to put on her boots.

“When will the MJOLNIR be in position?”

“In about twenty minutes.”

“Very well. I will grab a coffee and then join you guys on the bridge.”

With her boots now on, Tina got up and went to her mirror, combing back her hair into something approaching presentable before leaving her day cabin. She went first next door to the bridge crew lounge, a small room where snack food and beverages

were available 24 hours a day, and poured herself a cup of coffee. She put a safety lid on her cup before walking out of the lounge and on the bridge: spilling hot coffee on an electronic display panel would not do. She joined Patricia O'Neil, Dana Durning, Frida Skarsgard and Bill Morrison around the same display table still showing the mining complex near Lagos. This time, though, the view had been zoomed out to show the region up to fifty kilometers around the mine, which included Lagos and its port.

"Remind me again of the expected effects of the strike, Dana."

Dana consulted a printout taken out of one pocket and put a small red circle on top of the mine location, speaking in as neutral a voice as she could.

"Even with cutting its terminal speed by limiting the burn time of its fusion drive, our rock missile's impact will be nothing short of cataclysmic. This first red circle shows the expected 1,500 meter-diameter of the crater that will be formed by the impact. That crater will be at least 200 meter-deep and, if the strike is accurate, will ensure that no part of the mine complex could possibly survive. The kinetic energy of the impact will be equivalent to close to sixteen megatons of explosive power, enough to utterly destroy everything around in a radius of at least ten kilometers. By utterly destroyed, I mean vaporized or incinerated instantly to cinder, then blasted away by the shockwave from the impact. Very severe damage to structures will result from both blast and thermal radiation in a much wider area, accompanied by an earthquake of at least eight in magnitude on the Richter Scale. I am sorry to say this, Tina, but Lagos will be wiped out completely."

"How...how many people are there in the Lagos area?"

It was Dana's turn to hesitate before answering in a weak voice.

"The last census put the population of Metropolitan Lagos at 26 million people. It is actually the fifth most populated city on Earth."

Tina closed her eyes and cringed on hearing that number, while she clenched her fists as well on top of the display table.

"Twenty-six million people... So that is the price to safeguard our own people from that chemical agent threat."

Bill Morrison put one hand on top of her right hand.

"I am sure that our leaders didn't take that decision lightly, Tina, but this is war, war against an enemy with no scruples."

"It still doesn't make it right, Bill. Necessary? Yes! Right? No!"

Despite her feelings, Tina stayed on the bridge until the time of the strike, then watched on as MJOLNIR fired away a two million tons rock missile straight down towards the Lagos area. As captain of the KOSTROMA, Tina could not ask her crewmembers to watch this while herself retreating back to her cabin. She felt increasingly sick to her stomach as the one hundred meter-diameter rock, pushed by its fusion drive to a terminal velocity of more than four kilometers per second, burned through the atmosphere in an awesome column of blinding light and fire. Being hypersonic, the missile could not be heard in advance of its impact by the inhabitants of the Lagos area, who only had the visual spectacle of its fiery dive as a clue of what was to come. Very few people realized what was going to happen to them before the rock impacted its intended target, utterly vaporizing it all, hill, mine and chemical agent stocks alike. A huge fireball many kilometers in diameter then rose in the sky, as thermal radiation and supersonic blast wave destroyed everything around and were followed by an earthquake that completed the destruction. The fireball, followed many minutes later by the mighty roar of the blast, was visible for hundreds of kilometers around Lagos, with tens of millions of spectators to the drama.

Nobody spoke on the bridge for long minutes, all eyes being on the displays showing the rising fireball and the zone around its base. Tina knew that she would never be the same person after this. She may not have done the strike herself, but she had suggested it, then let someone else take the decision. Technically, she had done things by the book, referring to those with the proper authority to decide. Being technically right was however little balm on her conscience.

"Bill, you may now let go free our two defectors. Let them have their runabout but paint over the ISF markings first and give it a civilian registry number." Morrison, as badly struck as her, nodded his head and left the bridge at a tired step. Frida Skarsgard looked at Tina's face, pale and drawn, and spoke softly.

"What are our orders now, Captain?"

"The curfew imposed by the ISF will soon take effect in Western Europe. Let's move to the vertical of Paris to be ready to harass the ISF patrols and convoys there with our laser batteries. This war is not over yet, by a long shot."

While Tina never accepted that fact afterwards, the strike on the Lagos area dealt a death blow to ISF morale and triggered a wave of desertions, especially among

the ISF support personnel still inside the ISF bases dispersed around the Earth. Facing numerous resistance forces that were quickly being armed by Spacers deliveries of weapons, and with its field forces under murderous harassing laser fire coming from orbit, the ISF started losing ground over the territories it had invaded. Its past excesses however ensured that the ISF troopers that tried to surrender got no mercy from their vengeful Terran compatriots. When the remnants of the field forces retreated to their original garrisons and bases, it was only to face destruction at the hands of the KOSTROMA or one of the other four Spacer battleships. Horace Zembelo, who fled Shanghai to go find refuge in one of his residences in Africa, was killed a week later by a dispirited bodyguard who had lost his family in the Lagos strike. His few remaining supporters, including the surviving ISF generals, then got the message and started disappearing with their ill-gained fortunes, using their money to adopt new identities for themselves, while abandoning without a second thought their subalterns to their fate. Most however were going to be hunted down, found and executed within a year. By the end of April of the year 2316, the Spacers and their Terran allies could claim victory at long last.

