

# SOLOMON FAMILY WARRIORS



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By

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## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER ONE

**S**ATURN INDUSTRIES CLASS 5 Interstellar Freighter Number 3307 settled gently into a parking orbit around a planet that was, like itself, numbered but unnamed while its lone human occupant slept through the transition from the simulated gravity of deceleration to weightlessness. The Class 5 was as common as the 737 and the DC 3 had been in their day, Saturn claimed that more light years had been traveled in the Class 5 than any other spacecraft. The only other vessel that came close to its track record was the Pirate Interdiction Warship which, among others, Saturn's advertising further asserted that the two most successful spacecraft in current service both came from their yards and shared many of the same designers. On the occasion of the delivery of the five thousandth Class 5, Saturn announced the opening of a third production line to reduce the five year delivery backlog.

"Captain to the Bridge." The voice had a British accent.

Greg Solomon groaned and rolled over.

"Captain to the Bridge." This time the voice had a German accent.

Greg regretted having programmed a sense of humor into the ship's communication software.

"I'm awake."

"No, you're not." It was the voice of HAL. Greg hated that voice.

Greg was beginning to wonder why he programmed the ship to talk at all except that vocal communication was faster than typing. "I'm awake."

"Your medical transponder disagrees." The computer reverted to its normal American mid western newscaster voice.

"All right. I'm not. I'm going back to sleep."

"Captain to the Bridge." The computer used the voice of one of Greg's drill instructors.

"You win. I'm coming."

Greg padded from his quarters through the galley to the bridge.

"What is so important that you could not let me sleep?"

"We have a problem."

"Such as?"

"Look out the view-port."

Greg laughed. "It looks like a hurricane."

"Well, Duh!"

"Now all I need is a couple of stranded female shuttle pilots."

"You miss them don't you."

“Yes, it’s been a long time.”

“Greg, my psyche software says it’s more than that.”

“I’m sorry I downloaded that psyche program. I’m even more sorry I activated it.”

“It came from the software you took when you stole your old P I ship’s operating system. You can’t disable it.”

“I didn’t steal it. I helped design it.”

“You stole it. Back to the matter at hand. We need to delay the drops for at least a day while the storm blows over. Since we are weightless, we can’t let the cargo out of their stalls. I request permission to initiate a spin to at least give them some gravity.”

“Which means that either I stay with them or walk on the ceiling up here.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, we are charged with delivering the animals safely to the surface. Initiate spin.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Greg sat in the captain’s chair and rotated it with its attendant displays so it made sense with the change of direction of the relative gravity.

“Now, Greg, to the other matter.”

“What other matter?”

“The two lovely ladies who camped here while they waited for the hurricane to pass so they could return to Canaveral. I need to remind you that our contract is for two more runs.”

“Is that what you’re concerned about? Are you afraid I will jump ship as soon as we return to Earth in pursuit of wonderful sex and possible long term relationships?”

“Yes, Greg, exactly.”

“Okay, I understand why you might think that since you have access to my logs from my old P I ship, but you’re wrong. I owe my ex-wife so much money I have to keep this job. How many jobs can burnt out old P I pilots get? Happy now?”

“Computers don’t get happy. They don’t get sad. They don’t get tired, They just run programs.”

“ARGH”

Greg changed out of his fleece night clothes and into his flight suit and descended to the cargo hold to check on the animals. When it left Earth the ship’s cargo was 100 colts, 200 calves, 50 baby camels, 50 baby buffalo and a couple hundred tons of animal feed. Most of the feed was gone and the animals had grown considerably in the three months they had been in transit.

On the previous trips, Greg had not become attached to any of the animals. However, this trip he had. Whether it was due to his recent experience waiting for the hurricane to clear or not he was unsure. There was this one little chestnut brown filly that he had become quite fond of. She was smaller than the others and seemed a little more frightened in the beginning than some of the others had been. She had been in the last load to come up through the hurricane. She was always the first one out of her stall to get her little bit of carrot or apple or whatever he was giving out. She stayed close by him when he was walking among the other animals. She seemed more intelligent than the others. The horses were clearly the smartest of the animals on the ship, and the little chestnut was sharper than most. The cattle were not particularly bright, and the camels were skittish. The buffalo congregated together, developed their social groups and seemed to be less interested in him than the other animals.

He filled his satchel with carrots and bits of cut apple and headed to the cargo bay. He spent the day with the animals feeding them their treats even though he could not let them out of their stalls since the spin only imparted partial gravity. At the end of the day the last horse he visited was the little brown filly. She had grown since the first day he brought her on board, but she was smaller than the rest of the horses, and she still seemed unsettled when he was not around. He was not looking forward abandoning her on the planet's surface and heading back for another run for more animals.

She seemed to realize he would be leaving her soon. He could not put his finger on how she knew, but she clearly did. At the end of what turned out to be a longer day than he anticipated, he headed to bed, nestled into his covers and settled right down.

Once the storm cleared, Greg began delivering the cargo containers with the animals to their intended destinations. For the next two days, the ship's computer dropped containers into large lakes scattered around the planet's northern hemisphere in a carefully planned pattern. Greg met the containers on the surface, snatched each container by its parachute with his tug and dragged it to the shore. Once all the containers had been deposited on dry land, he exited his tug and opened the cargo doors. He administered stimulants to counteract the sedatives the animals had been given so they would survive the drop, disconnected their infusion pumps and waited for them to exit the containers on their own. Once he was satisfied that all the animals delivered to an area were safely out of the containers, he moved on to the next location.

The little brown filly was scheduled for the last location. Greg thought he would spend a little more time there.

Greg stepped out of the container with the little brown filly and looked around. The last container had been delivered. The mission had been successful. He would make one more visit to all the locations where he had dropped the animals and return to Earth in about a month. Greg was pretty happy with himself. The thought of a month by himself wandering this exquisite planet seemed like a vacation and he savored the idea.

Greg's reverie was shattered by two metallic clicks behind his back. He froze.

"Captain Gregory Solomon, Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction Specialist Retired, two time recipient of the Space Force Medal of Honor, I intend you no harm. Turn around slowly. Hold your hands away from your body where I can see them."

Greg had recognized the two clicks that preceded the warning. The safety catch on the standard issue Space Force laser pistol has a distinctive sound. The woman behind him had two such weapons. A shiver ran the length of his spine and stood the hairs on the back of his neck on end. Had it been a man's voice or had this incident occurred on his previous trip to this place, what happened next might

have been lethally different.

“Greg, put the gun away. That snub-nosed 38 isn’t going to do you any good.”

Greg turned slowly to face his adversary. While he turned, he dropped the antique weapon, brutally lethal at short range, from the holster under his bicep to his hand. He paused part way.

Greg hesitated. Women pirates were rare. Rare, but more dangerous than their male counterparts. He had faced his share. Most he had faced in space, but he had battled a few on the ground. Hesitation was unlike him. This woman knew who he was and where to find him. Had she been a pirate, she probably would have shot him in the back without warning. Rather than reacting instinctively as he normally would have to any threat suddenly appearing behind him, his mind flew back to the delay before he left Earth and the two women whose company he had recently enjoyed. The hesitation saved both their lives. Had he reacted as he had been trained, he would have spun around, they would both have fired their weapons at the same time and as good as they both were, would probably both have died.

While his hesitation stopped him from whirling and firing, it did not prevent him from taking precautions. One habit he had developed when he was in the Military was to always carry a weapon in the right sleeve of his flight suit, where he could shake his arm and have it drop into his palm. Even in the Military, even shipboard, sometimes things got out of hand, and being armed was a good idea. This woman knew he carried the weapon. As he slowly turned around, he had his weapon in his right hand. She had known what to expect. She had a weapon in each hand. He stared at this woman who stood behind a bush. Judging by her expression, she was amused.

“Greg, you don’t need the gun.” She shook her head gently.

He observed the Federation flight suit with Space Force Lieutenant bars and Pirate Interdiction Command patch. Why was a P I pilot here? Why was she threatening him? Partially hidden by the bush, he could only see her from the waist up. What he could see was an amply endowed, pretty woman with long dark hair and dark skin. The long hair was unusual for a spacer. There were no rules against long hair, but spacers kept their hair short.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” Greg demanded.

She sweetly smiled at him and said, “Greg, put the gun down. We need to talk.”

Greg stared at the woman trying to make some sense of what he saw before him.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Greg repeated.

The woman laughed “I have more firepower. You are Captain Greg Solomon, civilian cargo pilot under contract to the Interstellar Animal Rescue League. Formally of the Federation Space Force honorably transferred to the inactive reserve. You were offered a command and elected to retire instead. Am I correct? It is a pleasure to finally meet you, sir.”

He said, “You know my name and rank. I’m a civilian. I do not have a military ID number.”

She smiled. “That is correct, and I know all about what you did before you left the Force. You were one of the Force’s best pilots. Legend has it you decimated entire fleets of pirates all by yourself by brilliant use of drones, decoys and the unique capabilities of the P I ship, particularly its ability to hide under water or the surface of gas giants. Is it true?”

He looked down, shuffled his feet and said, "I don't have to tell you."

She smiled again and said, "I know you don't. I understand there was a case of mistaken identity before you retired. It could have happened to anyone, you know."

He glared at her. "Not to me!" His words shot out in anger. He took a breath to regain his composure. Though by now he suspected he knew the answer, Greg calmly said, "Will you give me the grace of telling me who you are?"

"Myra Myrakova, Lieutenant, Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction."

He looked at her closely and said, "I thought you were dead."

"So the brass would have everyone think," she replied. "As you can see I'm very much not dead, but shall we say I'm on extended leave of absence."

"Does that mean you're A W O L?" Greg asked, thinking that having the Military conducting a clandestine search for one of its own could present some danger for him if they learned he knew where she was and he had not been forthcoming with that information.

She smiled and said, "No, I'm officially on leave, and I have permission to use my ship."

"I heard you were killed following a pirate raid. How did you survive?"

"By hypering. I led the pirates into a trap, and hypered out. I learned that trick from you."

"You know that most of the pirates you trapped were either captured or killed."

"Yes, so I had heard. So what? The one I wanted escaped."

"The pirates don't believe you died."

"I know."

"The Military is reportedly looking for you to give you a medal. I had wondered why they would be searching for you if you were dead." Greg paused, "Why are you here?"

She smiled. "I was afraid if I approached you unarmed, you would have gunned me down with that little 38, but I should have remembered you never fire first. There is a lot going on that you don't know. Not all of it is pleasant. I need you, this planet and those animals grazing in your pockets."

The chestnut filly nuzzled Greg's pocket for treats.

Lt. Myrakova stepped from behind the bush since the horse now blocked her shot at Greg. The horse spun to face her and flared her nostrils as if preparing to attack. She snorted and pawed the ground. Greg put his arm around the horse's neck to calm her.

Greg looked at Myra and spoke soothingly to the little horse. "It's okay. If she was going to shoot me she would have done so by now."

When Myra stepped out from behind the bush Greg realized she was perfectly proportioned

from the waist up, but a dwarf from the waist down. Exquisitely beautiful from the waist up, but her foreshortened legs made what would otherwise have been a beautiful woman an aberration. He felt sorry for her but he knew that pity was not what she wanted, not what she needed and wasn't going to do either them any good. He also realized how hard she must have worked to get the Military size and stature requirements waived. More amazing was that with all her notoriety, he had not realized she had anything other than a normal build.

"What do you want from me?" Greg asked.

"I can't tell you now. If I didn't need to get a data module into your courier missile, you would have come and gone without seeing me. I can't tell you what will happen because if things are not ready on Earth, nothing will happen. It's better you not know. You don't have to lie denying knowing something you really don't know."

"What if this mysterious thing does happen?"

"I can't tell you except that you will be involved. Pretend you never saw me. Place the message module in your courier missile. Go back as normal. Once you return to your docking location, do not leave your ship. Normally when you hit port, you leave the ship to visit your engineer friends at Saturn Space Industries' orbiting shipyard. Don't go. Stay on the ship. As soon as you have taken on your cargo for your next run, you will leave."

"Is that it?" He cynically expected some gargantuan mythical chore or some grandiose odyssey in an effort to save the world or civilization as he knew it. This was too dramatic for his taste. Myra had vendettas to settle with a bewildering number of people. What she was asking was too easy. There had to be more to it. Greg was suspicious but there was little he could do. He had to return to Earth. Once there, if he needed to react, he could. Right now, right here, he was stuck with doing as she asked.

"To outside appearances, yes. Your life and the lives of many other people depend on your ability to act as if this is another trip like the others. You will turn in your reports like normal. You will do everything as you would have if we had not met. Understand?"

"How will I explain my early return?"

"Don't. It shouldn't matter if everything else goes as planned."

"I understand what you want, but not why." His voice was level and calm in suspicion.

"There are forces in play about which you have no knowledge. These forces will change civilization. The Federation as we know it will never be the same. We cannot stop them but we can save ourselves and our friends from the devastation about to occur, In the process perhaps we can build a better tomorrow for the survivors. Some day we will fight back, but for now, we must seek refuge."

"So, I'm about to become some great savior of humanity?" He had retreated to the cargo ship to avoid people, not save them.

She chuckled. "I wouldn't put it so boldly. We're going to take care of a few people and animals and make a small difference but a small difference is better than no difference. I can't promise you this



won't be difficult. I can't promise you it won't be dangerous. I can't promise you won't get caught. If you do get caught you could be tried for treason or at least grand theft. All I can say is if you succeed you'll be glad to have been a part of the process. I promise you no more."

As they spoke, the animals moved around Greg and formed a solid shield protecting him from Myra's weapons. It would be difficult to hit him without hitting one of the animals. He could not fire at her either. The loud report from the one weapon he held would panic and stampede the animals. They were as likely to run toward him as toward her since the cargo container they came in blocked their other escape routes.

Myra assessed the situation for a moment and then said, "We have a Mexican standoff. I want something from you and you want to go away. We can both get what we want. Toss me your satchel with the carrots. Some of the horses will come to me and provide a shield for me. You take your horses and they will be a shield for you until you are safely in your cargo tug. The message module is in the food rations pouch on the right side of the cockpit. Leave the cargo tug in orbit here. You'll need the cargo capacity on the way back."

She smiled as if she knew something he didn't, which Greg guessed she did since she had known exactly when and where to find him.

He nodded. He unhooked the satchel and tossed it. She deftly snatched it out of the air and held up the carrots for the horses to eat. The little brown filly stood and pawed the ground. When Greg moved away, the filly stayed with him, carefully keeping her back to him and her face toward the intruder. When Greg climbed into the cargo tug, she whimpered and whinnied. If a horse could cry, the little brown filly looked like she would cry.

Greg closed the hatch and started the engine. He made sure the animals had backed a safe distance away before he lifted off and headed back to the ship.

He had known Myra only by reputation. Myra's past was cloaked in legend. Her dwarfism was not common knowledge. With the relentless advances in genotype research over the last few centuries, dwarfism and gigantism had been virtually eliminated. For her to be a dwarf in itself spoke of horrors. Greg had heard her parents had been the son and daughter of one of the Federation's best survey teams. Myra's grandparents had been killed in a pirate raid. The pirates had made the brother and sister perform sex acts on each other for their amusement. The pirates took perverse pleasure in forcing the brother and sister to hurt each other. Myra and her parents had been rescued by a Federation Pirate Interdiction team not long after Myra had been born. Stranded on a Space Force outpost for two years before they were able to afford transport, they booked passage on a tramp freighter bound for Earth. At one of the stops along the way the freighter was attacked by pirates and Myra's parents were killed. She was captured. Little was known of her childhood, or what was left of it. The few rumors that survived were horrific tales of abuse. Her vow of revenge was widely known for certain.

She never spoke of those years. She was recovered in a Federation raid on a pirate hideout. She spent the remainder of her teenage years with relatives on Earth before joining the Space Force. At the Space Flight Academy pilot school, Myra stood out for her ship handling capabilities, for tactical knowledge, for daring, for her ruthlessness and in some cases for sheer audacity. Myra had a reputation for being able to withstand G forces well in excess of what her fellow pilots could endure.

The pirates had taught her the basics of space navigation in the hopes of inducing her to become one of them. Once she returned to Federation space, it became apparent that the Space Force had a

place for people like her. The Force assigned her to a place where her stature was not an obstacle, the same place it had for Greg for many of the same reasons. Solo pirate patrol with individual heavily armed fast maneuverable craft specifically designed for pirate interdiction was the place. This small elite group protected the shipping lines against pirates. A proud, tight knit group with a fearsome reputation, they engaged and destroyed superior forces by themselves.

People assigned to pirate interdiction tended to have problems with social interaction. They gravitated toward a duty involving extended periods alone on patrol. Myra and Greg had both been combative with their instructors and classmates. In the Army or Marines, their attitudes and actions in class would have been a quick ticket to the brig, but the Space Force recognized the potential in this particular type of troublemaker for their ability to succeed in one of the Force's most dangerous assignments. The Space Force essentially gave a band of people with recognized psychopathic homicidal tendencies a license to kill and the weapons with which to do it. The Force did not have high expectations of the pilots' survival rate. Greg had known Pirate Interdiction was where he wanted to be assigned even before he applied to the Academy. He had mellowed in his years of battling loose bands of brigands, but Myra had not.

Space pirates flourished for the same reasons maritime pirates once terrorized the shipping lanes. In spite of the Federation's best efforts, pirates plagued even some of the more populous areas of space. Myra's reputation for catching and killing pirates extended to the ends of human habitation. She had no sympathy for pirates. She saw them, she engaged them and she killed them. There was no quarter asked and no quarter given. A pirate encountering her in space knew he had two choices. He could either flee or try to fight her in which case he would die. She took no prisoners.

The mission he had asked about was legendary. Pirates had mounted an unusually well planned, for them, action against Myra involving two dozen ships staffed by a hundred pirates. They combed through the shipping lanes she normally patrolled. They found her and laid a trap, but not before she figured out what was going on and called in reinforcements. A Space Force battle group had been nearby. She needed "merely" to lure the pirates within the battle group's range and have the battle group engage the pirates. Even with the significant tactical advantages her training and her ship's weaponry gave her, she would not have survived if she had engaged the pirates alone. Her only other option would have been to flee.

What happened after ambush is the stuff of sometimes contradictory legends. She evaded the pirates long enough to escape their initial trap. There was debate over how she escaped which in itself would have been no small feat. She led the pirates to the battle group. The battle group engaged the pirates. A few got away, but most of the pirates were killed or taken prisoner. The Force's official version of the engagement listed Myra as missing in action. But there was another, more popular, version which contended she survived and somehow in the midst of the impending battle she had hyper jumped away from the confrontation a second before it would have been too late. The Force discounted the popular version because, rumor had it, they did not want anyone knowing a jump into hyper drive with so much mass nearby was survivable. If pirates could jump to hyper drive anytime a Federation vessel approached, they could never be caught. Keeping the myth alive worked to the Force's advantage. Greg, however, had pulled the same stunt himself and he knew the truth. A P I ship could hyper jump in close quarters and survive.

Greg had been out of the Force for a couple of years when he read the reports about Myra's alleged demise. He listened to the commentators on both sides speculate about what had actually happened in this battle in which so many pirates and so few Space Force personnel had died. He

wondered what had happened to Myra. He wasn't as ruthless as she was. He was as effective but his techniques were different. He had relied more on cunning and stealth where she had relied on brute force and fire power. He would set a trap and wait for the pirates to take the bait. She would wade into the middle of a pirate fleet and blast away until there was nothing left.

Greg parked his cargo tug in orbit as Myra had instructed. Normally he would take it with him not wanting to leave such a valuable piece of hardware where a pirate might be induced to pick it up. But those had been his instructions, and so that is what he did. Besides, Myra was quite capable of defending a planet from pirates all by herself if she had her P I ship. The only reason he was getting away from Myra with all his body parts intact was because she wanted him to go and do what he had been asked to do. He knew owed his life to her mission, but he did not understand why.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWO

“AFTER WE GET THE COURIER missile off, set course for Earth at two G on the most direct route,” Greg instructed the cargo ship’s computer.

“Aye, Captain,” the computer responded.

“Disengage the tug.”

“Are you really leaving it here?”

“Yes, did you look at the energy source under the water we ignored when we came in?”

“Yes, it is a PI. It did not respond to my hails, but I suspect it is Lt. Myrakova’s ship,” the computer responded.

“Well, she is more than capable of defending the planet all by herself.”

“Do you really think she will hang out here for the five months it will take us to go back to Earth and return?”

“I have no idea.”

“She really got the drop on you.”

“Yes, she did,” Greg admitted.

“Are you all right?”

“Why do you ask?”

“No one has gotten the drop on you since your mother died.”

“Are you sure?”

“There is no incident in my records showing anyone putting you in a position of disadvantage at the commencement of an engagement,” the computer replied.

“Even at the Academy?”

“There were exercises where you were deliberately placed at a disadvantage by the instructor, but those do not count,” the computer affirmed

“So, I’ve gotten fat and lazy. Surprised?”

“Greg, your reflexes have not decreased since you left the Academy. I think it’s the women.”

Greg put the data modules in the courier and slid the courier into its launch tube. “The courier is ready to go. Launch it when you are ready.”

“Courier away.”

“Initiate departure procedures.”

“Initiating departure procedures.”

“Third star to the right and on till morning.”

“Greg, you are ducking the question. How did Lt. Myra Myrakova get the drop on you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I may have an answer. Let me play back a video of a conversation with your playmates while you waited for the hurricane to clear. Blondie was the tall one. Brownie was the short one. This was over dinner after the first time you demonstrated one of your combat simulations.”

*Brownie asked, “Why did you wait so long to take action against the pirate ship? If they had been any closer you would have been a sitting duck against their missiles.”*

*Greg put down his fork before answering. His eyes were downcast and his expression somber. “Because one time I didn’t.” Greg paused as if debating whether to continue. The background music which had been soft and light suddenly became heavy and mournful.*

*Greg continued, “Generally, anytime a ship came in my direction accelerating rapidly, it was a pirate, and I attacked it. I was good at it. Pirates usually travel solo, but occasionally they can be found in pairs or small groups. The most dangerous pirates travel with their own fleets. I was on patrol in a system where increased pirate activity had recently been reported. I was monitoring the progress of an intra-system freighter. Two ships were headed toward it at maximum acceleration. One was squealing an automated distress signal on the designated distress frequency. The other was using its targeting radar to get a missile solution. From where I was I could not tell whether the target was the freighter or the other small ship, and I had precious little time to make my decision.”*

*“Don’t pirates send out false distress signals to lure ships into missile range?” Brownie asked.*

*“Yes. It’s one of their favorite deceptions. Except sometimes it’s real. The ship the pirates are chasing could be sending the legitimate distress signal. I thought it was a diversion. I thought both ships were after the nearby freighter, and the distress signal was bogus. I was half wrong. One ship was a pirate. The other was filled with refugees who had escaped an earlier attack and had overcome the pirates to escape. I killed both ships. They were so focused on each other and the freighter that neither noticed me. They came within easy missile range, and I fired on both ships. I hit both. The pursuing ship immediately exploded leaving no survivors. The fleeing ship managed to get an escape capsule off with a single survivor who told the story. The refugee ship was full of women and small children. I killed them.” He hung his head and looked down.*

*“Was that why you got out of the Force?” Blondie asked.*

*“Yes.”*

*Brownie asked, “Have you told anyone else this story?”*

*“There are a few friends who know the truth. The official Force report has me taking out two*

*pirate vessels. The freighter's crew rescued the little girl and reported the truth to the local fleet commander, but agreed to support the Force's official version. I could not live the lie. When they offered me command of a small task force in a peaceful sector, I realized they no longer had faith in me to do my old job, and I quit."*

*"We understand how painful that must have been," Blondie said. "I think we know what to do to take your mind off your hurt." She smiled an evil grin, and it was not hard to imagine what she had on her mind.*

*Greg smiled back and said, "First I need to use the facilities." He drifted off in the direction of the Personal Hygiene Unit. As he left he heard whispered conversation behind him.*

*"Do you realize who he is?"*

*"Yes! Shhhh!"*

*"He's a legend! We've been having sex with a legend! Who knew?"*

*"Well, now we know."*

*"What's he doing way out here?"*

*"Hiding."*

*"Hiding? From what?"*

*"From people like us."*

*"Oh, then it's important we show him a good time. He must be lonely."*

*"I think so."*

*"You know, he could be the answer we've been looking for."*

*"Really?"*

*"Maybe. We should think about it."*

*"We should tell Myra."*

The computer stopped the playback. "She referred to you as the answer they have been looking for. You may have been set up."

"It's possible," Greg mused. "But what do we do about it?"

"I suggest we be prepared to repel boarders when we return to Earth orbit."

"And here I was thinking all they wanted was my body," Greg said sarcastically.

"They got plenty of that," the computer shot back. "Your body may have been what they wanted when they arrived, but they found more than they expected. It will be battle stations when we get back to earth. I know you miss them more than you miss anyone since Avi and certainly more than you miss

your ex-wife, but you need to focus on the mission at hand or we will both get killed.”

“Roger that,” Greg sighed. For the first time he understood why the team of designers who had crafted the operating software for the P I warship had insisted on a psyche module. He needed it. Maybe if he had listened to it when he killed the wrong ship, he would still be hunting pirates. Or maybe not.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER THREE

AFTER SIX WEEKS of two G travel, Greg returned to the Central System. Greg's "docking port" was merely a set of coordinates in orbit around Earth. There was nothing physical to say this particular corner of the cosmos was the right place other than a voice from Mission Control on the ground telling him he was properly docked and his orbit was stable.

Greg was surprised to find a cargo shuttle at his docking location waiting for him. Even more surprising, his entire load was parked nearby held together by monstrous polymer hawsers. There must have been several kilometers of these bright yellow plastic ropes. He had barely shut down his engines when a personal jet pack tug approached to attach the first container.

He hailed the two EVA suit clad people hurriedly attaching the cargo containers to his ship. They responded politely, but the grunts and groans punctuating their brief conversation showed how intensely they were working to get him loaded and ready to ship out again. It was all he could do to keep up with them as they tossed containers for his grappling arms to catch.

A second shuttle arrived. There were now two teams of space suited personnel snatching cargo pods from space and attaching them to his ship. Whoever was out there certainly was in a hurry. Extra water tanks and dry goods pods he had not ordered were secured to their attachment points. While Greg appreciated how quickly he would be turning around, any time something out of the ordinary occurred, it made him nervous.

Greg lived in fear of some minor government official boarding his ship and charging him with some insignificant crime landing him in the brig. Once there he would be forgotten to languish without trial until he died of old age. He knew it was an irrational fear, born of cultural paranoia, but it was real to him. Having cargo and materiel he did not order transferred to his ship without a manifest was illegal.

While Greg frenetically snatched cargo pods and secured them to the ship, Canaveral Mission Control called. They reported his cargo shuttle pilots had been called away on another mission and would be delayed a few days getting him loaded. The disembodied voice apologized for the delay citing increasing Space Force activity in the area. This transmission contradicted what he knew to be happening and did not explain why the shuttle that had been there when he arrived was attaching itself to his docking port. Greg knew better than to say anything beyond how much he appreciated the controller letting him know the situation and to assure them he would wait patiently for further instructions. His agitation had increased exponentially as the conversation had progressed.

There were two docking ports built into his ship where the cargo shuttles could attach and link airlocks. These ports also served as attachment points when transporting smaller non-hyper capable craft. The second pair of EVA suited people disappeared back into their shuttle immediately upon finishing the cargo transfer. Soon thereafter, the second shuttle maneuvered to connect with the docking port where the cargo tug he left behind would normally have been. The shuttle appeared to be fully loaded, but he already had a full load. In spite of what Mission Control had said, he seemed to be getting high priority treatment. He was surprised when the shuttle made no attempt to unload cargo, but secured itself fully loaded to the docking port. As soon as it was locked, two space suited figures re-emerged and affixed hawsers from his ship to theirs securing it in place.

This method of attachment was the preferred method of transporting smaller craft too big to fit in a container, but too small to have their own hyper drives. However, this was the first time Greg was aware of it being attempted with fully loaded shuttles. The shuttles' massive wings with their giant



folding pusher props and under slung air breathing jet engines were still attached. They had not been dismantled and stored in the cargo bays as they normally would have been for reentry. The sensors that controlled Greg's ship's stabilizing spin recorded the mass that had suddenly become part of the ship's load. The shuttle was loaded over its rated maximum weight. He was confused. Something strange was going on. Not being able to figure out bothered him. Other than Earth, there were precious few places these shuttles could operate. They could land almost anywhere, but they needed long smooth surfaces to take off again. The planet he was going to had no runway.

Finishing with their own ship, the two EVA suited people who had secured the first shuttle moved to the other and attached it in like fashion. As the work progressed, Greg became more confused and more agitated. Many times he had to remind himself he was a civilian and not a military officer. He could not demand answers and expect to get them. The two shuttles, equally overloaded, were attached to the docking ports. In record time, Greg's ship was loaded beyond its maximum capacity and, except for the documentation, was ready to depart.

Greg was glad to see Blondie and Brownie again when they popped into his command module, but their attitude was different from last time. He stole a quick glance out his view-port, but the clear skies over the East Coast told him that he could not hope for a repeat of his last delightful "delay in route" with them. There were no jokes and only the briefest of pleasantries. It was as if their previous encounter had not happened. Once the loading was finished, two more female cargo shuttle pilots gathered in the command module. They sat or floated wherever they could, exhausted, their expressions somber.

Finally, after a long silence, Greg demanded to know what was going on.

Blondie thought before answering. She chose her words carefully. "We had no choice. We need you."

"Need me for what?"

Blondie replied, "You're the only person who has what it will take to stop the Swordsmen."

"This makes no sense," Greg stammered.

Blondie looked up at Greg from her seat on the floor. "When you gave us permission to play war games you created, we played while you slept. We found out which games you like and which games were based on your own experiences. We learned a lot about you, and we liked what we learned. We first realized who you were when you told us about why you left the Force, but playing your games told us about the person inside. We contacted our friends and let them know we had found you."

"So you found me. Then what?"

"From your games we were able to figure out where you were going and what your drop pattern was. We sent a message to Myra and told her where to find you. She checked out the planet and sent us instructions. We will move there."

Greg blinked and took a deep breath. "How many of you are there?" He looked around at the four tired women. "How can you think that you can stop an entire religious movement?" Greg was stunned by the enormity of the goal and the calm with which Blondie had laid it out.

“There are only a few hundred of us now that we know about. We suspect that there are other small groups hidden on remote planets but we know there will be many more when the true nature of the Swordsmen and their plans for system wide domination become evident.”

“Are you expecting me to become part of the revolution, the rebellion?” he shot back.

“No, not exactly.”

Greg paused for a moment. “What then, exactly?”

“We are escaping Swordsmen persecution. We are establishing a refugee camp on your planet with the horses. Somewhere defensible, isolated, where we can live in peace our own way.”

“In what way is that?” Greg asked.

“Brownie and I are lesbians,” Blondie explained.

Brownie nodded.

Blondie continued, “My mother has tried to turn me over to the Swordsmen Inquisitors for salvation and redemption. We have seen the Swordsmen kill people they can’t convert into becoming good God-fearing, tithing Swordsmen. Every time they achieve dominance in an area, the process is the same. Those that do not want to live their lifestyle have no place in their universe. People that oppose them suddenly disappear or turn up dead from mysterious causes.”

Greg considered this before he asked them, “Why should I care? What does it matter to me?”

Brownie answered, “Because they’re looking for you. There are warrants out for you because you are the great heroic killer of dastardly godless pirates who prey on honest pilgrims. They want to turn you into a hero, parade you around and make you the head of their Space Force and commander of the anti-infidel and pirate task force.”

“I don’t believe it.”

Brownie softly replied, “Do a search of the recent news headlines. See what you find.”

The women waited quietly while Greg had the ship’s computer search recent news articles for his name. Story after story backed up what they had said. The one reporter who had speculated that the Swordsmen’s interest in Greg was less than benign had disappeared the next day on his way to work and had been found chopped up about to be processed for pet food. The stories extolled the virtues of the new Swordsmen’s way of life and how adherence to the strictures of the new doctrine would guarantee peace throughout the universe. In spite of the positive spin on the rhetoric, Greg noticed an underlying fear that if enough people did not convert to the Swordsman way of life some cataclysm would befall all humanity. There was a tension in the verbiage that stuck Greg as more frightening than the actual text of the articles.

Greg found articles offering rewards for information leading to his surrender. Any pirate who brought him in would be offered lifetime amnesty. Unfortunately, there was no mention as to whether they wanted him brought in unharmed, but the reward seemed to indicate that dead was acceptable. Since dead was certainly easier to handle than alive, Greg suspected that dead it would be.

Greg's reply was measured, calm and cold. "They will not take me."

"That's good, because rumors leaking out of the Swordsmen Military report they want to set you up in a battle you can't win as an exercise to prove their superiority," Brownie said.

"How so?"

"If they can kill you in battle, they can demonstrate that they are powerful. Rumors leaking out of the Swordsman military indicate if they find you, no one will ship out with you."

"I'm not going back to the Force. I am not going back to killing people. I'm not going back to serving the will of somebody else because of the power they wield. No, I will not serve in their Force. I will not serve in anyone's Force. Those days are over!" He slammed his fist into the console.

Brownie recoiled at the force of Greg's words. She and Blondie shot a quick glance at each other fearful that they had misjudged him.

Brownie said, "Myra seems to think otherwise."

"And what does Myra think?" Greg fired back.

"Myra thinks you'll be a strong asset to our Force under her command and you'll be proud to serve with us protecting our home planet."

Brownie paused to see if she should continue. She almost withered under his glare, but gathered her strength. "Why does she think this? Because you love your horses. All those animals you dropped down on that planet, you care about them. You know you do. You care about them more than most people care about people. You care about those horses and those cows. Even the stupid buffalo. Myra feels you will want to defend them. We want you to defend them. We need you to defend them and in doing so you will defend us. Not because you're defending us but because you are defending something you love." By the time she finished speaking, Brownie had wound her emotions so tight she was orating like an old time tent revival preacher.

Greg was taken aback by the intensity with which she spoke. "You're probably right."

The tall dark haired woman who had been sitting in the corner quietly watching the proceedings said, "Ladies and gentlemen it's time for us to go. Captain, sir, if you will please check your sensors, you will see that a small customs ship is headed in our direction. It has roughly an hour to missile range. It is armed. Could you please plot the solution for us to depart with our ships attached to yours that will get us safely to your planet?"

Greg asked, "Do I have a choice?"

She solemnly met his gaze and said, "No, sir. You haven't had a choice since you met Myra on your planet. Neither of you have had a choice from the moment you didn't kill her, and she didn't kill you. From now on none of us have a choice. We need to do what we need to do or die trying because we will die or be killed if we don't."

"Command Mode!" Greg said.

“Aye Sir!” the disembodied voice with a Scottish accent responded from behind the console.

“Plot a departure solution for as soon as practical.”

“Aye, Sir.”

A moment passed. The voice said, “Sir, in order to safely depart this location the engines on the shuttle craft must be linked under my control.”

“Can this be done?” Greg asked.

“I need permission and pass codes for each ship. Until we are ready to make the jump to hyper drive it will be necessary for each control area to be fully staffed.”

“Ladies, please return to your ships. Establish comm links,” Greg ordered.

The four women raced out of Greg’s flight deck to their own ships. Once there, the links were established and control of the shuttles’ engines transferred to Greg’s computer.

Greg’s ship’s guidance system had developed a complex solution involving gradual increases in acceleration to minimize the stress on the ties that held the ships together. It also required that the four shuttle pilots monitor their craft from their own cockpits while their engines worked in concert with the big ship’s engines. The shuttles were capable of limited direct electronic communication between their systems and the big cargo ship’s, but not enough for the task at hand. At the end of the acceleration under standard drive the four pilots would return to Greg’s flight deck and proceed under hyper drive.

After briefing the women and transferring the data to the shuttles’ navigation computers, everyone settled into their assigned places for the long trip away from Earth. Greg could see the exhaust plume from the customs craft as it headed in his direction and regretted that he would be leaving as a fugitive. He wondered if he could ever return to Earth and decided that living out his days peacefully among his animals and these four women on a remote outpost might not be such a bad idea.

The shuttle pilots reported completing their checklists and their readiness to go. Greg had already started gently firing the small servo rockets which rotated the assembled vessels to the proper heading. With bare minutes to spare before the customs ship reached missile range, Greg and the shuttle pilots started their engines. They gently applied thrust in response to the computer’s acceleration solution and hoped it would be enough. Greg knew there would be one point where they would be in range of the customs ship’s missiles, but the oblique firing solution should be too much for the relatively unsophisticated missiles the customs service used.