## **CHAPTER 11 – THE WAR IS OVER**

**15:02 (Universal Time)**

**Tuesday, April 25, 2316**

**Crew mess, MSS KOSTROMA**

**Low Earth orbit**



“...a planet-wide ceasefire is thus declared immediately and the allied Spacers and Northern Alliance forces will only fire from now on in self-defense or to protect unarmed civilians. We, the leaders of the Spacers League and of the Northern Alliance, realize that this unfortunately does not mark the end of the ignorance, distrust and hatred that caused this war in the first place. More importantly, the main problem of Earth, its gross overpopulation, still has to be dealt with. That problem will take some drastic measures and decades to fix, but the time to dance around it and avoid taking the measures necessary is well past. Those regions of Earth that have proven unable or unwilling to deal with their overpopulation problems will be put on notice to act without delay, on pain to see all federal aid and subsidies to their regions cut. Also, those who have been satisfied for years to sit at home and do no productive work while collecting social benefits will either accept the work offers done to them or see their benefits terminated. Only through those measures will Earth be able to overcome its problems of overpopulation, pollution and squandering of its precious natural resources. Also, applying those measures will not be an option, even if some regions vote against their applications. The past failed regime had too often bought votes or incited uneducated voters who knew no better to follow its short-sighted policies. No more! As well, local customs and so-called religious rules and traditions will no longer be accepted as excuses not to deal with uncontrolled population growth, pollution and mismanagement of resources. Some will scream dictatorship when faced with these measures, but those people can only blame themselves for having been unwilling to face the true problems of Earth before this war started. On its part, the Spacers League will be ready to help those who deserve it, as it always did in the past. A program of restricted emigration will soon be started for those Terrans who have the basic education and technical or scientific skills needed to live in space and who wish to leave Earth. It must however be

emphasized that Spacer worlds have only a very limited capacity in terms of population growth that it can handle safely, so emigration will be by waves of at most a few thousands at a time, and not millions. This further reinforces the point that Earth must reverse its population growth if it is to be able to survive as a viable ecosystem. Only the citizens of Earth can do that. In the name of the Spacers League and of the Northern Alliance, this is Janet Robeson, Governor of the Jovian System, wishing to you all peace and a better future.”

The crewmembers assembled in the mess for that planned announcement started discussing and commenting the speech as soon as it was over on the main plasma display screen of the mess. Tina, sitting at a table with Dana Durning, Patricia O’Neil and Rose Tillman, let her men and women discuss freely around their drinks without adding a speech of her own, preferring for the moment a more intimate discussion.

“That speech was certainly direct and to the point, I would say.” Said Dana, then taking a sip from her white wine. Tina nodded to her words.

“It was, but it had to be. Did you know that over seventeen percent of the populations of Africa and of the Indian Sub-Continent is illiterate or nearly so? The same regions that show the highest consistent rate of population growth on Earth while being the poorest. Ignorance is truly the enemy here.”

Rose Tillman, the chief engineer of the KOSTROMA, shook her head in disbelief.

“Seventeen percent illiteracy...in the 24<sup>th</sup> Century. Who would have believed that?”

“I would!” Replied Patricia. If you look closely at Earth news from those continents, the conditions you see in many small villages are still pretty damn close to the Dark Ages: no in-house sanitation or running potable water and, sometimes, not even electricity, while they still use farm animals to plow their fields. Most of these people will never be able to qualify for space emigration.”

“You can actually blame the political and social leaders of those regions, who were too happy to keep their populations in ignorance in order to better control and exploit them.”

“Well, Dana, if those same leaders stay in place, then we will have fought that war for nothing, as the problems of Earth will perpetuate themselves.” Said Patricia in a bitter tone. Tina then jumped in.

“Well, I, personally, am in no mood to have to fight again in the future because of them. Let the Northern Alliance make them swallow their medication!”

“Wow!” Said Rose while looking at Tina with some surprise. “I never saw you so passionate about politics before, Tina.”

“Having to kill 26 million people tends to change someone.” Replied Tina, who took a swig of her scotch and grimaced as the alcohol burned its way down to her stomach. The three other women looked at her with concern, with Rose finally speaking up.

“Tina, the only other alternatives would have left opportunities for those ISF scientists to flee with their damn chemical agent, apart from forcing us in a battle where we would have lost possibly hundreds of our people. Besides, you didn’t take that decision, nor did you actually do it yourself. You simply looked at the problem at hand and presented options to the Spacers League Council, which then chose the rock strike.”

“That’s not completely true, Rose.” Objected Tina at once. “I did not only presented options to the Spacers League: I recommended the rock strike as the preferred solution. Big difference.”

“And? If not you, then someone else would have, since it obviously was the only viable option if we wanted to be certain to destroy those damn chemical agent stocks and their makers.”

“But I was still the one who did the recommendation, Rose, and I will never be able to forget that.”

Dana, possibly the closest friend of Tina on the KOSTROMA, then slammed a hand on the table, making the heads snap around her, while staring hard at her captain.

“So, that will justify in your mind sinking into guilt and self-pity? Wake up and smell the coffee, Tina! We all had to do things that we would not normally have done. What the hell do you think I was thinking while calculating the effects of that rock strike prior to its firing? Did I refuse to do those calculations out of moral objections? No! I did what had to be done then, no more and no less. Do I feel regret? Damn right I do! Do I blame myself? No! The ones to blame are those ISF leaders who were planning to poison to death 340 million Spacers with their lethal gas and forced us to act, not you, me or us. So, get out of your pit of guilt and start acting again like a ship captain!”

Tina, shocked by the tone of her friend, was left speechless while everyone around stared at her. Slowly putting down her glass, she then got up and left the mess at a

hurried pace, her closed face hiding her feelings. Her three friends followed her with their eyes until she was out, then Rose Tillman looked at Dana Durning with some misgivings.

“You were quite harsh with Tina, no?”

The head navigator sighed heavily, her head low.

“I had to, Rose. Tina needs to get out of that funk, now. If not, she may lose her self-confidence, which would be very bad for this ship and all the crew.”

“I think that Dana did the right thing, Rose.” Said Patricia O’Neil. “Personally, I would hate to see Tina continue the way she has been like since the strike on Lagos.”

As the three women continued to sip their drinks in silence, Anwar Duharto, who had stayed on the bridge with a minimal duty crew, came in the mess with a message printout in his left hand, looking left and right. He then saw Dana and walked to her table.

“We just received a message from the Spacers League Council. Where is the Captain?”

“Probably in her apartment, Anwar.” Replied Dana, who then extended a hand.

“I will take the message for her.”

Anwar gave her the printout, then left to return to his duty station. Rose and Patricia crowded Dana at once as she started to read the printout.

“So, what does it say?”

“Jeesh, you impatient Irish girl!” Chided Dana, who then read quickly the printout.

“We are asked to pick up our ground fighting contingent, which is presently in Seattle, so that it can return to Hygiea and Pallas. We are then to return to Callisto and await further instructions there. I will go bring this to Tina. In the meantime, Patricia, can you go to the bridge and get us to the vertical of Seattle?”

“I think that I will go prepare to light up our fusion drive.” Said Rose Tillman, as Patricia O’Neil got up from their table. The trio then split, with Dana going down three decks to head towards the Bow Gravity Sail Deck apartments that now housed all the crew. Thankfully, she found Tina in her apartment, where she had hoped to find her. Tina’s expression was neutral when she answered her door ring.

“Yes, Dana?”

"We received this message from Callisto Prime, Captain. I already took the liberty of ordering the ship to move to the vertical of Seattle."

Tina took the message and read it quickly, then looked back up at Dana while giving her back the message.

"Very well, Dana. Advise me when our ground contingent will be about to fly in, so that I can greet them in the hangars."

Tina then hesitated, briefly looking down before eyeing back Dana, a hint of a smile on her face..

"About what you said to me in the mess, Dana: you were right about me. Thanks for the straight talk."

"Hey, what are friends for, if not to tell it to you when you need it?" Replied Dana, suddenly feeling much better. She then turned around and made her way back to the bridge.

## **20:34 (Universal Time)**

### **Lower Hangar Deck, M.S.S. KOSTROMA**

The weary men and women, along with the sprinkling of teenagers in their ranks, got out of their heavy personnel shuttle to find most of the crew of the KOSTROMA lined up in the cavernous hangar and cheering them wildly. The members of the ground combat contingent, breaking into smiles at that reception, started shaking the hands of those around, while the few members who had spouses or parents on the ship went to hug them, some with tears in their eyes. Two young teenagers from the KOSTROMA who had been with Michel Koniev's ground contingent since the Mars expedition got a most special hero's welcome from their parents and friends. On her part, Tina Forster greeted personally Michel Koniev, who was still wearing his combat gear and had a sober look on his face, with an accolade.

"Welcome back, Michel. I am happy to see that you are in one piece." Koniev made a weak smile while looking into her grey eyes.

"Thank you, Tina. Your ship's support did a lot to help us during the fighting. Unfortunately, not all of us made it out intact. Our dead and wounded are inside the shuttle. In all, since our departure from Pallas in December, 27 of us got killed and another 61 were wounded."

Tina let her pain show at those numbers: she already knew that one young teenager from the KOSTROMA, a fourteen years old boy, was part of the dead, while another teenager had been wounded, thankfully not to a serious degree.