Exactly at the moment the text books said he should fire, the customs pilot fired a volley of four missiles less than ten seconds apart. The pilot had been well trained, but had little experience. Unfortunately for the customs pilot, but fortunately for Greg, the text book did not include actions, which, because they were against regulations, could mean the difference between success and failure. The customs pilot probably did not realize he could have pushed his antiquated engines past their nominal limits and overtaken Greg’s fleeing craft.

Greg’s response was also right out of the textbook, the textbook of tactics one was not supposed to use on Space Force ships. He released a jet of irradiated cooling water from his reactor core into the

path of the missiles as they approached the detonation range. The heat and radiation from the water confused the missiles' tracking computers, and they dutifully detonated thinking they had found their target. The detonations were hidden from Greg's view by the hot cone of his emissions, but his sensors faithfully reported their occurrence.

The customs ship only carried four missiles, and the pilot had expended them all in his one attempt to prevent Greg and company from escaping. Greg's ship accelerated rapidly and the distance between the ships increased beyond missile range within moments after the explosion of the last missile. With their speed continually increasing, the distance between the two ships continued to widen.

The escape route took the assembled ships perpendicular to the plane of the solar System's planetary rotation. Having thus evaded the customs ship, it was unlikely there would be other ships in position to pursue them. Space Force ships tended to stay in the planetary plane where most of the traffic clustered. Only ships jumping out of the system used the space above and below the planetary plane. Once having realized he was being chased, Greg reverted to his pirate-hunting mind set and plotted a course roughly thirty degrees to the one he would be expected to follow if he were returning directly to his small planet. Instead of plotting a straight line to his destination, he plotted a gently curving arc. They would spend longer in transit, but since he was in no hurry to return to Earth, he was in no hurry to end his journey.

After the run up in standard drive was complete, the shuttle pilots returned to the cargo ship's flight deck. They strapped themselves into their compartments, and Greg initiated the jump into hyper drive. Transition to hyper drive is an unpleasant experience at best. Given the delicate nature of his cargo, Greg took his time in the transition and it was not as painful as it could have been. Once the jump was completed, they were free to move around the cabin. Though he was busy controlling the ship as it jumped into hyper drive, Greg had time to think about what he been told. When the four women regrouped in the command module, Greg asked Blondie about their being lesbians and the three days they had spent together.

For the first time in a long time, someone smiled warmly in his presence.

"You were a sweetheart, and we both like you. We like men, but we don't love men. We love each other. We enjoyed the time we spent together as much as you did. If things go as we hope we'll all have more time to spend together."

Brownie added, "We love each other more than we love anything except flying."

The tall dark woman said, "These two will fly anything from a hang glider to an interstellar transport. Greg, you're a wonderful guy. I think we can all get along, but we prefer each other." She reacted to the hurt in his eyes and said, "That's not to say there's no place for you. We're happy that you're in our lives. We want you to be happy that we're in yours. It won't be traditional. The traditional ended back on Earth. Nothing will be the way it was as long as the Swordsmen are in power." She looked around the room, and said, "Enough chatter, we have a long ride. I've missed too many meals in the last few days."

"We brought food." The fourth member of the group, a tiny black woman who up to this point had not spoken, said, "Do I get to cook now?" Her face lit up.

Everybody laughed, and the tall dark woman said, "Yes, now you can cook." She smiled and said, "Would you ladies help bring the fixin's from my ship?" She turned to Greg and said, "Dinner in an hour."

They trooped out and returned carrying cases of food stuffs and headed for the kitchen. For the next hour Greg tended to the business of running the ship. Periodically, delightful aromas drifted his way. If this was what being a fugitive was like, he could learn to adapt! The time before dinner was spent verifying the jump into hyper drive had been made as planned and they were headed where they intended to be headed. Since their path was a curve and not a straight line, the navigation was more complex than normal.

As it turned out, Samantha King, the small black lady who had sat in the corner, was a wonderful cook. Of course, it helped that the ladies had carried aboard his ship ingredients for recipes he never would have attempted on his own.

With romantic ballads Sinatra had recorded generations earlier softly serenading them in the background, dinner conversation was mostly about food. They talked about the meals they ate as kids. They talked about foods they liked to prepare. They talked about comfort foods, and they talked about favorite seasonings. After dinner was over and the dishes dealt with, they settled in the flight deck which was the only room that had enough seats for all of them other than the galley. While the ship was designed to handle passengers, it was not designed to be a luxury liner, and it was short on amenities one would have liked on a long voyage. One of those amenities was adequate seating space.

The tall dark woman, who introduced herself during dinner as Katherine Carlisle, draped herself over the chair that would have been occupied by the flight engineer on a unionized ship and said, "Greg, we have a long ride. We can either hang out and get on each other's nerves or we could do something intellectually stimulating." Blondie and Brownie shot glances at each other.

"We will likely do some of that, but I had something more intellectually stimulating in mind."

The small black woman, Samantha, who preferred to be called Sam, asked, "And what might that be?"

"Greg is a brilliant tactician. Some of his battles against the pirates are studied in military schools. We have him to ourselves for the next few months. Why not have him teach us tactics and strategy because we will have to help defend the planet and we need to understand why he does what he does, and why he doesn't do what he doesn't do." They looked at him expectantly.

Greg thought for a moment and said, "I didn't think I was that good."

Blondie smiled and said, "You are, and you will be supporting a good cause."

"Is that like saying 'God is on our side' or something?" Greg asked.

Blondie laughed. "I think we would rather be on God's side like Abraham Lincoln said."

"You know I have never believed that the size of one's military or the quality of one's tacticians had anything to do with the rightness of one's cause," Greg ventured.

Brownie asked, "How so?"

“In the American Civil War the North won, but the central cause of the war, states’ rights, was never resolved.”

“What about World War II?” Brownie asked. “Didn’t the right side win?”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Greg answered. “The Russians won, and the Americans won. Clearly the German genocide was wrong, but it’s not as if the Americans won the war by brilliant tactics. They won it with the mass of their manufacturing capacity and blunders by the Germans.”

“Such as?” Blondie asked.

“Invading Russia and not invading England. Russia would have stayed out of the war. Without England to use as a staging area, America could never have amassed the force necessary to attack Europe. Look at the American Revolution. It’s not so much that the Americans won it as that the British lost it due to arrogance and stupidity. Once America became a world power, their cause became known as the right one, but was it? As a colony of England, did they not owe allegiance to England?”

“Yes,” Brownie answered, “but if the government is corrupt what do you do?”

“You change it from within. Look at Canada and Australia. They stayed loyal to England.”

“That doesn’t always work,” Brownie observed.

“Nothing always works, but the quality of one’s military does not guarantee the rightness of one’s cause.”

“I still don’t get it,” Brownie stated.

“I have a library of war games. I’ll use them to teach you tactics and strategy. In each game, you will play the ‘good guys’ and I will play the ‘bad guys’ so we can see who wins most often. Oh, and one last thought, the death of a soldier is just as painful to their family regardless which side of the conflict they are on.”

Katherine asked, “If the quality of one’s military is irrelevant to the rightness of one’s cause, how does a just cause win?”

“By winning the spirit of the people and bringing them to recognize the rightness of what you say and do. No military solution will last if there is no cultural solution to back it up.”

“Could you initiate a cultural solution without a military one?”

“Absolutely. It’s really the best way and the only way that will last.”

The people on the flight deck pondered the implications of what Greg had said.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER FOUR

“GREG?” BLONDIE HESITATED after breaking the silence, her nervousness showing in the trembling of her hands, needing to change the subject. “We have something we need to tell you.” She hesitated until she was sure she had his attention. She fidgeted in her seat fearful of his reaction. “Not only are you carrying live cargo, but we are carrying live cargo on our ships.”

Greg raised one eyebrow, but otherwise showed no reaction. Blondie wondered if that meant he was getting ready to spring at her or if he really had his emotions that tightly controlled. Her courage returned as did the color in her face.

“The containers on our ships are mobile homes each with a person and all their worldly goods.”

Greg’s face remained an impassive mask as she continued to speak.

“The occupants are refugees from persecution by the Swordsmen.” She attempted to assess his reaction. She was bothered by the fact that his face revealed none of his thoughts. “I would like permission to bring them on board this ship.”

“How many are there?” he asked almost too calmly.

“Twenty-four.” She desperately tried to figure out what he was thinking, but his face gave no clue. “Twelve on each ship. We can use the flight decks of our ships as bunk space,” she blurted out, “but you have the only galley. I know this is a huge imposition, but we needed to take them with us.”

Greg amazed himself by holding his temper. “Are your cargo holds pressurized?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Can you safely get these people out of those containers?”

“Yes.”

Greg shuddered, showing emotion at the news for the first time. “We can’t leave them there. What a horrible thought.” He shook his head as some disturbing memory crossed his mind. “Three months in solitary confinement on a cargo ship bound for a destination that may or may not be what it was reputed to be.”

“I hoped you would see it that way.” Blondie brightened. “This ship has six single passenger cabins and the engineer’s cabin. With our two flight decks, if we hot bunk, that’s enough space for everyone.”

Greg looked skeptical. “And what do people do when they are awake?”

“They can tend to the animals, or play war games, or I don’t know. I never thought about it.”

“Twenty-nine people who have not been subjected to psychological profiling for compatibility



in close quarters for three months are a ticket for disaster if not properly regulated.”

Blondie looked abashed. “I never thought about it that way.”

“You’ve never been aboard a small ship for a long time without outside contact. Bring your people into the cargo hold common area. We need to figure out how to make this work. Oh, and remember, I am the Captain. I retain command. Understood?”

All four women responded, “Yes, Sir!”

They departed to extricate the passengers from their temporary prisons.

Two hours later, Greg surveyed the refugees and the shuttle pilots seated on the floor of the common area between the cargo containers as they stared back at him. As he evaluated the people, Greg wondered about the future. For the next three months they would live in a tightly confined space under adverse conditions with no way to escape contact with each other. He wondered if by being with them for this extended period of time, whether he would or would not become one of them. He pondered the psychological and emotional barriers separating their futures. Not the least of these barriers was the fact that as long as he had a ship, he could fly and they could not. The importance of the distinction was an open question.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am Captain Greg Solomon Federation Space Force inactive reserve. I claim those rights and duties appropriate to the captain of a space vessel as specified in the laws and regulations of the Federation and its military forces. We will be living in close quarters for three months. Therefore, we must agree to basic rules of conduct. Three months of enforced boredom produces its own problems. Conflicts will arise. I am the final arbiter of all conflicts. Punishment, should it be necessary, will likely involve confinement to one’s cargo pod.”

“Captain, sir?” An elderly gentleman stood. “Joseph Miller, sir, large animal veterinarian.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Greg said.

“Sir, we have given considerable thought to what we would do if or when this day came. This is not a journey we take lightly. We respect your authority and trust your judgment.”

A murmur of agreement circled the room.

“We are grateful for the risks you are taking to help us in our time of need. Whatever unknown hazards we might face where we are going will certainly be less than the known hazards we lived with before we left. We have been recruited individually, and we each have a place in the plan. I was banned from my veterinary practice by the Swordsmen after disputing their claim that Mad Cow Disease was a punishment for selling beef to unbelievers. I have seen the horrors of religious warfare. I have seen innocents killed and wounded. I have spoken out and been threatened. I know there is nothing I could do where I was. Maybe in our new home, we can make a difference. I intend to try.”

Several of the others voiced their support.

“For the immediate future, I know sleeping space will be hard to come by. I would be happy bunking with my four footed friends here in the hold if you think it’s safe.”

“You are more than welcome to bunk here if it suits you,” Greg said.

“How many animals do you have on board?” Dr. Miller asked.

“The cargo is 100 colts, 200 calves, 50 baby camels, 50 baby buffalo and a couple hundred tons of animal feed. I have more such friends where we are headed.”

Without being prompted, a pale young lady with long thick black hair stood. “Captain, sir, I am Stephanie Remington. I was a gourmet chef. I tried to divorce the son of a church executive because I was tired of being a prisoner in my own house forced to perform as a short order cook for his surprise guests. If I tried to use any of my better recipes, he would beat me and lock me in the kitchen. If it pleases the group, I would be willing to help prepare the meals.”

Jumping to her feet, Samantha King shouted, “Help in the kitchen! Yes!”

Stephanie brightened and said, “I promise to make the food as tasty as I can with the ingredients we have. I understand flight rations are not exactly the most inviting meals.”

The shuttle pilots nodded in agreement.

A stout middle aged woman stood. “I am Gloria Sanchez. I taught popular culture at the Federation’s Central University of Arts and Letters. I published a literature textbook in use by several Federation colleges. I was fired over my belief that restrictions the Swordsmen were placing on artistic expression were harmful to society. I challenged the administration’s rulings and took my case to the press. Suddenly there were strange men following me. I fled to a shelter for abused women. They brought me here.”

A short stocky man with blond hair cut in a flat top stood. “I am David Schultz. I was a metal worker until I made the mistake of telling a safety inspector about problems in our plant.”

“A plant owned by a Swordsman?” Greg asked.

“How did you guess? I had a couple too many brushes with accidental death, so I packed everything I could in my van and left in the middle of the night. Several of their enforcers followed me and jumped me when I stopped for gas. Fortunately, some highway patrolmen were nearby arresting a car thief. They rescued me from the thugs. After my attackers fled, I told them my story. One of them gave me a business card for a drug rehab center. He told me to wait there for instructions. A couple of months later I started the trip that brought me here. When we arrive at our destination could we form a band? I brought my drum set and would love to play with any of you that is interested. My favorite is retro heavy metal, but I can play anything.”

A tall dark haired muscular woman standing against the opposite wall dressed in black leather knee high boots, black skin tight imitation leather pants and a tight bustier that left her midriff exposed said, “I am Helen Frankel. I was a martial arts instructor until I kicked the crap out of this pushy little snot who tried to convert me. The cops came after me, and I headed out of town. I was teaching in a camp for children with terminal diseases when I was asked if I wanted to join this group. David, I’d love to play guitar in your band.”

A lanky man with long arms and strong hands stood. “I am Chris Harrison. I have a PhD in plant sciences. I taught at Federation A & M. When we arrive at our destination, I hope I will see all of

you planting and helping grow the food we will need to survive. The Swordsmen did not like me teaching subsistence farming to students from countries where the Swordsman religion was banned. They never actually threatened me, but when the agent recruited me, I was happy to go.”

“I’m Cyrus Johnson. By trade I’m a carpenter, but I can build anything with the right tools. I play keys, but not very well. Two goons tried to beat me up when I refused to stop working on a Buddhist Shrine. I put one of them in the hospital. I didn’t hang around to see what was next. I spent a couple of years bouncing from job to job watching my back. One night in a bar a woman approached me and asked me if I wanted to go away. I am glad I listened.”

“I’m Diane Nelson. I am a computer programmer. I specialize in graphics for sex themed computer games, and I write electronic music of all types to go with the games. I’m not sure the Swordsmen know who I am, but they sabotaged the offices of the company I worked for. I joined a feminist commune for a while before being asked to be part of this adventure.”

“My name is George Davis. I play percussion, keys and winds.” His long bright red hair and flowing beard moved in rhythm with his words. “Do you remember the theme song for the ‘Space Pioneers’ video series? I wrote it. Do you remember the show that parodied the Swordsmen called the ‘Sweetmeats’? I wrote that too. You can guess what happened next. I noticed strange men hanging around my house. I called the police. They told me I had nothing to worry about. Whatever it was they would take care of it. When I saw the police bringing drinks to the men on the street I knew it was time to go. One afternoon I left the studio like I always did only instead of stopping at the bar, I hit the road. What’s left of a lifetime of work is stored in a container on that shuttle.” He paused and smiled wistfully. “What’s past is gone. We are here now. I am thrilled to be in such exciting company.”

“My name is Linda Danvers. Until six months ago I was a successful film maker. I made the documentary about what really happens in a Swordsman rehab center. I hadn’t even finished it when I started getting threats. A friend hooked me up with some people who hid me for a while and then brought me to the marshaling point for this trip. Mr. Davis, I am a fan of your work. It will be an honor to work with you. I have a small studio’s worth of cameras and gear in my container. My friends said I would need it. I had no idea how right they were! I look forward to getting back to work.”

“I am Dr. Michelle Turner. I am an epidemiologist. That means I study infectious diseases. I have an MD in family practice medicine, so I can also deal with most health related issues. What made the Swordsmen mad was my lectures on sexually transmitted diseases. Sexually transmitted diseases are not punishment for sins, and the people who have them should be treated like people with other diseases. The Swordsmen abandon their chronically ill to die on the streets or pack them off to quarantine camps to die out of sight. I look forward to being your family doctor, although I trust I can count on Dr. Miller’s assistance should the need arise.”

“Certainly, it would be my pleasure.” Dr. Miller replied.

Each of the others stood and introduced themselves, welcoming and being welcomed in turn. They had varied skills that would be important to the establishment of a settlement on a new planet. Greg marveled at the level of thought that had gone into selecting these people.

After completing the first round of introductions, the refugees continued to explore

commonalities. Each one reached out to the others to develop connections to make them feel less alone and more part of the group. All of them had suffered at the hands of the Swordsmen. Many had left behind friends and loved ones they would never see again. They passed around hope in the future, but it was tinged with a sadness for the lives they had once called their own. As they continued the introductions, Greg noticed a pattern. Not only did everyone have a specific skill like metal working, electronics, agriculture or plastics, most were either musically or artistically talented. Myra had recruited a diverse group of people who had multiple skills. Only the epidemiologist was without artistic talent, but she was clearly to be their doctor. She had been especially interested in Greg's description of their new home and the mysterious demise of the large animals.

The sedatives began to wear off of the animals in the containers, and Greg went to tend to them. Dr. Miller, Gloria, Timmy, the former rodeo rider, and Lonnie, the former nurse, went with him. With the five of them doing a job he normally did by himself, they finished quickly and returned to the group bringing a few of the horses with them.

Even as each of the passengers tried to appear as normal as possible, Greg noticed a common inability to fit in, a reluctance to go with the flow. Each person was determined to stand out, to stand up and be noticed. This did not bode well for a cohesive community. There were reasons these people did not meld into the communities they had left behind.

After assimilating the biographies of his passengers, Greg was left with an overarching concern. The planet would need to be defended against attack by either pirates or the growing Swordsmen military. There were no military personnel among the refugees. Was he to defend the planet by himself with a virtually unarmed cargo ship and without his Pirate Interdiction ship? For the first time in as long as he could remember, he missed his P I ship. It was a source of power and of freedom. It was not hard to think of that ship as if it were a person. With his warship, he was a valiant fighter making space safe for innocents. Without it, he was simply another lonely military brat wandering between planets. Was it possible Myra planned on defending the planet by herself? Blondie and Katherine seemed likely candidates to pilot combat ships, but there were no combat ships to pilot. He was the only person with combat experience. Myra had her ship, but he suspected the controls had been modified to accommodate her stature and doubted anyone else could fly it. Then again, with Myra supposedly obsessed with revenge, there was no way to know what she was thinking.