“Those are painful losses indeed, Michel. Let’s disembark them with the honors they are due.”

Using a microphone tuned to the loudspeakers of the hangar, Tina then gave a few short orders.

“WE WILL NOW LET OUR DEAD AND WOUNDED COME OUT OF THE SHUTTLE. PLEASE CLEAR THE AREA OF THE SHUTTLE’S RAMP. PARAMEDICS AND MEDEVAC TEAMS, COME FORWARD!”

Many in the crowd of crewmembers, including dozens of teenagers, went to the anti-gravity stretchers lined up in one corner and quickly pushed them towards the shuttle, climbing the rear ramp and disappearing inside its hold. At the same time, the walking wounded of the ground contingent came down the ramp, to be immediately offered seats in a small fleet of anti-gravity carts. They were then driven away towards the ship’s medical center while cheered by the crowd. The 42 litter cases were also cheered when they were floated out of the shuttle, with shouts of encouragement echoing as well. Then it was time to take out the dead. Calling the crowd to silence, Tina had a deck hand pipe an arrival, then signaled him to start a recording. The timeless, mournful bagpipe music of ‘Amazing Grace’ resonated through the hangar as the first of 27 coffins, draped with the flag of Hygieia, was carried out of the shuttle and put on a cargo platform, to be carried towards the ship’s morgue like the others after it. Tina and Michel Koniev stood at respectful attention as the dead were brought out of the shuttle and carried away. Once that was done, Tina spoke up to those still present, crewmembers and ground fighters alike.

“HOPEFULLY, THIS MARKS THE END OF OUR SACRIFICES IN THIS WAR, MY FRIENDS. YOU ALL FOUGHT AND SERVED WITH COURAGE, DETERMINATION AND COMPETENCE. YOU CAN ALL BE PROUD OF YOURSELVES TODAY. WE ARE NOW GOING TO LEAVE FOR HOME, FIRST FOR HYGIEIA, THEN TO PALLAS AND CALLISTO, SO THAT YOU CAN ENJOY SOME WELL-DESERVED TIME OFF WITH YOUR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS.”

The cheers brought out by that announcement could not be more heartfelt then.

**22:49 (Universal Time)****Tina Forster's apartment****Bow Gravity Sail Deck**

Tina, having come from the bridge barely fifteen minutes earlier after setting her ship on a course for Hygiea, answered her door ring to find a smiling Michel Koniev on the porch. He was now wearing a clean civilian outfit and had shaved. His sight warmed up Tina's heart at once.

"Michel? What can I do for you at this hour?"

"Let me in, maybe." Replied with a grin the tall, blond security officer.

"Oh, of course!" She said before stepping out of the way to let him in. Only then did she notice the bottle in his hands. Michel presented her the bottle as she was about to ask what it was.

"May I present you a little present that I collected for you in Seattle?"

"A bottle of 2299 red Chateau Laffite wine? My god! It must have cost you a fortune!"

"Maybe." Said Michel with a grin. He was not going to tell her that he had been given that bottle by a rich Seattle citizen whom he had saved in extremis from looting ISF soldiers. However, it was the intention that counted, like they said. Tina admired the bottle's etiquette for a second before showing him the entrance of her lounge.

"Please, make yourself comfortable, Michel. Anything to drink for you?"

"A simple mineral water will do: I am quite tired and it wouldn't take much to knock me out."

"I still have a couple of bottles of Ceres mineral water, I believe. I won't be long."

While Tina went to her small kitchen corner, Michel went to sit in one of the sofas of the lounge and started looking down at the large round floor viewing port showing the giant aquarium running under the apartments of this level. Only then, as he was relaxing, did he realize how truly tired he was. He had to fight off his fatigue before Tina came back with two glasses of mineral water and gave one to him before sitting besides him on the sofa.

"So, happy to be going home, Michel?"

"Very much so, Tina. It will be nice to return to simple bar brawls and cheating gamblers after this bloody war."

Tina giggled at his tone of voice.

“Sounds like your job on Hygiea can be quite interesting.”

“At times it is. I certainly get to meet all kinds of interesting people with kinky tastes or weird habits. And you?”

“Me? I simply fly from point to point around the Solar System and load or unload cargo: nothing very exciting, really.”

“Except if you run into pirates, of course.”

“Of course!”

They were then silent for a while, looking discreetly at each other but staying in their respective corners of the sofa while sipping their mineral water. Michel finally decided to make a move.

“So, what will you do once back in the Jovian System, Tina?”

Tina’s eyes became dreamy as she thought about something.

“First, I will go get back the spouses and kids of my crewmembers that we sent to the safety of Triton before going to war. Without kids running around, my ship nearly feels empty. Next, I will go see the Jovian Shipping Lines, to check in what state the interplanetary trade is following this war. Many things have changed, especially on Earth, but I have to think about obtaining new shipping contracts, so that I can continue to sustain my ship and crew. Things may be tight at first, especially considering what this war cost to everybody, both in lives and treasure.”

“All that was about your ship. What about you, Tina?”

“Me?” Asked Tina, genuinely surprised. “And what about me?”

“Well, apart from driving a ship around space, do you have any personal projects in mind?”

“Uh, I don’t really have much else in mind at the moment. I have been living on this ship for thirteen years now and it has become both my life and my home. I actually truly love this ship.”

“Answered like a true Spacer.” Said Michel with a smile.

“And you?” Replied Tina. “Do you have any personal projects?”

“Well, I have to say that I am a man of action and am not attracted by anything that would land me behind a desk. On the other hand, I like meeting new people, which makes my present job quite satisfying. So, here we are, two people dedicated to their jobs and having no desire to change.”

“Here we are, indeed.” Said softly Tina while looking Michel directly in the eye. “Sounds like we could grow old before deciding to settle down from our jobs, you on Hygiea and me in some corner of the Solar System.”

“Indeed!” Replied Michel, becoming suddenly quite sober. “Tina, I know that we will have to say goodbye to each other in two weeks and that we then may never meet again. You have however made quite an impression on me during the last months and I would like to keep in contact with you once I disembark on Hygiea. Would you mind that?”

A warm feeling went through Tina as Michel said those words in a tone that was nearly pleading. She had come to admire him for his courage, strength and honesty. That admiration had however turned lately into attraction for that splendid man. Putting down her glass of mineral water on the low table in front of the sofa, she slid on the sofa to snuggle against him, looking softly into his blue eyes.

“I would be happy to stay in contact with you, Michel. In truth, we have had too little time to get to know each other during those months of war. Of that time, too much of it was spent by me worrying if you would make it alive and well. Let’s take the next two weeks to learn about each other.”

She then approached her lips to his, with Michel meeting her half-way. He put down his own glass and used his arms to hold her as they kissed. Still holding each other, they got up from the sofa a minute later and walked slowly towards her bedroom.

**16:14 (Universal Time)**

**Wednesday, May 24, 2316**

**Bridge of the M.S.S. KOSTROMA**

**Arriving in low Callisto orbit**

**Jupiter System**

“We are now on automated final approach to the Callisto Prime Space Terminal, Tina. Docking estimated in seven minutes at Docking Station 5.”

“Thank you, Frida, and congratulations: that was a nice, smooth approach.”

As Tina was about to give another order, she suddenly saw on the viewer screens the navigation lights of the space terminal and of all the ships already docked or floating in proximity to the terminal starting to quickly blink in unison. Blood rushed to her brain as

she recognized the old custom meant to salute the arrival of a meritorious or exceptional crew or ship.

“Frida, blink our navigational lights in response: we are getting a heroes’ welcome, guys.”

There were a few happy comments and exclamations around the bridge as the duty crew realized the honor they were receiving. Then, Patricia O’Neil spoke up, joy in her voice.

“Tina, I am getting a message from our heavy personnel shuttle TROUBADOUR: our families have returned from Triton and are here. I have Piotr Romanski on line for you.”

Tina took no time to switch her video screen to the incoming call, making the head of the jovial purser and financial officer appear.

“Piotr! You can’t know how happy I am to see you here.”

“And you can’t know how relieved we all are here to see the KOSTROMA returning safely and in one piece. We heard many scary stories about the battles you fought. We ask permission to fly in once you will have completed your docking procedure.”

“Permission granted, TROUBADOUR. I am going to reserve my first accolade to you, Piotr. See you on the Lower Hangar Deck.”

Now feeling like a million credits, Tina finished giving her last orders for the docking and let her crew do the rest. When the last docking clamps and communications tubes were declared secure, she switched her microphone to the ship intercom mode.

“Attention all hands, this is the Captain speaking! We are now docked safely to the Callisto Prime Space Terminal. You may secure from flight stations. All the crew, except for minimum manning requirements, is invited to join me in the Lower Hangar Deck to go greet our shuttle TROUBADOUR, back from Triton.”

She could nearly hear the cheers that then rang around the ship at her announcement. With a big grin of anticipation, she got out of her command chair and, accompanied by all but three of the bridge crew, walked towards the central elevator shafts.

When she walked in the Lower Hangar Deck, Tina saw on a video monitor that the TROUBADOUR was just about to enter one of the four giant airlocks, each with openings eighty meters in width and height, connected to the lower hangars. Nearly all the 239 persons aboard the KOSTROMA were either already in the hangar or were

streaming in from the central axis elevator shafts, eager to greet their spouses, children or friends. This time, Tina stayed in the back ranks at first, so that mothers and fathers could have the first shot at receiving their children on the TROUBADOUR. They had to wait another eight minutes before the sealing and pressurizing of the airlock could be completed, allowing the shuttle to float slowly inside the hangar, with the waiting crowd staying well away until it landed softly on the steel deck. The moment that the shuttle's access ramp lowered and that the first children and young mothers with babies started coming down, the men and women that had been waiting broke rank with happy screams and ran to their loved ones, hugging or raising them in their arms to kiss them. That moment of pure love and joy warmed Tina's heart, nearly bringing tears to her eyes. Only when Piotr Romanski appeared at the top of the ramp did she start to make her way towards the shuttle, walking around celebrating families and couples. Piotr, once at the foot of the ramp, let go his two pieces of luggage so that he could share a warm hug with Tina.