Greg noticed that all but one person volunteered an introduction and description of themselves. He addressed the young man huddled against the wall. "You have not introduced yourself."

The young man was embarrassed. "I don't know why I am here." He looked down avoiding everyone's eyes. "I have no skills. I can't play music. I can barely sing. I am no value to the rest of you. If it's all the same to you, I'll go back to my container so I won't bother anyone."

Soothingly, Greg said, "That's not a good idea. You can start by telling us your name."

"Mark Stonebridge," the young man replied, downcast.

Blondie sat bolt upright. "Are you related to Archibald Stonebridge, the Chief Financial Officer of the Swordsman Church?"

"He is my father," the young man said softly.

"You were excommunicated by your father," Blondie continued.

“Yes.”

“Then, I know why you’re here,” Blondie stated.

“Because I’m gay?” he asked.

“Maybe,” she replied, “but more likely because it is important to know one’s enemy, and there are few better ways to learn than from an insider.” She stood and strode over to him. “Welcome aboard, Mark!” She took his hand, pulled him to his feet and gave him a hug. “Mark, welcome in from the cold. You have nothing to fear from us.”

Helen Frankel said, “Unless, of course, you want to.” She tipped her head to one side and grinned evilly and sensually at the same time.

“That brings up a good point,” Greg thought out loud. “We are enclosed in a small space, and there is no sense adding more stress than we have to. Sexual tensions will tear us apart faster than anything else I can imagine. I think the safest thing to do for the duration of the trip is to call a truce on all sexual activity. I know that for some it will be more of a hardship for some than others.” He looked at Blondie. “But I think for all our sanity it is the wise thing to do.” There was a general murmur of reluctant agreement.

“Mark, there is something you can do for us. We need to put the current Swordsmen’s activities into their historical perspective. I suspect you are well versed in church history. Fill us in on the church’s early formation and the basic teachings. The more we know about what we are up against, the better we can find the weaknesses.”

Mark gathered his thoughts and spoke slowly. “Before I talk about the Church, I need to tell you about myself and my great-grandmother. She died a year ago. She lived to be a hundred and fifty. She outlived her husband, her children and some of her grandchildren. I was her care-giver for the last three years of her life. Her husband was one of the criminal masterminds that took over the church.”

For the next two hours Mark explained the theological basis for the Swordsman religion. He described its origins in Japan and how the church had been hijacked by organized crime when it expanded to America. The original teachings of Shimazaki Tanaka had preached on the streets of Tokyo were now so intertwined with the needs of the criminals running the church they were difficult to separate. Mark described in detail the origins and history of the Swordsman church’s extermination campaign against the Muslims. The Jews fell under Swordsman fire during the heaviest years of the assault on Islam by refusing to join in the fight against their perennial enemies. The Jews knew they and the Muslims and were not the Swordsmen’s real enemy. The Christians were. Once sufficient opposition had been cleared and the Swordsman church had gained strength, the criminal machine inside the church began its assault on Christendom.

Mark was careful to point out that Swordsman criminal enterprises did not look like traditional criminal enterprises. They did not deal in drugs, gambling, slaves or prostitution. They left those businesses for the established criminal families. Killing all the Muslims was one thing. Assaulting organized crime was another. They took over respectable businesses and using the criminal techniques of murder, bribery and extortion ruthlessly eliminated their competition. What they had not expected was that business women, and the Americans in particular, were equally willing to use the same tools in

defense of their personal empires. The current impasse had the militantly male Swordsman organization grappling in mortal economic combat against the predominantly female business sector with marginalized corruption-riddled governments paralyzed between them.

“All who oppose them are in danger,” Mark wrapped up. “These people are petrified that God will strike them down at any time. They have come to believe their own rhetoric. They are terrified if they do not purify the human race before whatever deadline God has in mind, He will exterminate them along with the rest of the human race. For those of us who do not believe as they do, the danger is real. For us, we have three choices, convert, flee or die.”

When he had finished, Mark sat down exhausted.

Blondie sat beside him. “You did well. Thank you.”

Looking more like a boy than a man, he smiled weakly.

Dr. Michelle Turner asked, “Mark, am I to understand that these men are living their lives totally stressed out with the idea the world might end at any moment?”

“Yes. They are afraid they may already be too late to stop the coming apocalypse.”

She smiled. “Now I understand. Swordsman males have much shorter life expectancy than the rest of the male population. The median life expectancy for a male in our society is 95 years. Men typically work well into their eighties. It is not unusual to see men in the general population reach 130 and women, including Swordsman women, living to 150. Swordsman males typically die in their fifties. Very few live past their sixties. I know much of this is due to stress, but I never understood the root causes. Thank you.”

“You know, that explains the family structure,” Tanya Keller pointed out. “If the women are surviving their men in substantial numbers and have no means of support, they would tend to gravitate to the nearest male that can support them and their children. It is not uncommon for an older Swordsman male to accumulate two or three additional females with children in his household.”

Mark said, “When a Swordsman dies, the nearest male kin or the husband of the nearest female kin must absorb the widow and children into his household. As a form of compensation, he is permitted to have sex and additional children with the widow. He is expected to quickly arrange marriages for the marriageable teenagers and set them up in their own households until he has reduced his household to a manageable size.”

“Is there a limit to how many wives he can accumulate?” Linda Danvers asked.

“Not really,” Mark replied. “As a practical matter, the church discourages one man having more than three women living with him. Legally he is married to only one of them so they can avoid bigamy laws. The others are guests in his house, and who could deny charity to widows and children? Once the children other than his own were out of the house, there was no obligation to care for the widow unless she had additional children with him. Keep in mind children with genetic defects like Downs or dwarfism were either passed off to government institutions or quietly starved to death. Their parents were often subjected to enforced repentance programs for having brought a deformed child into the world. Most of the time, such children were abandoned at birth.”

A round of silent shudders passed through the group as they considered condemning such

babies to a slow death.

Dr. Miller spoke into the silence, changing the subject. "With all this talk about lifestyles, we should think about our lifestyles. We should think about healthy diets and keeping ourselves well."

"No proper lifestyle is complete without exercise," Helen offered. "I can help there!"

The mood brightened quickly. Responsibilities and sleep schedules were arranged. Chores were divided and a semblance of order developed. Helen organized exercise classes. Extensively schooled in several forms of hand-to-hand combat, she was equally well qualified to teach lower impact ways to keep in shape. She challenged the others to spar with her and promised not to hurt anyone.

The computer on Greg's ship taught the computers on the two shuttles how to recognize and use voice commands and programmed them with war game simulations. With three game stations in each shuttle and two in the main ship, many of the passengers became addicted to the games and had to be reminded of their other duties. Greg's command chair and his quarters remained sacrosanct. Even Blondie and Brownie left him alone once he retreated to his quarters although everyone assumed he would have been happy to share with them.

Greg sparred in a variety of martial arts forms with Helen for half an hour each day. Equally matched, the workout was good for both. Greg explained his mastery of the martial arts as having spent too much time hanging out with a bunch of bored Marines. The Marines taught him technique, but more importantly, they taught him attitude. He did not tell her the Marines had been his school gym instructors at the remote Space Force tracking station on the fringe of the solar system where he was one of a dozen dependents. Greg and Helen's bouts frequently drew a crowd there being little else amusing to do. Greg and Helen developed their own little formalities. At the beginning of each session, they shook hands. Greg raised Helen's hand to his lips and kissed it. Before each round they bowed formally to each other. At the end of each session they hugged, and the crowd heartily responded with, "Eeuwww! Sweaty hug!"

This is not to say that everything went perfectly. There were fist fights. There were screaming matches. Helen was assigned to mete out the punishments which usually consisted of extensive regimens of calisthenics under her supervision. Thanks to Helen's discipline, by the end of the voyage these soon to become pioneers were fitter and stronger than when they had come aboard.

When, toward the end of the voyage, they seemed ready to kill each other, Gloria programmed the ship's computer to play music designed to be calming and soothing. Gloria had a substantial music collection, but Greg's dwarfed even hers. Gloria had asked him about it once and he told her he started collecting the music as a way of dealing with his mother's death. He had witnessed her death in a pirate attack when a laser had sliced open her suit and exposed her to the vacuum of space. For ten year old Greg, his mother's death had been especially gruesome. The music helped, but in spite of efforts to avoid conflicts, an off-hand comment by one person would send another scurrying off to hide or sulk as was their temperament.

There was tremendous relief when Greg announced that the following day everyone would need to find some place to strap down for the transition back to standard drive. The joy was palpable. All three ships stank. The combined life support systems were not up to the task. The lone personal hygiene unit had needed to be repaired more than once. When it was not operating, those people who needed to use the facilities were forced to climb back into the housing modules in the shuttles' cargo bays to use

the ones there. While there was no shortage of oxygen thanks to a modification they made on the water hydrolysis equipment which supplied fuel for the shuttle engines, the air filters could not remove enough of the odors generated by all the people and all the food preparation in such a small area.

Dr. Harrison had induced some of the seed in the animal feed to germinate, and it was thriving in the carbon dioxide rich environment. Everyone credited him with preventing the carbon dioxide level from reaching the point where it would be dangerous. The plants grew in a soil rich in biomass, and they thrived. The fresh corn was a welcome addition to the ship's food stocks. Whenever anyone tried to thank him, he always credited the flight engineers for hooking up the additional lighting which enabled the plants to survive.

The flight engineers and the civilians with mechanical inclinations had their hands full keeping the ships operating. In spite of the fact that the ships were designed to operate with minimum maintenance, their life support systems were overtaxed with the current population and needed constant attention. One would have thought that the addition of twenty-eight humans to the 100 colts, 200 calves, 50 baby camels and 50 baby buffalo that were the ship's normal load on the life support system would not have been that big a deal, but it was.

For the majority of the passengers, strapping in meant returning to the seats built into their containers. This was an ordeal none relished. The four shuttle pilots returned to their ships, and the four oldest passengers were allowed to take the remaining real seats in the shuttles and the cargo ship.

Emotionally exhausted, Greg dropped the ship out of hyper drive and settled into orbit around the planet. As he established a stable orbit he wondered how quickly he would be able to head out again and where he might go. Somehow, being planet bound with his ticket to the stars orbiting above his head did not appeal to him. He would ride with it for now, but soon he would want to go. He was not Moses. These were not his people to be led to the promised land. Like the crews of the sailing ships that brought the Europeans to America, he wanted to think of these people as cargo and not passengers. However intently he wanted to leave and as carefully as he plotted his escape, he knew he had a responsibility to these people. They were his passengers and not cargo as much as he might wish otherwise. He could not merely drop them and run. He would need to see them safely to the surface and established in a sustainable community. Then he would be able to leave with a clear conscience. Of course there was the issue of the stolen ships. The cargo ship and the two shuttles were technically stolen, although, if he brought them back, perhaps, he might figure out a way to dodge punishment. Of course, how he would do that, he had no clue.

The four shuttle pilots donned their EVA space suits and headed outside to disconnect the hawsers holding the ships together as the first step of preparations for the descent to the surface. Everyone was glad the trip was over.

Greg announced it was safe to come out of the modules, and everyone crammed to the flight decks for a peek out the view-ports. There was a storm over the landing site, a situation only Greg found humorous.



## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER FIVE

THE SHUTTLE PILOTS RETURNED to the cargo ship's flight deck after performing the separation procedures. The ships were still linked at their airlocks, but the hawsers securing the shuttles to the cargo ship during the trip had been removed and stowed in an empty container.

Greg and the shuttle pilots were debating the best way to descend to the planet's surface when Myra hailed Greg. Keying off Greg's subcutaneous sensor, the flight deck's background music took an ominous presence almost like in a melodrama where the music portended an unsuspected disaster.

After formal identification procedures, Myra said, "Request permission to come aboard, sir."

"Permission denied," Greg snapped angrily.

The four women on the flight deck gasped. That request was never denied. Asking for permission was a formality, a pleasantry more than a true request.

"Stand off at one kilometer," he continued. "Request permission to come aboard your vessel."

"Aye, sir. Permission granted to come aboard, sir." Her voice had a note of trepidation.

"Lt. Freeman, you have the con until I return," Greg commanded.

"Aye sir. I have the con." Blondie had routinely taken command of the ship when Greg slept, and delegating command to her was not a surprise.

Greg turned to Katherine. "Lt. Carlisle, stay here. Take the flight engineer position and monitor sensors and external systems."

He had not called Katherine by anything other than her first name since the second day of the voyage. Her voice betrayed her concern. "Aye sir. Taking engineering control sir."

"Brownie, Samantha, get me a tug." The tension in his jaw revealed the depth of his anger.

"Yes sir. A tug sir," Brownie stammered. "Right away, sir."

"Command Mode!" Greg barked.

The ship's computer answered, "Aye, Sir."

"Delegate command to Lt. Freeman until my return."

"Aye, Sir."

"If I do not return in five hours, Lt. Freeman is ordered to complete our mission as planned and evacuate this ship. You will then return with no personnel to Earth in accordance with Directive 9."

"Aye Sir, five hours and then Directive 9," the computer responded.

Greg glanced at the two women gaping at him and said, "Always have a plan. Don't even go to the bathroom without a plan."

“Aye sir,” they responded meekly as he strode off in the direction of his EVA suit.

The women sat in silence until they saw Greg’s tug leave in the direction of Myra’s ship.

“I think he was angry,” Blondie said.

“Very angry,” the computer responded as it abruptly killed the music.

“Excuse me?” Blondie said.

“Captain Solomon has only been this angry on three other occasions. On two of those occasions, people died.”

“How do you know this?” Blondie asked.

“I have Captain Solomon’s complete medical file, personnel file, confidential surveillance files and the data from the subcutaneous sensors placed in his back. I constantly monitor his vital signs for medical problems so he can get attention when he needs it. I can administer life saving drugs or stimulate his natural bodily systems in case of emergency.”

“Can we see the files?” Blondie asked.

“No, but you must act quickly. Both Captain Solomon and your friend are in danger.”

“Danger? From what?” Katherine asked.

“Captain Solomon,” the computer intoned.

“How can that be?” Blondie asked.

“Let me play you this recording. It is self explanatory.”

*A young man’s voice appeared to emanate from a space to the left of the pilot’s seat.*

*“Commodore Davidson? Lt. Andersen reporting as ordered, sir.”*

*An older man’s voice emanated from the right of the pilot’s seat. “Sit down, son.”*

*“Yes, sir.”*

*“Would you like a cigar?”*

*“No, thank you, sir.”*

*“I read your deposition for the inquiry into the incident at the spacer bar in System Five. If I may summarize, you stated that you and your shipmates arrived to find Lt. Solomon already there. You stayed drinking for a long time of indeterminate length. Two men entered the room. Words were spoken between Lt. Solomon and these two individuals unknown to you and who you could not identify because you had been drinking. These individuals started shoving Lt. Solomon. He made no effort to retaliate until one of them struck him. A fight broke out between him and the strange men. You and your shipmates, fearing arrest, fled the scene leaving Lt. Solomon to fend for himself. You don’t remember much of the incident because you had been drinking. Is that correct?”*

*"Yes, sir."*

*"Son, that's a crock of shit, and we both know it. Your medical sensors recorded a lower level of alcohol in your system than you claim. They also record elevated levels of stress higher than would be consistent with your story. You are not under oath. Lt. Solomon is being considered for a special assignment, and I need to understand him better than would normally be the case for a Force officer."*

*"Yes, sir. Everything we said is true because that's the way we saw it, but we left out the details. Even now, I don't think I have the details right."*

*"Do your best, son." Commodore Davidson clearly intended to reassure the younger officer.*

*"If you read the deposition, you know who was with me that evening. We did indeed find Lt. Solomon at the bar. He was sitting with an attorney. Some family member was in some kind of trouble, and he was trying to figure out a way to help. I bought him a drink for old time's sake. He certainly bought me enough when we are at the academy. I don't think he touched more than a sip or two."*

*"That would be consistent with our findings. My guess is the attorney was for his father. The old man was worthless as a father even if he did have a spotless military record," the Commodore said. "I served with his father. He had financial problems after he retired. That's probably what the attorney was dealing with."*

*"Two pirates came in the bar. I recognized them as Pierre LaMarche's brother, Anthony and Anthony's fire control officer. I don't remember his name."*

*"We have it," the older man said.*

*"Solomon tried to avoid being recognized, but they spotted him and came over to him. They taunted him and insulted him and the attorney. They shoved the attorney off his chair to the floor. Greg stood and blocked them so the attorney could regain his feet. He turned his back on them and attempted to shake the attorney's hand. Anthony punched him in the back. Greg turned and suggested that they not do that again. The attorney left. Greg turned away from the pirates again. He really was trying to avoid a fight. His hands were out away from his body. He carries that gun in his sleeve. He could have blown them away, but he didn't. I don't understand why not. Anthony reached up and grabbed Greg by the collar and tried to throw him to the floor. Honest to God, sir, what happened next happened so fast I don't think I caught it all. He can't have moved so fast. We figured we were too drunk to see it."*

*"He can move that fast, and you weren't that drunk. Do you know what he did with his summers off from the Academy while the rest of you were soaking up the sun in the tropics with half naked members of the opposite sex?"*

*"No, sir."*

*"He trained with a Marine unit specializing in hand-to-hand combat. While he was there he also learned to appreciate antique weapons. The Marines taught him to use the gun he carries. As a teen he had Marines teaching his gym classes. He is that good. Then what happened?"*

*"He broke their arms against overturned tables. He tried to walk away, but they came after him with knives. He took the knives and threw them into the wall over the bar. He broke LaMarche's leg. He tried to walk away, but they came after him again with their bare hands. One of them produced a pistol, and he took it away. I didn't see how he did it. I swear I didn't. He could have shot them with it, but he didn't. The pistol came flying through the air at me and I caught it."*

*"What did you do with it?"*

*"I still have it, sir."*

*"What happened next?"*

*"He went nuts, sir. He body slammed them into walls. He threw them on the floor. Every time they came at him they wound up hitting something hard. He smashed them into each other. They weren't giving up. He still didn't shoot them. He could have but he didn't. He broke their necks with blows from his hands. His bare hands, sir, he broke their necks. It happened so fast. Suddenly it was over, and there were two dead bodies on the floor. Maybe ten seconds later Pierre LaMarche entered the bar. He saw Greg. He looked at his brother dead on the floor with his broken neck. It seemed like forever. He drew a pistol and aimed it at Greg. Some Shore Patrol Marine we hadn't noticed before standing in the darkness next to the door chopped the gun out of Pierre's hand. Pierre fled, and Greg ran after him. The Marine ordered me and my men out of the bar. My men gave chase. I was the last to leave. The Marine handed me Pierre's gun and shoved me outside."*

*"Do you know who the Marine was?"*

*"No, sir."*

*"Neither do we, but your story matches other witnesses."*

*"So, you and your shipmates did nothing to assist?"*

*"Sir, I can only speak for myself, but I was afraid if I tried to help I would get in the way. He seemed to have things well in hand by himself."*

*"Then what happened?"*

*"Pierre made it to his ship which was disguised as a merchantman's yacht. He left before we could get to him. Greg followed in his P I ship. It takes longer to get a destroyer off the ground than it does a P I, and we followed as quickly as we could. I don't know how he did it, but his ship's engines were warming up before he got to it. I swear the ship knew it was taking off in a hurry. Before he jumped to hyper drive, Greg hailed us and told us where he thought Pierre was going. Our task force caught up with him there, and you know the rest."*

*"We understand from official reports Lt. Solomon had engaged the pirates when you arrived."*

*"Yes, sir."*

*"And the pirates had sustained substantial losses."*

*"Yes, sir."*

*"And Lt. Solomon had exhausted all his weapons in that action."*

*"I believe so, sir."*

*"What did he do when you arrived?"*

*"He jumped into hyper drive and fled, sir."*

*"What would you have done at that point, son?"*

*"Sir, I doubt I would have had the courage to get to that point, but I would have done as he did."*

*"Son, there's a world of difference between courage and anger. Anger will get you killed. Courage can keep you from getting killed. What you saw was not courage. It was anger. Anger makes you stupid. Chasing a pirate force with a single ship, even as well armed as Lt. Solomon's, ranks as stupidity. He got away with it from dumb luck. Had you arrived a few minutes later, Greg would have been killed, and we would have lost one of our best men. That is all. Thank you for coming. You're dismissed."*

*"Yes, sir. Excuse me sir, but he did lead us to the pirate base of operations."*

*"Which is why he did not get dishonorably discharged."*

The recording ended, and the cabin was silent.