"It is good to see you and the others, Piotr. I hope that you didn't worry too much about us in Triton."

Piotr took a step back to look with gleaming eyes at her.

"What we heard about the 'Mighty KOSTROMA' sure scared some of us a bit, but it also made us all proud, Tina. If we could believe the Jovian News Network, you defeated by yourself more than half of the Terran Navy and expelled the ISF from Mars." Tina's grin faded somewhat then and she replied with a hint of regret in her tone.

"Killing men and women in combat, even when it is necessary, was not something I enjoyed, Piotr, believe me. We did what had to be done to free Mars from the grip of Earth. Unfortunately, we had to kill more people to rid Earth of the ISF and Zembelo...a lot more people."

Piotr nodded his head slowly, no trace of disapproval on his face as he stared into Tina's eyes.

"I know what you are talking about, Tina. In war, unsavory options are often all that you have. The ISF and Zembelo are to blame for what happened to Lagos, not you nor the Spacers League."

"Thank you for your understanding, Piotr, I really appreciate that. We were lucky on the KOSTROMA, but our ground contingent took some severe losses, unfortunately. One of our volunteer teenagers, Robin Westwood, was killed in combat during the retaking of Ares City, while Patricia Kendrik got wounded."

"Their mothers know already, Tina: the Jovian Administration kept us informed via regular bulletins and electronic mail sent to Triton. It was hard on Misses Westwood but she is starting to get over the worse of it now."

Piotr couldn't help glance in the direction of a mature couple, with the man and woman crying in each other's arms, as he spoke. Tina looked briefly at the Westwood, then back at Piotr.

"Let me go speak a bit with the crew of your shuttle, to thank them. You are of course invited to have supper at my table tonight."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to refuse such a kind invitation, my dear." Replied Piotr with a big smile. Tina was about to walk up the ramp of the shuttle when her wrist videophone buzzed, making her flip open its small display screen. Patricia O'Neil was visible on it and spoke at once.

"Tina, I have a communication from Governor Robeson for you. I am transferring it to you now."

Tina did not have the time to worry about what that call could be about before Janet Robeson's head replaced that of Patricia.

"Ah, our intrepid battleship captain! I am sorry to disturb you so early after your arrival, Captain Forster, but this won't take long. Basically, I would like you to come to my office in Callisto Prime tomorrow morning, for nine o'clock. I need to discuss a few things with you."

"With me, Madam Governor? And what will we be discussing, if I may ask?"

"Your future, Captain." Said Robeson with an enigmatic smile. "Can I count on your presence tomorrow morning?"

"Certainly, Madam Governor!" Could only say Tina.

"Excellent! Have a good evening, Captain Forster."

"You too, Madam Governor." Had time to say Tina before the line was cut, leaving her wondering aloud.

"My future? What did she mean by that?"

"You will know tomorrow morning." Said philosophically Piotr, shrugging at the same time that he smiled.

**09:05 (Universal Time)**

**Thursday, May 25, 2316**

**Office of the Governor of the Jupiter System**

## **Government center, Callisto Prime**

### **Callisto moon, Jupiter**

“Please sit down, Captain Forster! I am sorry if I had to make you wait a bit, but a little matter needed my immediate attention. So, how are your ship and crew after all these battles?”

Tina, wearing her best shipboard outfit, sat in the sofa presented to her by Janet Robeson before answering her.

“Crew-wise, I lost one young member on Mars during the fighting for Ares City, plus had one more young member wounded there, but not seriously. My ship is fully operational, with my only battle damage being a number of furrows dug by laser beams in my bow shield.”

Janet Robeson, sitting in an easy chair facing Tina's sofa, nodded her head.

“I am truly sorry for the loss of your crewmember, Captain Forster. As for your ship's damage, my administration will pick up the bill for your repairs. It will also reimburse you for the fuel and consumable supplies you used up during the war while in the service of the Spacers League. Your purser needs only to send the bill for their replacement to my office and I promise that it will be paid out without fuss.”

“That is most generous of you, Madam Governor.” Said Tina, feeling relief. She had not wanted to bring up that subject, for fear of appearing like a vulgar mercenary when she had actually fought out of patriotism. However, that bill for fuel, food and other consumables she had used during those months of war totaled over 115 million credits. Even for her bank account, that was not an inconsequential number. Robeson then spoke again.

“Before you worry about me trying to enroll you in some new Jovian Navy, don't, Captain! I know that you didn't enjoy having to kill and can fully understand you about that. Besides, the Spacers League is resolved not to commit the same mistake as Earth did by spending huge amounts of money and resources on military forces. The economic and social priorities we had before the war still stand today. However, we clearly need to be better prepared if someone ever threatens us again, be it by this ragtag Southern Federation emerging out of Africa and India and holding a grudge for the ouster of Zembelo, or some rogue surviving ISF elements that could turn to piracy. This subject was discussed extensively between me and the other leaders of the Spacers League and we came to a common accord on what we need to do. Simply put,

instead of forming a standing navy and army, we will use the merchant ships armed for this war as a reserve force, while our standard police and security forces will all receive basic combat training and will have combat weapons held in store. Call it a kind of people's militia, if you will."

"And that merchant ships reserve force, how is it going to work exactly, Madam Governor?"

"The concept is actually simple, Captain Forster. The merchant ships armed for war by the Spacers League or, in the case of your ship, those that had armed themselves out of their own initiative, will be allowed to keep their armaments and combat systems and will receive government subsidies to maintain these systems and weapons. In times of peace, when no crisis is in sight, those ships will continue to ply the space trade routes like they did before the war. If, however, a crisis erupts, then the Spacers League will reserve the right to recall these armed merchant ships into military service, with their expenses and payrolls then taken care by the government, and that for the duration of the crisis. The crews of those ships will have military reservist status and will get a small monthly stipend, in exchange for brief periodic training that could be held via distant learning methods. The one point out of this of import to you, Captain Forster, is that you will have to obtain the consent of each of your crewmembers to become reservists. In view of the stellar performance of your crew in combat during the war, I believe that won't be a problem in the case of your ship."

"It effectively won't be, Madam Governor." Replied Tina without hesitation. "Will we have to wear some kind of uniform as reservists?"

"I don't think so. We are still sorting those small details out, but the most you may have to wear when in service will probably be simple patches or brassards. As for your ship, it will bear the acronym A.S.S., for Armed Space Ship, instead of M.S.S., before its name."

"That sounds simple enough, Madam Governor." Said Tina, attracting a malicious smile on Robeson's face.

"Ahh, but wait, Captain! You have proven to be a master tactician when it comes to space combat, as well as showing strong leadership skills. We can't possibly let you stay a simple ship captain if we have to fight again. Don't worry: we would not even dream of trying to pull you out of your beloved KOSTROMA. What we have in mind, if you accept, is to give you the reserve rank of Fleet Captain, with the authority to take

command of our battleship squadron in time of war. What do you say to that, Captain Forster?"

Tina was left speechless for a moment as Robeson waited patiently for her answer.

"Uh, I am not sure that I deserve such a position, Madam Governor."

"Sure, you do!" Replied the politician. "You are simply too modest to accept that fact."

"Then, I suppose that I can't say no."

"I won't let you!" Said Robeson with a grin. "Then I consider this done. I will come back to you in the next few days with the details concerning the reserve status of your ship. Now, what are you planning to do in the near future?"

"Well, I will see if I can get a shipping contract for my ship, Madam Governor: I am in the business of commerce and must make a living, for me and my crew. This brings me to something that is worrying me: what about the interplanetary space trade? With the new situation on Earth, with its split governments, things certainly won't be the same as before."

"Actually, my experts would disagree with you, Captain. Earth is certainly divided now, but individual regions, including the Northern Alliance, will still have a need for space resources, while they can provide us with useful goods. Furthermore, the Terran Federation Council isn't there anymore to suck our tax revenues and waste tens of billions of credits on military forces, or to veto our development plans to concentrate instead on supporting a mass of unproductive people. We are now in a truly free market for the first time in over a century and we in the Spacers League are going to use that freedom. For one thing, we can now go ahead with many projects that had been frozen or nixed by the Terran Federation, like the Mars Terramorphing Project and the Eris Expedition."

Tina's ear got up at the mention of 'Eris Expedition'.

"The Eris Expedition? It is going to be launched at last?"

"I certainly have my mind made up to launch it as soon as feasible, and so is Governor Perez, on Titan. Titan still holds fabulous amounts of precious hydrocarbons and nitrogen, but we will need a second source of hydrocarbons in the decades to come, especially if we are serious about letting many emigrate from Earth. We are in fact already in need of expanding our capacities to house, sustain and occupy a growing population, but had been impeded by the Terran Federation Council and its misguided priorities. It has already been over eighty years ago since an automated deep space

probe briefly studied the dwarf planet Eris and the other Trans-Neptunian Objects before falling silent. We learned then that Eris holds vast amounts of methane, nitrogen and water ice and could become a viable world for human occupation, or at least exploitation. I believe that the time has come to seriously explore the potential of Eris. Eris is presently about 54 Astronomical Units from the Sun, further away than even Pluto, and moving away from the Sun. With its orbital period of 557 years, it won't get close again to Pluto's orbit before five centuries from now. I further believe that your ship is the only one capable of carrying a large prefabricated base to Eris and sustaining a deep space mission more than one year long. Would you accept such a mission?"