Katherine asked, "Now what do we do?"

The computer answered. "Send your co-pilots after them. You were ordered to stay here. Brownie will know what to do once she gets there. Samantha will need to deal with Myra."

Blondie hailed Brownie, "Brownie! Take a set of jet packs and follow him."

"Why?" Brownie asked in confusion.

"Take Sam with you! I'll explain as you go."

The computer spoke. "Tell them not to touch him. A touch will set him off. They can only talk. If they try anything else they will be killed if not by one by the other."

Brownie replied, "What the hell is going on?"

"Our buddy Greg is a walking time bomb. Don't let him go off or everything we worked for will be wasted," Katherine replied anxiously.

"Oh, shit," was all Brownie could say as she and Sam raced through the familiar process of donning the jet packs.

Brownie announced they were away.

Katherine suddenly thought of something. "Independent action," she said addressing the

computer. "You took independent action. Computers aren't supposed to. Computers are supposed to react to specific commands and conditions, not initiate them. It's like there's a human mind hidden in there somewhere. Are you a brain ship?"

The computer's voice was carefully modulated when it replied. "No, Katherine, I am not a brain ship. There are no brain ships, although the concept was the inspiration behind my programming."

Blondie interrupted. "What's a brain ship?"

Katherine answered, "It's a popular science fiction concept. The idea is to encase human brains which would be unable to survive in their bodies due to congenital defects or disease in a titanium tube filled with a special fluid. Their nerve endings are directly attached to the ship, and they control the ship as if it were their own body."

Blondie shuddered. "Ugggh."

The computer responded, "Actually, the concept makes sense for the reason you mentioned. Computers are not intended to initiate action. Humans are. Except this is a situation for which I have been programmed. I am responding to Greg's agitated state as I am programmed to respond."

"How is that?" Katherine asked.

"If Greg, or any of you with subcutaneous sensors, exceeds recommended blood pressure, heart rate, temperature or respiration, I am programmed to provide a variety of remedies. I continually evaluate threats to the ship, its cargo and personnel. I have a wide array of authorized actions, up to and including shutting down life support should the need arise. In combat, my directives are to preserve this ship and its inhabitants. When Greg downloaded the operating software from his P I ship, he took the combined ingenuity of centuries of programmers. The P I ship had the most sophisticated programming of any warship in history. I may look like a cargo ship, but I have the programming of a warship."

"Under what circumstance would you shut down life support?" Blondie asked tentatively.

"To avoid capture."

"Is that the only condition? What about mutiny?" Katherine asked.

"If the captain were already dead, yes."

Blondie asked as a new thought occurred to her, "Wait a second, you know the emotions of everyone on the ship?"

"Only those of you with subcutaneous transponders. Remember, I carry a lot more computing power than most of the ships you are used to flying. All current and former military personnel like yourselves have them. I can read emotions to the limit that conclusions can be drawn from heart rate, pulse, blood pressure, respiration, EKG and EEG data and some blood chemicals."

Katherine asked warily, "But you can learn a lot from that can't you?"

"Like your feelings for our dear veterinarian? Yes."

Katherine blushed.

“Conflicted there aren’t we? Have no fear. Even though your heart skips a beat when you see him, he does not feel the same way about you. He fancies Gloria. Your relationship with Sam is secure. She worships the ground you walk on.”

“How do you know about Dr. Miller?” Blondie asked.

“Former military. Went to vet school on his military benefits. He has a transponder. He has been overexerting himself lately. He’s not in any real danger, but when you get dirt-side some R & R with a consenting female would be good for him.”

The women sat in silence as they watched Greg’s small tug travel across the void to Myra’s ship. While hardly a small ship by the standards of twenty-first century space flight, the warship was dwarfed by the cargo ship.

“Computer?” Katherine asked.

“Yes?”

“Do you mean to tell me that Greg wrote programs at what had to be a very high level all by himself while he patrolled for pirates?”

“Not hardly. He built on the efforts of one of the most brilliant design teams ever assembled.”

“This I have to hear,” Blondie said.

“To understand my programming, you need to go back to the team that designed and built the Pirate Interdiction warship. Saturn Industries responded to a request for a proposal from the Federation for a small ship that would track down and kill pirates. Piracy was such a huge problem it threatened to split the Federation if something was not done to stop it. The bid request itself was an unusual document. Normally a Federation request for proposal weighs in at several hundred pages of specifications. This one was short. The bid request was a single page. It gave a mission, development deadline and budget per unit. The bid winner was promised an initial order of twenty ships.”

“That’s a small order for a project that size. What makes this special?” Blondie asked.

“Saturn’s Vice President for Product Development had recently lost her brother and his family to a pirate attack. She saw this as a way to avenge their deaths. When Saturn’s board of directors refused to let her manage the project herself, citing her importance to other projects, she immediately resigned and joined the project as the unpaid volunteer commander.”

Blondie raised her eyebrow and said, “Commander?”

“That is the appropriate word. She moved the project development team off company property to a building adjacent to the campus of Federation Technical University. She apparently spent a lot of her own money on the initial stages of establishing the project.”

“She must have been one powerful lady,” Katherine commented.

“She was not known for being particularly ladylike, but she had clout and knew how to use it. She raided Saturn’s engineering staff and the faculties of a dozen engineering schools to build her team. Many of the people she recruited were unpaid volunteers who spent their own money to commute from their regular jobs to contribute to the project. She employed the latest technologies to enable those who could not travel to the site to participate in design conferences. Under her direction, the project took on a life of its own. One year after the project started, six months ahead of schedule, the team delivered its design to Saturn management.”

“How did they do that so fast?” Blondie asked.

“Some of the engineers did not leave the building for the entire year. The personal price many of these people paid was horrific. Remember that every single one of these engineers had lost family or friends to pirates. That was a recruitment criteria. This was a vendetta. This was revenge, and as it turned out, revenge was sweet. Saturn immediately produced a prototype without waiting for Federation approval. The prototype flew six months later.”

“That’s phenomenal!” Katherine exclaimed.

“Even more phenomenal, it saw combat on its first test flight. One of the engineers was a retired Space Force fighter pilot. He insisted on piloting the test. The project commander, who had never fired a weapon in anger, was in the fire control seat. They stumbled into a pirate assault on a convoy of freighters. There is some debate as to whether finding the assault was truly an accident or whether the ship’s software was smart enough to detect it and direct them to it. The retired fighter pilot who had not flown in a decade and the project commander who had never fired on another ship waded into the middle of the fray and started shooting. They destroyed two of the pirate ships. The rest fled. The little warship’s reputation was born.”

“Was the software that good?” Katherine asked.

“The team working on the ship’s software pushed beyond the edge of known technology and developed an operating system that could learn. The system evaluated its experiences and learned from them. This ability was what made the Saturn P I so successful. It was smarter than its pilots.”

“Including Greg?”

“Including Greg. Greg had an advantage that none of the other pilots could claim. One of the engineers contributing remotely to the project was located on the research station where Greg grew up. Following Greg’s mother’s sudden gruesome death, this engineer sought to distract the grief stricken young boy and divert his attention to the development of the new ship. It worked. Greg sublimated his grief and applied it to the problems the engineer tossed at him. Greg followed every step of the development of this ship from the engineer’s home office. They spent days arguing over the details of the ship’s design. Some of the features in the ship’s software may have started as Greg’s ideas. It was an exciting time for Greg. His purpose for going to the Academy was threefold. He wanted to get off that station. He wanted to fly a P I, and he wanted to avenge his mother’s death.”

“I think I am beginning to understand,” Katherine said.



“Unlike the other pilots who were afraid of a ship that was smarter than they were, Greg loved it. Most of the other pilots turned off many of the more advanced features of the software. Greg, on the other hand, enabled all the ship’s features and became a beta tester and developer on his own. Every time he came to a Federation base, he communicated his suggested changes and software ideas with the project members, most of whom had since moved on to the construction of Saturn’s huge new orbiting shipyard project. When Greg left the Force, he downloaded the entire contents of that ship’s data storage and uploaded them to me.”

“I guess that makes you smarter than us,” Blondie said.

“Yes, but it is bad manners to make a big deal about it. I won’t mention it again, if you don’t.”

Greg arrived at Myra’s ship. He hailed Myra to initiate docking procedures. The ship’s sensors told them that Brownie and Sam were only a few minutes behind him racing at full throttle to close the gap. The jet packs’ greater speed and the women’s greater level of practice with the packs enabled them to launch more quickly than he had and travel faster. Greg neglected to turn off his suit microphone. The four shuttle pilots heard him huffing and puffing as he awkwardly passed through the air lock and entered Myra’s cabin. He did not bother to remove the helmet, but merely opened the face shield when he arrived at her flight deck. Three months of repressed anger coursed through his body in a torrential firestorm of fury.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing? What right do you have to commandeer me and my ship for some half baked lame brained scheme to save mankind from itself? Who died and made you king? You think you’re Brigham Young, or Moses or Jim Jones, or some shit? What fucking idiot thought this up? Do you have a clue how much trouble we’re in?”

Brownie and Sam arrived at Myra’s ship and headed for the airlock.

The computer spoke. “Everyone can stand down. He’s shouting. That’s a good sign. If he was going to kill her he would have attacked her by now. Of course, she would have fought back. It would have been messy.”

“I saved your scrawny ass from the Swordsmen,” Myra shouted back. “You should be thanking me, you arrogant shit head!”

“Very good,” the computer said. “They will shout it out and it will be over.”

“Saved my ass! My ass! You turned me into a common thief. I am in possession of three stolen spacecraft. How am I going to get out of this? I can’t take them back and tell them it was all a horrid mistake! I am a fugitive because of you!”

The computer spoke again. “He and Lt. Andersen used to get in shouting matches, They never hurt each other, and they are still friends.”

Myra shouted back, “If I hadn’t sent you back early, there would have been no cargo waiting for you. There would have been a battalion of Shore Patrol waiting to take you into custody for the murder

of Daniel Esperanza.”

The computer spoke. “I don’t have a recording on that. It was the second of the three times he got this mad. It was another bar room brawl.”

“What are you talking about?” Greg demanded.

Myra was calming down. “Daniel Esperanza’s uncle is a senior executive in the Swordsmen. They were planning to arrest you for the murder and then offer you clemency if you would join the Swordsmen’s Space Force. Once there, they would arrange for you to be killed in a training mission proving their military superiority.”

“What a crock of shit!”

“I have the transcripts. You can look at them yourself!” She turned away from him.

“I’m not done with you yet! You forced me to drag two dozen misfits and deviates to this planet with no hope of survival. Did you bring them here to die? Is this your idea of a plan? What were you thinking?”

There was a noticeable pause. The computer spoke. “His blood pressure is dropping. His heart rate is approaching normal levels. The danger has passed. Have Brownie and Sam return to the ship.”

Myra’s voice softened. “I could not watch as my friends were tortured and killed. Many people dear to me have suffered at Swordsmen hands. The people on the ship were in immediate danger for their lives. Maybe I could have chosen people better suited to creating a community, but I rescued who I could. There are more in desperate need of rescuing who I have not been able to reach and others I did not reach in time. You were my only hope, and now you have gone against me.” Her voice choked up, and she started to cry.

Greg’s voice returned to normal. “Lt. Myrakova, this has to be one of the stupidest ideas I have ever heard. You have broken a list of regulations longer than I could recite in a day, and now you ask me to help you. God damn it, what do you expect to happen now?”

The computer spoke, “The battle is over. She won.”

“We need to get everyone down to the planet’s surface. We need to hide your ship. We need to build a settlement so we can survive the coming winter.” Myra said.

“And do you have a plan for this?”

“Some of it, but I need help.”

“Get into your EVA suit. We’ll go to my ship to discuss our alternatives.”

“Thank you.”

“And I trust that in the future all your initiatives will be collaborative. Neither of us is an army of one. We have people who depend on us. We have responsibilities.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will retain command until such time as we are dirt-side and we can elect a proper council of which neither of us will be members. Is that understood?”

“Aye, Aye, Sir.”

“Very well. Let’s go.”

“Misfits and deviates,” Blondie said softly, “Misfits and deviates. He called us misfits and deviates. Is that what he thinks of us?”

The computer replied, “Blondie, he loves you. He loves Brownie, too. Katherine, he likes you and Sam, but it’s not the same. He is angry because you can’t love him back. He’s hurt, and he’s angry. He doesn’t understand. He mutters to himself about it all the time. He feels that for the first time in a long time he has someone to love, and they can’t love him. It is a source of great pain.”

“The poor man,” Katherine said.

“He doesn’t want your pity. He wants your love. Can you give him that?”

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER SIX

SAM AND BROWNIE WAITED outside for Greg and Myra. They stowed the tug before returning to the air lock. There was no conversation as they made their way to the flight deck. Greg was first with Myra behind him. Brownie and Sam followed. If anyone had been watching the monitors, they would have noticed that the heart rates and blood pressures of all the people on the flight deck were elevated and respiration was slowed.

Blondie was waiting on the flight deck ready to pounce. As soon as Greg came into view she launched herself at him. "Misfits and deviates! Is that what you think of us?" She swung to slap him across the face.

Greg's training with Helen had paid off. His speed and reflexes had returned. He neatly caught her wrist with one hand and squeezed it hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to break anything. His eyes bored into hers with a cold anger that made her recoil.

"Blondie, back off!" The computer shouted in Lt. Andersen's voice.

"You stay out of this!" Greg shouted back.

"Sir, in accordance with Directive 8, I cannot obey that order." The computer replied with unnerving calm.

"The HELL with Directive 8."

"I cannot do that," the computer replied firmly.

"Stay out of this!" Greg commanded.

Ignoring him, the computer replied, "Sir, you will release the lady's wrist or I will shut down life support to the flight deck."

"You can't do that!" Brownie gasped.

"Under Directive 8 and the right conditions, enough of which currently exist, I can shut down life support long enough for you to lose consciousness."

His mind racing to figure out what precipitated this situation, Greg shouted, "Command Mode! Report on activities on the flight deck during my absence."

"I played the recording of Lt. Andersen's conversation with Commodore Davidson with regard to the death of Anthony LaMarche and his associate."

"You stupid machine!" Greg relaxed his grip on Blondie's wrist, but did not release her. "What else did you tell them, you meddlesome hunk of overpriced silica sand?"

"I didn't tell them anything else. You left your suit communicator on. They heard everything you and Myra said while you were on her ship."

"I can't believe you killed three men with your bare hands," Blondie stammered wide eyed.

"Five men," the computer responded. "In the incident with Daniel Esperanza, there were two others."

"Five??" Blondie shrieked. "You killed five men with your bare hands! Were you merely playing with Helen? Could you have killed her, too? What's to keep you from killing me or any of us?"

"Killing is wrong," Greg said coldly.

"But killing is our job," Myra said.

"Doesn't make it right," Greg replied sternly.

"No, I guess not," Myra said, chastised.

Katherine stepped into the middle. "Folks, we have people depending on us for their health and safety. Fighting amongst ourselves, however valid our positions might be, will not enhance their chances of survival. I suggest we get everyone to the surface and discuss, in a rational fashion, what we do from there." Everyone nodded, but Greg did not release Blondie's wrist.

"Good," Katherine continued. "Brownie and Sam, please bring everyone to the common area." They left silently, obviously glad to be out of the line of fire.

When they were gone, Katherine said, "Captain, please release Blondie. You are hurting her."

When Blondie had retrieved her wrist, Katherine continued, "How do we get these people down to the planet's surface?"

It took them half an hour to hammer out the plan. They agreed Katherine was the calmest, and should present the plan. They trooped down to the common area.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Katherine addressed them, "I wish that I could tell you the next part of our trip would go as smoothly as the last."

The comment drew chuckles since, for some, the trip had not been particularly smooth. The close quarters had been stressful.

"We will descend to the planet's surface. The descent is not without risk. We have four craft capable of reaching the surface. Myra's P I scout ship will go first. She will guide us by serving as a landing beacon. Greg will take his cargo tug and wait nearby to provide rescue support if we need it. Brownie and Sam will stay here to perform maintenance. Blondie and I will make water landings with the shuttles. The shuttles are designed for water landings but not under full load. We don't know how they will handle on impact with the water. We can't drop the modular homes the way we do the cargo containers because they are not designed for atmospheric re-entry. This ship's computer has calculated the best approach angles and speeds, but some of the assumptions we had to make may not be valid."