It was as if thunder had struck Tina at those words: She may be put in charge of what could well become one of the most significant space missions of Humanity's history. Getting up from the sofa, she stood in front of Robeson, a happy smile on her young face.

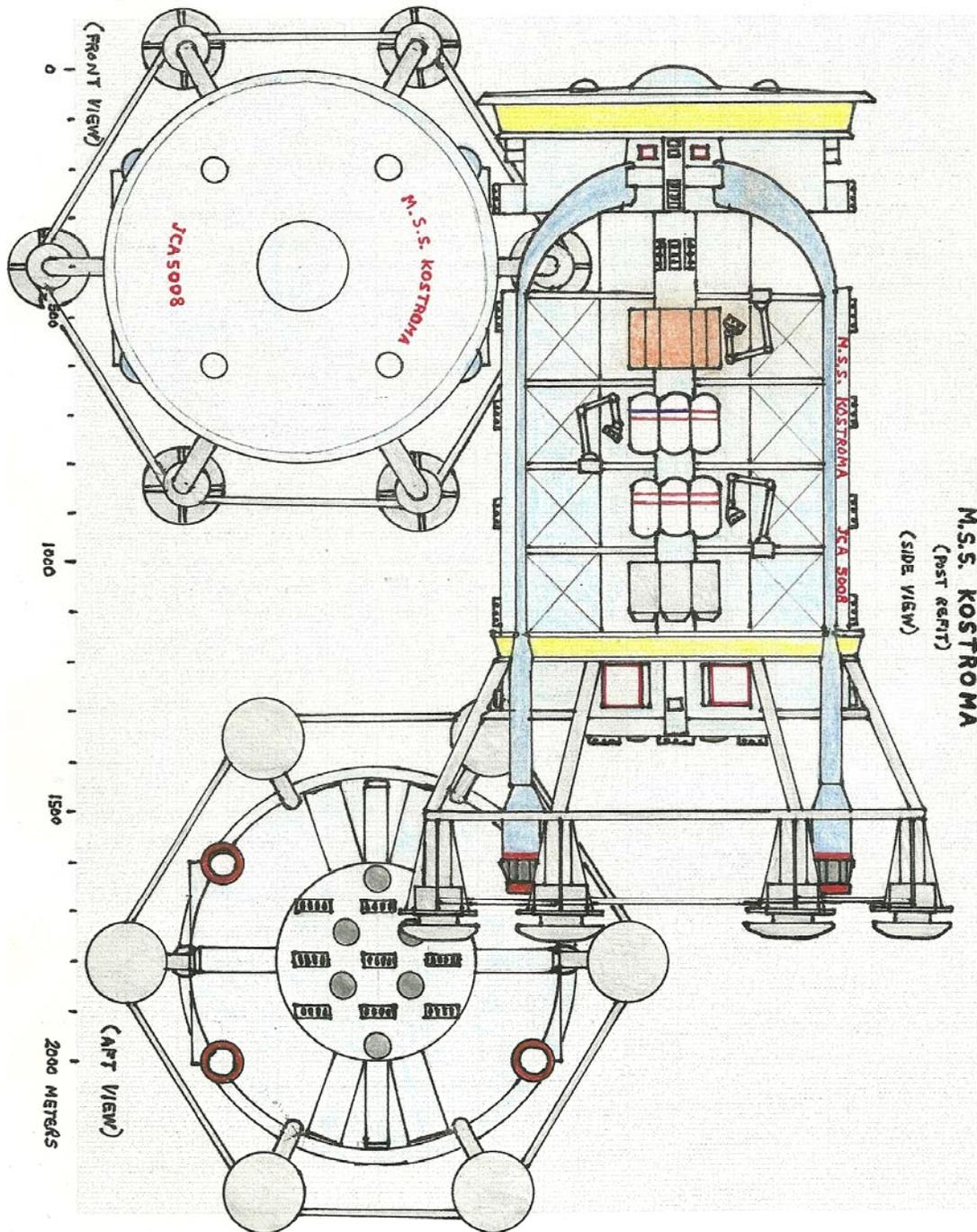
"Madam Governor, it would be a true honor for me to be selected for such a mission."

"Then, consider yourself in, Captain Forster." Replied Robeson, also getting up and extending her right hand for a shake. "The expedition should be ready to leave for Eris in about a year. I am sure that you and your crew will be up to that challenge."

"We will be ready, Madam Governor." Promised firmly Tina while shaking hands with Robeson.

# M.S.S. KOSTROMA

(Post refit)



## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Bill Yenne, The Atlas of the Solar System, Bison Books, Greenwich, CT, 1987.
- Pierre Kohler, L'Homme dans le Cosmos, Éditions Hachette, France, 1982.
- Kenneth Gatland, The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Space Technology, Salamander Books Ltd, Crown Publishers Inc., New York, 1981.
- Numéro Spécial N° 20H: À la surface de Mars, Espace-Magazine, Paris, 2006.
- Space pictures courtesy of NASA.