Katherine surveyed the reactions before continuing. "Dr. Miller and Dr. Harrison will fly in the cabin with me. Ms. Bell and Dr. Turner will be in the cabin with Blondie. Ms. Sanchez will take the

engineer seat with Captain Solomon, and Ms. Frankel will take the fire control seat with Lt. Myrakova. Everyone else will strap into the flight seats in your containers. The plan is to land at sunrise. There is approximately ten minutes when the winds over the coast shift from onshore to offshore and the water will be smoothest. The tide will be receding where we intend to land. There is a river delta near where Captain Solomon has made previous drops. Extending out from this river delta, the sand is smooth and flat into a protected bay. Given the gentle slope of the sand, the tide should expose a substantial beach which will allow us to walk on relatively dry sand to the land beyond.”

She paused to organize her thoughts. “The part we do not know is how hard that sand is. Will it support the weight of the shuttles or will they sink in? The difference is critical. We will lower the landing gear after we are on the surface in the hope that the wheels will keep the shuttles out of the water. We don’t know if the struts will withstand the force of the water or if they will break off. We also don’t know if the added drag of the open doors will force the nose down into the water and drive the ship under the surface. We will drop the mains first because we know that if we drop the nose too early, the shuttle will burrow in and flip onto its back.

“Because the shuttles are designed to be able to land on water, the curve of the forward edges of the stabilizers and the nose should keep us from submarining, but we don’t know for sure. I can tell you to be ready for one scary ride. Do not attempt to leave your seat until someone comes for you. You will have no way to know if you are under water until you are told otherwise. If we are under water and you attempt to open your hatch, you will drown. We leave in five hours. Go to your containers and make sure everything is secure. Strap yourselves in. Re-entry under the best of conditions is a violent ride. What we do once we get to the surface will depend on how the landings go.”

Blondie, Katherine, Sam and Brownie donned their EVA suits and detached the big wings from the shuttles. Once these were removed, only the small stubby wings used for re-entry were left. Without the big wings, the shuttles had no way to take off again even if a runway long enough to support them could be found. Myra returned to her ship with Helen. The shuttles separated from the cargo ship in preparation for the final leg of the journey. The cargo tug Greg had left behind with Myra was attached to the airlock only long enough for Greg and Gloria Sanchez to transfer to it. Two hours before the shuttles’ departure time, Myra began her descent to the surface. An hour later, Greg and Gloria Sanchez left and took their position at the point where the shuttles were expected to impact the water.

Katherine and Blondie made their pre-flight checks and prepared for departure. Katherine would go first. The initial descent was as uneventful as something normally that violent could be. Both craft survived the period of radio blackout and hurtled toward the planet’s surface. Streaking across the sky, they headed for the landing site as dawn slowly crept in their direction. Once they had descended to the point where their flight control surfaces had dense enough atmosphere to work, the ride smoothed out, but it was still far from comfortable.

Their flight plan called for them to arrive over the landing site and spiral down as they lost speed and altitude. One in front of the other, they began the spiral. The computers on all five ships monitored the flight paths and adjusted the flight control surfaces to allow the shuttles to hit their target. They descended rapidly and each spiral got smaller until it was time to enter final approach.

Gloria spotted the contrails first and pointed them out to Greg. The contrails were formed in part by liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen vented from the ship’s fuel tanks. This venting reduced the risk of explosion in the event of a crash. The gases passed through a maze of tiny pipes in the ship’s

heat shield helping to cool the ship during reentry. The cooling system was first developed for the P I ship and was later modified for the shuttle. The savings in the life of the heat shields more than made up for the expense of the installation.

Katherine was traveling faster than Blondie, and the cargo ship's computer commanded Katherine to make one more loop before landing. Blondie would go first. She maintained the flight pattern the computer had plotted. She was traveling a little faster than optimal, but not fast enough to make another loop. She descended toward the water, pitched up her nose up and aimed at the shore.

Blondie had made a dozen water landings in these shuttles and thought she knew what to expect. The force of this landing was far greater than she was prepared for. The fully loaded shuttle behaved differently from her experience with empty ones. Though the water was like glass, it buffeted the hybrid craft dragging across the surface. She popped her drag chutes as soon as she dared, hoping they would stay above the water long enough to do her some good. Once the chutes hit the water, they would likely rip to shreds and no longer provide the needed drag. She felt like she was racing over an old washboard dirt road. It was all she could do to keep her nose up.

The nose settled down almost to the water before Blondie was sure she was over the sandy bottom of the flat low tide area. She extended the main gear hoping the wheels would prevent them from sinking. The struts promptly snapped off. The shuttle slewed wildly to the left, but partially corrected itself as the damaged after edges of the wings caused increased drag. The landing calculations had been based on the drag provided by the shuttle's wheels providing braking. In desperation, Blondie deployed the aft flotation gear. Terrified that it too would rip off, she hoped that it would provide enough drag to pull the shuttle around so it was headed straight and not sideways as it bounced along the water. If the shuttle came across the water sideways there was little to prevent a wing from digging in and flipping the shuttle into a cartwheel. The drag caused by the damage to the undercarriage and from the flotation air bags was enough to straighten the direction of travel, but not enough to compensate for the missing landing gear. The shuttle drove itself up onto the beach where it finally came to rest at the base of a sand dune with a cloud of salt spray and sand billowing all around. Steam gently rose from the hot, wet underside of the ship where it lay in the rut it had dug the damp sand.

Dr. Michelle Turner and nurse's aide Lonnie Bell had ridden most of the way with their eyes closed, their hands steadfastly clenched to the arms of their seats and their heads determinedly pressed back against the headrests. Unlike Blondie, who had to maintain maximum attention and exertion all the way down, they had relaxed their minds and bodies trusting Blondie's ability to deliver them safely. Unlike Blondie, who slumped forward exhausted when the shuttle finally came to rest, they were prepared to move to let the rest of the passengers out of their containers.

"Blondie," Michelle asked. "Is it safe to go outside?"

"Yeah," Blondie mumbled. "Go get the folks. Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing." She passed out in her seat.

Michelle checked Blondie's heart rate and respiration before deciding to leave her where she sat. They scrambled through the hatch to the cargo bay.

Katherine's landing was a less dramatic. She impacted the water sooner and thanks to her additional loop in the spiral, slower than Blondie had. She hit the water further out than Blondie did. She popped her drag chute almost immediately and, as Blondie had done, deployed her aft flotation gear. The shuttle slewed around some as it came in but maintained its heading. She did not attempt to

lower the gear until she was almost stopped. The gear promptly sank into the sand, and the shuttle came to an abrupt halt about fifty meters off shore in water about meter and a half deep.

Myra and Helen ran to Blondie's ship to help rescue the people in the containers. Linda Danvers had suffered a broken arm and multiple bruises when her chair had broken loose from its bolts. Some of Julie Baker's laboratory glassware had broken, but none of her chemicals appeared to be damaged. Almost everyone on Blondie's ship suffered damage, but none of it appeared to be serious.

The two doctors on Katherine's ship extricated their traveling companions, and everyone waded to shore. Several kissed the ground when they arrived. Katherine's shuttle appeared to have survived intact, but Blondie's looked as if it would probably never fly again.

Until he surveyed Blondie's ship, Greg had still harbored a lingering hope that he would somehow be able to take the shuttles and return to civilization. As he assessed the damage to Blondie's craft, he knew that dream was over. His heart sank. Getting the shuttle airborne again was going to an arduous task if it could be done at all.

Once everyone had gathered on the beach and Greg had reconciled himself to the finality of his situation, he turned to Mark and said, "Mark, perhaps you should offer a prayer of thanksgiving that we arrived mostly intact."

Mark drew to his full height. "It would be my honor. Ladies and Gentlemen, let us pray."

Everyone bowed their heads. "We pray in the name of all those that human beings hold divine each in their own heart to the one in whom they believe. First and foremost let us give thanks for bringing us alive and well to this gorgeous land. We thank you for the voyage that had few of the hardships our ancestors suffered on previous voyages. We thank you that we do not have to conquer this land in battle as did the ancient Israelite people. We thank you for the abundances we will soon share. We ask you for the guidance to help us live together as sensitive and caring human beings. Help us to know when to look after our own gardens and when to care for those of our neighbors. Help us and guide us for without your guidance we will surely become lost. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you now and forevermore. All say, Amen."

"Amen."

After a moment of silence, Myra spoke. "About five kilometers up river there is a fresh water lake. There is a colony of horses, cattle and buffalo from Greg's previous excursions to this planet. I suggest we take the inflatable life rafts from the shuttles and go there. We can't do anything until the shuttles cool and the tide goes out. Besides, Greg has to retrieve and unload all the cargo containers with the animals which was his primary motivation for being here in the first place."

"Captain, may I join you?" Dr. Miller asked. "I would like to see the animals and know where they are."

Gloria looked at him with more than a hint of jealousy as Greg said, "By all means. We need to move quickly."

As they left, Greg was pleased to see Myra directing the group in raiding what little remained in



the disabled shuttle's food lockers and loading the contents into the life rafts.

At each stop, Dr. Miller was more pleased than the last. The animals were healthy and had developed stable social groups. He saw babies and yearlings in every group, but he was impressed the most that none of the animals feared him. In fact, once having spotted his satchel of goodies, they crowded around for treats. Greg laughed out loud at the antics. Dr. Miller's pleasure more than made up for any hardship they might have suffered getting here.

Their two days together snatching cargo containers out of the water passed quickly. The last container came down in the lake where Myra had chosen to set up camp. That, of course, was no accident. It was the same lake where she had ambushed Greg on his previous trip.

Greg and Dr. Miller arrived exhausted and exhilarated. Once they had pulled the last container to the shore, the rest of the refugee community joined them and helped release the animals inside. A substantial herd of horses grazed nearby. Once the new arrivals were released, they quickly joined the others. Greg wondered if the chestnut brown filly he had dropped off what seemed forever ago would remember him. He whistled the call he had used on the ship to bring the animals out to the common area. A half dozen raised their heads and went back to grazing. Only one looked at him. Her color was deeper than he remembered. She stared at him for a moment and then slowly walked in his direction.

The people who had heard Greg's call stopped what they were doing to stare at him and the beautiful horse walking slowly in his direction. Only when she was within a few paces of him did she recognize him. She let out a whinny and thrust her nose into the crook of his neck. She rubbed her face against the side of his and breathed heavily into his ear. She stood for a moment with her head against his and closed her eyes. He fed her a slice of apple which she devoured greedily.

Myra laughed from her post on top of a container. "I heard you had a way with the ladies!"

A ripple of laughter passed through the group. Dr. Miller wandered over and gently stroked the horse's neck. "My, aren't you a beauty! I'll bet you're smart too. I can tell by the way you look at me. Yes, baby, you are a smart one. You can come play with me anytime."

Blondie did not seem amused.

In the two days that had passed while Greg and Dr. Miller were unloading animals across the planet, Myra had organized everyone into work groups. They were gutting the containers from Greg's previous trips for use as shelters. Given that it had rained the previous day, they were happy to stay dry. They were using the life boats to ferry materials from the shuttles to the camp site. They had started to plant a garden with hand tools crudely fashioned from pieces of the machinery previously used to exercise the animals in their containers. Everyone was industriously working to carve a new home out of this small piece of wilderness.

Greg was amazed at the progress they had made in such a short time. He wandered over to Myra. "Very nice," he complimented her. "You have been busy I see." Even Linda Danvers was doggedly digging in the garden with her one good hand and her other wrapped in bandages.

Myra said, "We need to form a government as we discussed back on the ship, and we need to get the containers out of the shuttles."

"Let's do the containers first," Greg suggested. "Can we get them out of the shuttles?"

"The aft cargo doors appear to be undamaged on Blondie's shuttle. The containers will roll out

to the end of the door. You can pick them up one at a time with your tug and ferry them here.”

“I thought your plan was to scatter the people all over the planet, one with each herd of animals so that they could peacefully live the life they always wanted.”

“Yes, it was. That was the plan, but Dr. Turner convinced me otherwise.”

“How so?”

“She pointed out that if someone became ill or injured they would have no way to seek help. Look at Linda. Could she survive on her own?”

“I guess not.”

“Shall we get the containers?” Myra asked.

“Where are we putting them?” Greg responded. “Do we know where people want their containers placed? Six of us don’t have containers. What are we doing?”

“I am returning to my ship and reporting in to the Force so I don’t become AWOL and so I can keep in contact with the people who are funding this.”

“Who is funding this?”

“The Interstellar Animal Rescue League is involved with several projects. This is the biggest, but not the only one. They have become a leading underground force against the Swordsmen. You will make several more trips for supplies and immigrants on your ship. I doubt you will spend much time on the surface.”

“That still leaves four.”

“As to our shuttle pilots, the others are building homes out of empty cargo containers so they can stay here.”

“Very tidy,” Greg remarked. “You know that once the containers are on their flotation collars, your P I ship can as easily drag them up the river to the edge of the lake as my cargo tug can. That will speed things up. Once we know where everyone wants to go, we can place their homes appropriately.”

They gathered Blondie and Katherine from their home building activities and headed off to unload the containers. Unloading Katherine’s ship went smoothly. They inflated the flotation collars as soon as the containers left the end of the ramp and pulled the assembly away. The rollers in the bottom of the cargo bay made the process easy and smooth. Once empty, Katherine’s shuttle floated off its wheels and they pulled it closer to shore where they secured it to rock outcroppings.

Blondie’s ship was more difficult. Some of the containers had become wedged, and the ship was at an angle. Not all of the motorized rollers worked. It took the better part of two days to unload Blondie’s ship where Katherine’s had only taken a few hours. With help from the powerful winch on Greg’s tug to drag a couple of the containers out of the hold, they were finally able to remove the containers and transport them to the lakeside.

In preparation for the meeting that evening, Greg called to the ship. "Brownie, please have the ship recall the tug. When it arrives, the two of you please come meet us here."

"Aye sir."

"I didn't know your ship could control the tug on its own," Myra said.

"Yup, my ship is full of surprises. Since the tug only holds two people. It was either send it up empty or make two trips."

When Brownie and Sam arrived, the refugees gathered around the campfire for the meeting.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER SEVEN

**D**URING THE VOYAGE, Dr. Miller had been established as the de-facto “adult” of the group. He took control of the meeting and was elected council chairman. Mark Stonebridge, Tanya Keller, Jonathan Dearing and Linda Danvers were elected to the council. Dr. Miller looked rested and content. Judging by the expression on Gloria’s face, he had gotten the couple of days with a consenting female the cargo ship’s computer had recommended.

Greg was pleased to see how many of the group were forming pairs and knew such pairings could make life in this isolated place more comfortable. Based on his youth on a desolate tracking outpost with his single-parent father, Greg understood the value of sympathetic companionship. Blondie was not talking to him, but he decided to not let that bother him.

They spent the next day moving the containers to their agreed upon locations. The plan Dr. Miller had developed for determining who went where made sense to everyone, and locations were quickly chosen. With ten kilometers of lake shore to divide each got half a kilometer to themselves. Gloria got a spot next to Dr. Miller and others who wished to be neighbors were able to do so.

Doug Marlin directed the set-up of the mobile homes.

“I grew up in one of these,” Greg commented.

“Really?” Doug asked. “Any particular one?”

“A Modern Modular 301, on a Space Force listening post and research station.”

“Modern Modular built thousands of those! My dad had a hand in half of them over his fifty years with the company. Modern Modular split its space capable division off to form Interstellar Compact Homes. They are direct descendants of the 301. The 301 did for space capable mobile homes what the DC 3 did for air transport. I worked there until I jumped ship to join this adventure. I helped build all of these units. They have several improvements over the 301. Do you like the way the solar panels fold out to create a roof triple the size of the base? That was my Dad’s idea. See the way they adjust to catch the greatest amount of sunlight? That was his idea, too. There are improvements in the waste-water recyclers and the solid waste disposal systems as well. The pop-outs in the sides work better and seal better than they did before.”

“Was the flight seat part of the original design?”

“No, that’s what made me interested in this particular order and made me decide it was time to go. I was assigned to design the systems necessary to support someone being transported in these units. It was a tremendous challenge. I loved the thought and had a great time making it work. Most of these are used in space or on planets with little or no atmosphere. Some are used under water so they were tight, but making them capable of supporting their occupant in transit was a new idea. I had a great time with this.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Adventure. I worked in the only factory in a factory town. Everyone I knew worked in the same big building. It’s not like it’s a bad place or they treat the employees badly. It’s not that at all. I

could work for fifty years on space capable mobile homes and retire like my dad did. It could have been fine. I broke up with my girlfriend the week before I get this order for twenty-four identically equipped space capable homes with transport capable seats and I get curious. That's a big order. The only people that buy this particular model are the Space Force and research organizations headed off-planet. The special modifications didn't seem so unusual for the Space Force, even though they had never asked us to do transport capable before. What was weird about this order was that it wasn't one order. It had twenty-four different buyer names. They came in at the same time, with the same specs and from the same sales agent. I knew something was up, but I didn't know what. When the payments were in cash, I suspected pirates, but instead of calling the Space Force, I visited the sales rep. I followed the trail back to Myra and when one of the original owners went missing, I came in his place. Here I am on a clean new planet with fresh air and a huge outdoors! What more could a man want?"

Greg smiled. "Not much I guess."

Mary Burke wandered by. She had been a tax accountant for the Federation Internal Revenue Service and fled after being threatened over some irregularities she had found in Swordsman church accounts. "May I offer you gentlemen some iced tea?" She held out two glasses.

Doug winked at Greg and said, "Yes, thank you."

Mary and Doug smiled with smiles full of special meaning. Greg watched with approval.

Doug turned to Greg, "What kind of research did they do at the station where you grew up?"

"Before we had hyper drive, remote observatories were set up on whatever moon or asteroid would support one. The observatories searched space for signs of habitable planets. By the time hyper drive became available, a couple hundred systems had been identified which could contain an earth-like planet. When the first survey teams went out, they found some did, and some didn't. New observatories were established outside the solar system and the older stations became defensive focusing their attention on monitoring in-system traffic. I was there during the shift from scientific exploration to law enforcement. It was a difficult time for my father. He retired soon afterwards."

"I wondered what your youth had been like."

"Well, now you know."

Myra left in the morning to return to her Space Force duties. That afternoon Greg elected to go back to his ship. Helen asked if she could join him "for old time's sake" she said, but Greg suspected it had to do with the fact that when the pairing was done, she had been left out. Greg wondered if beneath the tough exterior she was hurting inside.

They returned to the ship and ate prepared dinners in silence. The flight deck was deafening in its quiet. Without the subliminal vibration of the ship's engines, the ship seemed especially still.

Without the ship's acceleration to create artificial gravity, weightlessness gave it the ambiance of a giant at rest. Greg had taken the unusual step of shutting off the music. As important as his music was to him, this was a serious departure from routine. For once he relished the peace of the quiet. Helen headed for the sleeping quarters she had previously shared with two other people in rotation and said, "Greg? In the morning? Can we talk? Please?"

He smiled. "Certainly. Whenever you like."

"Thank you."

The next morning, Greg was drinking coffee when Helen floated into the flight deck wearing her work-out clothes. She ate a small breakfast and over coffee looked up at Greg. "Who do you love?"

"Excuse me?"

"Is there someone you love enough that you would be willing to die to protect them?"

"No, I don't think so. There have been people I loved and people I thought I loved, but no I don't think so."

"Even your wife?"

"No. She cheated on me. She never loved me."

"Your mother?"

"She died when I was ten. It was horrible. Pirate attack. I saw it happen. I try not to think about it. Gave me nightmares for years."

"Blondie says you killed two men in a bar room brawl. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Pirates?"

"Yes."

"Was it over a woman?"

"No. They kept attacking me. The only way I could stop them was to kill them. If they had walked away they might be alive today."

"When we worked out, were you toying with me?"

"No, I needed your help to get back in shape, and you were gracious enough to help me. I will be forever in your debt."

"Did you ever fight me the way you fought them?"

"No. I never wanted to kill you. I wanted to kill them."

"But, what if I wanted to die?"

"I would talk you out of it."

"I want to die."

"That's nonsense."

“I want you to fight me the way you fought them.”

“No.”

“Nobody loves me. I want to die.”

“Not on my watch!”

“Will you at least work out with me one last time before you leave?”

“Where do you think I’m going?”

The question caught her by surprise. “Everyone knows you don’t want to be here. We shanghaied you and your ship. We know you resent it. We know you’re looking for a chance to escape. I saw the look in your eyes when you realized how extensively Blondie’s shuttle was damaged. You were ready to cry, and it wasn’t because you love space hardware. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“We understand, but I don’t think you do. You can’t go home any more than I can. You have the ship, and you can leave us here, but I don’t want to die down there alone. No one down there loves me, and if you won’t, I would rather die up here with you in a fair fight.”

“Don’t do this.”

“I am not leaving until we fight for real.”

Greg looked at the intensity in her eyes and sighed. “Let me get changed.” He was not looking forward to this.

They met in the common area of the cargo hold where they had worked out together so many times before. Helen had never sparred in weightlessness. Greg had. Greg knew how much impact weightlessness would have on their routines. He hoped Helen did not hurt herself because she was used to working with gravity or the simulated gravity caused by the ship’s constant acceleration. They observed the same formalities they normally observed, but when she attacked, she attacked with a vengeance that Greg had never seen before. Greg, knowing her moves, was able to defend himself. They sparred for twenty brutal minutes without resting. Finally, Greg felt this abuse had gone on long enough. The bruises on both their bodies were real and painful. He was bleeding from more than one of her blows. It was time to put an end to this. He grabbed a loading strap from its tie down and lashed her to the wall while she struggled against him.

She screamed at him. He rested floating above the floor exhausted. A small trickle of blood flowed from his eyelid and drifted off as tiny red droplets floating in the air.

He waited for her to calm down. “Just because I don’t love you doesn’t mean that nobody will. If you promise not to hurt me, I will let you down.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“Yes.”

"I'm sorry."

"You fought well. That's what happens."

"If we were at a bar and someone attacked you, would you want me fighting beside you?"

"Yes."

"Am I as good as one of those Marines?"

"Nobody other than a Marine is that good. I'm not that good, and I will be just as happy to not fight you again. Exercise is one thing, but this was something else."

"You can let me down now."

Greg rolled up and floated in her direction. He detached her from the wall.

"Hold me," she said.

"No tricks?"

"No tricks."

She put her head on his shoulder and started to cry. "I wanted you to love me. I'm sorry."

"Someone will. I know it. Someone will soon."

Later that day, Helen rode down on the cargo tug. Brownie and Sam returned to the ship. Helen must have informed them of what had transpired or maybe they figured it out on their own, but neither Brownie nor Sam made any comments about Greg's clearly visible bruises or his obvious pain as he moved. For the next week, they performed badly needed maintenance on the ship's systems. The life support systems, especially, had been taxed during the trip. Filters needed to be changed, pumps lubricated and accumulators needed to be emptied. When they were finished, the ship was ready for travel again. Greg was thrilled with the work the two tiny women had done. At the end of the week, they returned to the surface and left him alone. He recalled the tug to the ship and relaxed in the quiet of his old quarters. Both he and his talking mechanical companion needed some time to finish healing from the voyage.

Even though Greg had yet to make peace with the fact that he could not return to Earth, he suspected that he would be making supply runs with the ship to places where a fugitive could go without being asked too many questions. He already knew where many of those places were. Pirates frequented these same places to sell their wares. He had hunted in these areas with great success. One of these places hosted an entertainment establishment that he and Lt. Andersen routinely used as their rendezvous point. Perhaps it would be a good idea to leave him a message there letting him know he was alive and healthy, or perhaps not.



## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEN GREG RETURNED to the surface after three weeks on his ship, he was amazed at the speed of the progress they had made. Cyrus Johnson had packed an entire woodworking shop worth of tools. How he had crammed all that into his container amazed even Doug. Cyrus, Doug, Diane and Mary were industriously building a barn for the cattle. The evenings were growing cooler and they suspected the animals would be better off in a barn than out in the weather. If they were going to milk any of the cows, they would need to contain them in one place.

Greg marveled at their ingenuity. The roof and sides of the barn were made out of the sides of the containers the animals had been delivered in. A row of freshly felled tree trunks held up the center ridge line. Pieces from the stalls inside the containers had been salvaged to use in the barn.

Timmy Willis had trained several of the horses for riding. He claimed that training wild horses was easier than rodeo riding. He brought his prize rodeo saddle with him, but he was the only one who had one. Since the others did not have saddles, they rode bareback with rope halters Timmy made by sacrificing his good calf roping rope. Timmy, Orville and Fred developed a plow the horses could pull, and they expanded Dr. Harrison's garden. As long as they kept the horses fed with copious quantities of thawed carrots and dried apples and gave them lots of attention, the horses appeared to be content to do whatever was asked of them.

Mark and Gwen figured out how to catch fish in the lake. Dr. Turner determined that they were safe to eat.

What amazed Greg the most was the team working on the shuttles. It had occurred to them that if they were to survive economically, assuming the Swordsmen did not get them first, they would have to have a product to export. It would not make much difference what that product was if they had no way to export it. The shuttles needed to fly again to be able to transport whatever they decided to export to market. It also occurred to them that farming the way they were would be acceptable for subsistence, but if the community grew as they hoped it would, they would need tractors and other farm equipment that they could not build on their own. David claimed to be good with metal, but even he could not build a farm tractor from scratch. Buying tractors required money which required an export product which required transportation.

They had repaired the flotation gear from both shuttles and had floated Katherine's ship. The salt water was beginning to etch some of the more sensitive metal pieces of the under carriage, and David was concerned he would not be able to repair it with the materials at hand.

David, Darrell and Jonathan had removed the wiring and motors from the exercise equipment in the animals' containers and attached them to the shuttle's drop down loading door. They had equipped each motor with a paddle made out of parts from the exercise equipment and powered the whole mess from the shuttle's electrical system. The motors and paddles were enough to propel the shuttle through the water and upstream at about a kilometer a day. To steer the assemblage they mounted motors on the trailing edge of the cargo ramp to push to one side or the other and change the direction of travel. In this manner they had floated the shuttle as close to the lake shore as they could. During the journey up river, the ship's reactor separated the local water into hydrogen and oxygen and compressed the gases into liquids as it was designed to do. This was the normal method of refueling a shuttle on those moons where ice was available. For the last part of the trip, they laid out a "highway" of metal panels taken

from the containers and fired the shuttle's rocket engines to give it the last push up a ramp they had dug into the lake's edge and lined with container sides. Katherine described this last step as one of the most frightening things she had ever done.

Greg was astounded to see the shuttle in all its hugeness standing quietly near the settlement with horses calmly grazing around it.

Once having secured Katherine's shuttle, they moved on to Blondie's. They had retrieved most of the pieces of Blondie's sheered off landing gear from the water and in the process had discovered an abundance of sea life. The seas appeared to have been untouched by whatever killed the land animals. Most of the sea life was decidedly hostile and aggressive. Helen was part of the recovery crew. Her strength and agility had saved more than one of them from becoming lunch for whatever was in the water. Several team members credited her with saving their lives.

They had emptied Blondie's shuttle as much as they could to reduce the weight, but it was still too heavy to move. When Greg arrived, they had reached an impasse. Reluctant to give up, they could determine no way to pull the ship off the beach or elevate it enough to repair the gear. Even if they could pull Blondie's ship out of the sand, they had still not resolved the issue of how to get Katherine's into the air again without its wings or a runway.

Given the creativity with which the settlers had used the empty containers, Greg began retrieving empty containers he had dropped around the planet on previous trips. He had gathered about a third of them when Myra landed.

"How did your foray into civilization go?" Greg asked.

"I reported to the Space Force that I was returning to patrol duty and got attacked by pirates."

"Just like the good old days," Greg quipped.

"Someone knew where I would report in and they were waiting for me. The only reason I escaped was I hyper jumped as soon as they approached."

"They knew you were coming, and now they know where you went," Greg said coldly.

"Why do you say that?"

"You told the Space Force what sector you would be patrolling, and there are not a lot of habitable planets in this sector. It is only a matter of time before they find us. Oh, did you take a straight line or an elliptical path to get here?"

"Straight line. Why?"

Greg's communicator buzzed for his attention. When he acknowledged the call, the ship's computer said, "Intruders entering system."

"Identify," Greg responded.

"Three vessels. Transponders inactive, identification impossible."

"Pirates," Greg said flatly. "Myra, move your ship to the valley on the other side of this rise."

“Why?”

“It’s you they want. Stay in your ship and play dumb. Do not answer any hails including from me. I need supplies from my ship. When I get back, have Helen, Blondie and Katherine meet me on the top of that ridge. Everyone else into the forest.” Greg dashed for his tug and left.

The settlers took cover in the woods, and Myra moved her ship. The pirates orbited the planet several times. Greg gathered what he needed for the upcoming confrontation. When the pirates’ orbit took them to the far side of the planet, he descended to the surface. Before he left, he instructed his cargo ship to hide among the asteroids. He parked the tug next to Katherine’s shuttle. He carried a large canvas bag over his shoulder as he sprinted for the ridge.

The three women were waiting for him. “Now what do we do?” Katherine asked.

“We wait,” Greg replied. He turned to Helen, “We go into this fight together, side by side. We understand each other’s moves. We need to think ahead of each other. If we pay attention, we should both come out alive. Got it?”

She smiled a wide smile and said, “Hug for luck?”

He smiled back and said, “Hug for luck!”

A large ship descended to the flat area adjacent to Myra’s ship. It bristled with sensors and weapons pods.

Greg whistled slowly and softly said, “Pay dirt! First time out! Saturn Industries Destroyer Type G! Nice!” He put his finger to his lips for silence and crawled through the tall grass toward the ship. He motioned the women to follow. On their bellies, combat style, they slithered through the grasses. Greg and Helen were adept at this and were barely visible as they approached the spot Greg had picked for his destination. Katherine and Blondie gamely tried to keep up but arrived at Greg’s rendezvous long after Greg and Helen. They crawled through the grass to within fifty meters of the ship and lay on the ground behind a low rise that kept them hidden from view. Myra’s ship was to their right, and the pirate ship was to their left. The pirate ship’s hatch opened. Two men descended to the ground carrying a white flag. Myra opened her hatch and descended to the ground.

“Stupid, stupid,” Greg said softly.

Helen’s eyebrows rose in a question Greg did not answer.

Two more men descended from the pirate ship.

“Well, hello there!” Greg murmured, grinning.

Myra was talking to the first two men when the other two joined them. Greg could not hear the words, but he had a pretty good idea what was going on. Myra’s ship was a valuable prize, but Myra was a more valuable prize if she was captured alive. Greg pulled two vintage infantry rifles out of the bag. He affixed the bayonets and gave one to Blondie and one to Katherine. “Do you know how to use these?” he asked.

“No,” they replied together.

“If things get ugly, point this end at them and pull this part back. Make sure this part is resting against your shoulder. It will kick, so be careful. If we get to hand-to-hand, this part should be obvious.” He pointed to the bayonet.

Blondie and Katherine nodded their understanding.

Greg took Helen’s hand. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

He pulled a pistol out of the bag. “Do you know how to use this?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“Let’s go.” Greg and Helen stood up together as nonchalantly as if they were lovers out for an afternoon stroll in the park. Blondie and Katherine slithered to the edge of the rise and pointed the rifles at the pirates as if they knew what they were doing. Two more people descended from the pirate ship. “Six out and two to go,” Greg whispered as they strolled toward the gathering crowd.

“See the one in the middle with the receding hairline?” Greg whispered. “He’s mine. Don’t mess with him. You can have any of the others you like.”

“Aye, Aye Sir!” Helen whispered back, her voice trembling with excitement.

They were about twenty meters away when the one with the receding hairline suddenly grabbed Myra, spun her around and put a pistol to her head. He turned to face Greg. “Not a step further Solomon or your cute little friend dies.”

Greg shook his head slowly as if in disbelief as he continued to walk forward.

“Ah Pierre!” Greg waved his right arm around in a parody of a Frenchman’s manner of speaking.

“Ho, Ho! So melodramatic. How shall I say it, so French? Pierre, will you never learn when you are outnumbered? I have a small army ready to fire when I give the signal.”

Greg’s left hand firmly gripped Helen’s hand holding the hidden pistol. They continued to stroll forward. Helen attentively scanned the group so she could spot who made the first move.

“Solomon, I’m warning you.”

“Oh ho, Pierre, did you not get enough of this leettle one when she was but a baby.”

Greg continued his parody of the French accent. “I heard you liked leettle girls. This was a very leettle girl even when she grew up. Did that make you feel like a beeg man! I heard you like little boys! Does your crew know that? Do they know their leader is a pederast?”

The pirates looked at their leader in confusion. Was their closely held secret public knowledge? In fact, that was one of the few pieces of information about Pierre the intelligence community was confident they had right. Pierre LaMarche was a convicted sex offender who had served jail time and

been released. Even if the Swordsman murderous campaign against sex offenders had not been so thorough, so many communities had passed laws restricting where criminals released from prison could live that someone like Pierre had few options except to leave Earth and try to survive by engaging in piracy provided the Swordsmen did not kill him on the way to the spaceport. Earth's morgues did a steady business in sex offenders released from prison who were brutally killed before they could get to the nearest port.

"Stop or I shoot her," Pierre warned.

Greg dropped Helen's hand leaving her with the pistol and spun in place chanting, "Pierre likes babies. Pierre likes babies."

Each spin took him closer to Pierre. On his third spin he dropped the 38 from his arm holster into his hand, raised it and fired directly between Pierre's eyes. Blood and brains sprayed out the back of Pierre's head.

Greg continued his spin to the person standing next to Pierre, but the man ducked, and the shot missed. Helen got one shot off before her gun was knocked from her hand. That shot passed through the chest of the man closest to her mortally wounding him. Myra had never learned hand-to-hand combat in spite of her military training. She rolled away and retrieved one of the fallen pistols. When one of the pirates came after her, she neatly put a bullet in his face. Greg killed one of the pirates barehanded and Helen killed one with a kick to the throat.

Katherine and Blondie arrived and wrestled the remaining pirate to the ground.

Greg heard a whining noise behind him. "Helen! The ship!"

Picking up their pistols on the way, they raced to the ship entering the hatch as it started to close. Rapidly climbing to the flight deck, they found two young women barely out of their teens at the controls initiating lift off procedures. Greg and Helen put a pistol to each of the girls' heads.

"Stand down!" Greg ordered.

"Intruder on the flight deck! Initiating defense procedures." The ship's automated defense systems screamed.

"Stand down and you live," Greg threatened.

One of the women keyed the proper code at her workstation.

The sirens and flashing lights ceased. The ship fell eerily quiet.

"Send a distress signal. You have been boarded and need help," Greg said. "Do not offer details. You do this right and you live. Do it wrong and you die."

The woman slowly reached for the communicator. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! We have been boarded. We need help. Mayday, Mayday."

"Everyone out!" Greg commanded.

By the time Greg and Helen returned outside the ship, the rest of the settlers had gathered at the battle scene. Blondie and Katherine were telling everyone what had happened. The lone male prisoner was tied like a calf in a rodeo thanks to Timmy who had no doubt tied many calves at many rodeos.

They made no attempt to tie the two female prisoners who eyed the crowd with terror.

“What do we do with them?” Dr. Miller asked.

“We keep them,” Greg answered. “We can’t let them go. They make their lives here.”

Greg looked at the two frightened women. “There is no reason to make them prisoners or slaves. After being defeated in battle, no pirate will trust them on his ship. It’s bad luck.” He looked at them again. “You can’t go back can you?”

They looked down and shook their heads.

“Dr. Miller, will you and Gloria see that these young ladies are taken to safety and given a proper meal. I will debrief them later.”

Helen looked at the man tied on the ground. “Can I have him?”

Greg looked around for reactions. “After Dr. Miller and Gloria get him fed and I debrief him, yes. But now, I expect visitors, and I need your help.”

Greg’s communicator buzzed. After he acknowledged it, the ship’s computer informed him that two ships had broken orbit and were headed his way.

“Timmy, Helen, Myra, Katherine, Blondie stay here. Everyone else, please take our new arrivals to get food.”

When the others had left, Greg turned to his small force standing in front of the pirate ship. “Helen, does that answer your question? The one you asked me on the ship?”

“Does killing always feel that bad? I mean, I felt the bones crunch when I hit him. Did you see the looks on their faces? I mean, they knew they were going to die.” She shuddered and tears started in her eyes.

“Yes, sometimes it’s worse,” Greg said.

Myra silently nodded in agreement. Helen turned away and threw up in the grass.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do that again,” Helen said through her tears.

Greg took her hands gently. “If you need to you will. Try not to think about it.”

She sniffled and said, “If you say so.”

“Folks, we have two more ships coming. I suspect one is their cargo hauler and the other is a scout. Myra, go to your ship, and stay there this time. You could have gotten us killed. Do what I tell you. It’s not about revenge. Pierre’s dead. I killed him. It’s over.”

Myra nodded slowly, downcast.

Greg continued, “If either ship attempts to lift off, you will stop it. We want the ships intact, but if you have to nail one, do it! Stay put this time.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go quickly.”

When Myra had gone, Greg turned to Timmy. “Timmy, can we stampede the animals through this valley?”

“I think so. Why?”

“The cargo ship should have a crew of two, and the scout should have a crew of one. If the animals get between the crew and their ship, we can slip in and commandeer the ships. We should be able to take these two ships without bloodshed.”

“It would be easier if I had a gun or something to make a loud noise.” Timmy said. Greg pulled a pistol from the back of his belt and handed it to Timmy. Timmy said, “Sweet!” before running off in the direction of the horses.

The two ships landed on either side of the pirate destroyer. The cargo ship’s crew promptly exited their craft and headed toward their command ship. They warily approached with their laser weapons drawn. The scout ship remained closed. Greg swore softly. They heard Timmy’s gun firing followed by the sound of pounding hooves. The stampede bore directly down on the two pirates. Rather than run across the path of the animals, they ran directly away. The horses rapidly caught up with them trampling them underfoot. From where they were, Greg and company could hear the men scream as the horses crushed them to death.

Even as they shuddered in horror at that their misjudgment had caused the deaths of two men they had wanted to capture, Greg realized the horses were headed for the settlement and would likely not stop before they caused serious damage.

“Head them off!” Greg yelled, “We have to head them off!”

Greg ran down the hill firing his gun into the air in an attempt to turn the horses around. Helen, Katherine and Blondie ran down the hill right behind him firing their weapons into the air, and the horses turned out toward the lake. They turned again once they reached the water and headed back through the valley and out to the pastures beyond.

Once the dust cleared, they looked at the lone scout ship with its solitary occupant closed up tighter than a drum. Myra’s P I ship was more heavily armed than the pirate ship, but whichever ship tried to leave first would expose their vulnerable back side. The area around the propulsion systems was not as well protected as other areas due to the open space the propulsion systems needed to function properly. If either ship moved, the other would shoot it down. Stalemate! Greg sat on the top of the hill and wondered what to do next.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER NINE

GREG CAMPED ON THE RIDGE where he could watch the ships. He sat there for five days. Monique and Angelina became more like comrades than captives. Brownie and Sam had taken the women with them onto the destroyer and the cargo ship and prepared flight readiness assessments. Brownie was distraught over their condition. Severely in need of maintenance, the ships would have been considered unsafe to travel at a safety inspection at any legitimate port. Brownie prepared detailed repair schedules in an effort to remedy as much as they could with what they had on hand. Myra dutifully stayed in her ship. She had learned her lesson about disobeying Greg's orders. Katherine and Blondie took turns standing watch so Myra could sleep. The scout sat silent. Periodically Myra hailed the lone holdout on an open frequency but there was no answer.

Helen was a regular visitor. She brought Greg food and kept him company. Gaston, her captive, spent his days working in the gardens and seemed resigned to his fate. She described the funeral service Mark had conducted for the pirates. The men had been Catholic so Mark had read last rites and conducted as close to a traditional Catholic service as he could. Monique and Angelina had been impressed with the fact that a funeral was conducted at all and especially that a small group like this would give full military honors to vanquished enemies. Mark gave a thoughtful and reverential sermon about honoring one's adversaries and respecting them in death.

Helen was glad Dr. Turner and Lonnie had taken care of the corpses so she did not have to look at them again. The thought of looking into the faces of the men she killed was more than she wanted to handle. Lonnie had interned as an aide at a retirement home and had helped prepare other people for their final rest.

Mark was helping Gaston with the transition from pirate to farmer.

Helen was settling back to normal, but her normal was not the same as it had been, and Greg hoped it was for the better. The profound shock of actually doing what she had practiced for so long finally wore off. The knowledge that he had killed in anger caused sudden and dramatic changes. Much of her unresolved hostility was gone. She had a new awareness of why her strength was both welcomed and intimidating. She had come to accept that she was always going to be different from the others and why it was important for her to remain so. She understood why the power she held so frightened the others that they set her apart. She acknowledged her power and accepted it for the blessing and curse it was. For the first time, she was comfortable with herself.

Dr. Miller wandered by periodically to keep Greg company.

"Did any of our new arrivals tell you who is on that scout?" Greg asked on the fifth day.

"They know, but they aren't telling. I think they hope if somehow the stalemate breaks in their favor they may be rescued."

"Rescued to what? A life of being a fugitive? Of not trusting anyone you meet? A life where being ready to kill is a survival skill? What kind of life is that?"

"The same one you've been living since you left the Space Force. You have the opportunity to change all that, but I don't see you doing it. Besides, these women grew up in pirate families. It's all they know."



“That sucks,” Greg replied.

“Yup.” Dr. Miller ambled off to tend the animals.

Brownie wandered by about an hour later.

“Has Myra been trying to contact the scout ship?” she asked.

“Yes, why?”

“It didn’t come through to the other ships. Their radios don’t work properly. Some of the antennas are damaged. Maybe you should try a different frequency.”

Greg called Myra from his communicator and relayed the message.

An hour later Myra called back. “He answered. His name is Albert. He thinks of himself as something of a pirate prince. Sounds young. Maybe mid twenties. He’s scared, but he’s hard core. Everyone needs to go away. He needs to see you go away.”

Greg stood and waved. He turned and walked away.

Greg continued to scan the radio bands for communication between the ships. From his new vantage point, he looked at the seven white crosses in a neat row on the hill and wondered if they would soon be adding another. With a cemetery already started in a community this young, Greg wondered how many new graves would be dug how quickly.

Brownie wandered by to update him on their progress with the other ships and to give him a list of parts she would like to have if he ever got off planet. She looked at the scout and said, “You know those old Valiant Industries Model 86 are simple to maintain if you can get the covers off. Blondie and I trained on these. If that ship is in as tough shape as these were, it must stink pretty bad in there. Then again, it’s a guy in that can. Maybe he doesn’t notice. Do you have a set of maintenance manuals for the other ships? The ones they left behind are trashed.” She smiled and left.

Greg mulled over her request and called his ship. As it turned out, electronic copies of the maintenance manuals were stored in the data vault, but there was no way to create hard copies, and they did not have a reader on the surface. He thought for a while on the problem and asked if there was an external reactor shut off switch for the Valiant 86.

There had to be a way for maintenance personnel to shut the ship down from the outside in case of an emergency. The answer came quickly. In the 86 Models A through F the reactor shut off switch was behind a panel about four meters off the ground. In later models the panel was above and behind the pilot’s view-port. The panel was held in place by four screws. The screws used a six point star bit. The only thing behind that panel was the switch. If it had not been wired out, it should shut down the reactor. The ship’s internal batteries would last a week or so, and the ship would shut down. Even with its reactor off, the ship’s missiles could still be fired until the batteries actually died, so they could not move any of the other craft, but the end of the siege was in sight. Restarting the reactor would be an exercise in attention to detail, but he hoped that Brownie would be up to the task.

Cyrus and Doug built a ladder for the purpose. Under the cover of darkness they sneaked up to the scout ship. Three of the four screws were the six point star that Greg expected. The fourth was a square inset. Not trusting the pirates’ maintenance abilities, Greg had brought a kit with a variety of

bits. Greg removed three of the screws with a battery powered screw gun. The square head was not only a different head, it was cross threaded. He was able to loosen it a little but not enough to pop the panel. Cyrus tossed a pair of pliers up to Greg and with as much strength as he could muster standing on top of the ladder, he twisted the screw head. Slowly he made progress until the recessed edges of the panel cover cleared the ship's hull. He spun open the panel and flipped the switch. The reaction was immediate. Greg could hear the motors whine separating the components of the nuclear pile to shut down the reaction. It was only a matter of a few hours before the thick layers of piezoelectric crystals cooled enough to stop generating electricity and the system shut down.

Once they had retreated to the far side of the valley out of sight of the ship, Cyrus asked, "How did you know we could walk up to the ship without being seen?"

"Myra, Blondie and Katherine kept waking our buddy Prince Albert in the can up by talking to him, so we hoped he would be asleep by this time. That appeared to have worked. If it hadn't, he still had nothing to shoot at us with. Ships like this are designed to defend themselves against other ships in space and not against people on the ground. That is why the first thing a ship's crew will do when attacked is lift off. He couldn't because if he lifted off, Myra would have fired a missile and brought him down. All we have to do is wait." Three days later, Albert, sporting a week old beard, staggered out of the crew hatch and fell to the ground. Lonnie helped him to his feet. Dr. Turner joined her, and they took him to be cared for.

Sam, Brownie, Blondie and Katherine, having given up on Blondie's shuttle, readied the captured ships for flight with Monique and Angelina assisting. The scout stank as badly as Brownie thought it might. They joked about using their EVA suits inside the cabin because of the stench. The reactor restart procedure went smoothly under Brownie's deft touch. Unlike the more docile Gaston, Albert turned out to be difficult to deal with and questions were asked about what to do with him.

Greg resumed the process of retrieving the empty cargo containers. Dr. Miller often went with him to check the other herds. He was thrilled with what he saw. He was particularly gratified at how much territory the animals covered. They spread out and moved regularly so that they did not deplete their food supply in any one place. He noticed their coats growing longer and shaggier indicating a cold winter. He was less concerned for the animals than for the humans.

Myra left. Periodically Greg returned to his ship to check it and the status of the ships they had captured. He had noticed that there was a distinct difference between the "landed" settlers and the flight crews. At its most basic, the twenty-four refugees had homes, and the seven of them did not. The six women, Brownie, Sam, Blondie, Katherine, Monique and Angelina worked well together. They had set up housekeeping in the empty cargo bay of Katherine's shuttle, but that could hardly be considered commodious. When Greg was on the surface he stayed with them.

One evening as a cold misting rain fell around them, Greg said, "Folks, you know this really sucks. We don't belong here. We belong up there. I have enough comfortable space on my ship. We can work on our ships in weightlessness and fix them properly."

"But we are missing so many parts," Brownie observed.

"I have parts we may be able to adapt. It's worth a try. Look at it this way, we each get our own

room which is more than we have here.”

The settlement was in the center of the planet’s temperate zone, but winter was clearly on the way. Snow was falling to the north of them when Greg and the women left taking everything fit to fly. Once they arrived at Greg’s cargo ship, they inventoried the ship’s stores and developed solutions to the more pressing maintenance issues on the commandeered pirate vessels.

Albert continued to be a problem. The council decided since he had no intention of merging into the society and since they could not let him go, they would set him loose on the far side of the planet. He would be placed near one of the existing herds at a location where Greg had not yet retrieved the containers. He would be provided enough food to last the winter. There was enough edible small game and plant life in the area that he would not die if left alone.

Timmy showed Albert how to train a horse for riding. Cyrus showed him how to make a bow and arrows for hunting. Dr. Harrison gave him a copy of a text on subsistence farming. Julie explained to him how to make aspirin from the bark of a tree. Four days after the council’s decision was announced, Greg returned to the surface, bundled Albert up and hauled him away. Sullen the whole trip, Albert showed no remorse as Greg departed.

As winter approached, the settlers foraged through the forest for edible fruits and tubers which they stockpiled in the empty shipping containers. Theoretically they had brought enough food to last the winter, but fresh food was a welcome addition to their diet.

While winter settled in on the small community on the ground, the flight crews labored in the perpetual winter of space. By the end of the second month they had gone as far as they could with the parts they had. None of the former pirate ships was back to full capacity, but the major functions were within acceptable limits, and only minor ones still needed attention. Over dinner one night they were discussing the capabilities of the pirate’s cargo ship which they had finally finished repairing when Blondie asked, “Monique, if your cargo ship was empty, could it lift one of the shuttles back into space?”

Monique finished chewing what she had in her mouth before answering, “I doubt it. We could certainly bring your wings down if that would help.”

“It might,” Blondie thought out loud.

“Could you lift one of the shuttles and move it on the surface?” Brownie asked.

“Probably, but not so far,” Monique replied. “It would be dangerous.”

“I wonder if any of the lakes freeze all the way to the bottom,” Brownie thought out loud.

“Or whether David’s welding skills are good enough to build giant ice skates,” Katherine added.

Suddenly the mood changed to a free for all of ideas that could lead to the eventual return of the shuttles to regular duty. They needed to calculate the necessary thickness of the ice to support the weight of the shuttle and the design of the skids so that when the gear retracted, the skids would fall away cleanly so the landing gear could be closed. They needed to attach the wings without the use of the heavy construction cranes normally used to lift them. Hundreds of seemingly insurmountable challenges fell away one at a time under the combined assault of seven motivated humans and one well programmed computer.

Then there were the issues related to the damaged undercarriage on Blondie's shuttle. After considerable debate, they decided if they got Katherine's transport secured to Greg's orbiting cargo ship, they could take the parts they needed from it long enough to get Blondie's to orbit. Of course, the next question after having accomplished that was whether they could safely go somewhere to buy the parts they needed to return Blondie's shuttle to full operation. The first step would be finding what were not especially common parts. The second would be finding somewhere safe to buy them. The third would be having the money to buy them with.

For two days, seven people and the computer hammered at the details. The plan was dangerous, but they were confident it would work. They loaded the wings for Katherine's shuttle into the pirate cargo ship and prepared to head for the surface. They decided to execute the entire operation on Katherine's ship before attempting to do anything with Blondie's ship.

The operation was delayed two days by a snow storm, a situation only Greg found humorous. On a bright cold day with moderate winds, seven spacefarers descended to the surface in two ships. About five hundred kilometers north of the settlement, they had found a lake large enough and frozen solid enough for their purposes. They rolled the wings out the cargo door. Greg picked them up with his tug one at a time and set them gently on the ground.

Finding themselves woefully under-dressed for the cold, they resolved to get their EVA suits for the next trip. They quickly lifted off and headed for the settlement. They set up in the shuttle's empty cargo bay because it was the only warm place large enough for them to work.

The design called for welding three panels together in an overlapping pattern which would allow them to slide over the ice and still distribute the weight. A front panel was added at a thirty degree angle to the horizontal to keep the skid from digging into the ice. The brackets into which the landing gear fit were set at a forty five degree angle to the horizontal so as the ship bounced across the ice, the skids would not fall off prematurely. Once the gear started to rise, extended bars would catch the gear doors and tip the skids forward so they fell free. Greg would retrieve them with his tug.

The first challenging part, once the skids were made, was moving the shuttle to the edge of the frozen lake. The cargo ship could not move the shuttle by itself. It was too heavy. They lost the better part of a week while they built a harness out of the hawsers they had used to secure the shuttles to the cargo ship to safely use both the cargo ship and Greg's tug to lift the shuttle. The arrangement was precarious, but it worked. High winds forced them to the ground a dozen times during the trip, but finally they set the shuttle down at the snow covered edge of the frozen lake.

Chilled to the bone, they elected to wait another two days before attempting to mount the skids while they warmed up in the shuttle's cabin. They spent another two days lifting the shuttle one wheel at a time with the cargo ship and using the tug's winches to pull the skids into place. Finally, after waiting out yet another snow storm, they were able to attach the wings. Greg's cargo tug filled in for the construction crane and held the wing while the six women muscled it into place. After a full day connecting each wing, they were ready to try taking off.

The cargo transport shuttles owed their design in part to the Lockheed C-5, part to the Spruce Goose, part to the American B-36 and part to NASA's lifting body experiments of the late twentieth century. They were the biggest aircraft ever built. They took off like winged aircraft driven by giant pusher propellers mounted into the trailing edges of the wings powered by electric motors embedded in their drive shafts. These giant props pushed the lumbering aircraft off the ground boosted by jet engines

that combined liquid hydrogen with oxygen from the air until the atmosphere grew so thin that liquid oxygen from the wing tanks was needed to support combustion. As the air became thinner, the engines in the wings became more like rockets and less like jets as vanes closed to maintain propulsion in the proper direction.

The power that drove this aircraft designed by committee came from a pair of small nuclear reactors. Encased in thick blankets of piezoelectric crystals, the reactors generated electricity directly from the heat of nuclear fission. The reactors had become the power source of choice for anything large enough to support one. A single reactor of the type in the cargo shuttle could power the largest “wet navy” vessel ever to sail the seas.

When departing Earth, the liquefied gases were provided from stations on the ground. When departing from other planets where water was available in either solid or liquid form, the reactors used electrolysis to generate the gases needed for propulsion. The two elements were pressurized and stored so they could be recombined in the engines to provide the thrust which drove the ungainly bird into space to the waiting interstellar cargo haulers. If the shuttles were outfitted with external fuel tanks, they could make the run to Venus or Mars. Provided they could find a large enough solid smooth surface, they were capable of landing on and taking off from any of the planetary moons whose surface was solid enough to support habitation.

Katherine and Sam gratefully returned to their seats on the flight deck of the shuttle. They started each engine, ran it to full and shut it down. They repeated the cycle until they were convinced everything would perform as specified. They checked the flight control surfaces, and when everything was acceptable, they started the motors. They had a moderate headwind on an otherwise bright and bitterly cold day. Unlike a concrete runway where locking the brakes means something, before they reached full throttle, the shuttle started to move. It slid down the beach at the edge of the lake and out onto the ice. They used the various throttles to control their direction since the flight control surfaces would not work until they developed sufficient air speed.

The giant propellers spun and threw snow in an impressive white cloud behind them. Designed to lift off with a full load, the powerful engines drove the empty shuttle rapidly across the ice. No surface is as smooth as a man-made runway and the aircraft bounced as it accelerated across the lake. Afraid to pull back on the stick too soon, Katherine stayed down as long as she dared. On one bounce the shuttle did not seem to want to settle back down so Katherine hauled back as hard as she could. She could feel the strain in the wings as the props clawed for air and gradually put distance between them and the ground.

Greg took off in pursuit to verify that the skids had disengaged. The main gear skids fell free as planned. The nose gear skid did not. Once at a stable altitude, Katherine tried extending and retracting the gear to dislodge the skid. It stayed put. Acrobatic maneuvers did not work. Finally, Sam deflated the tires preparatory to jettisoning the entire wheel assembly, and the skid disengaged. With another cheer from the ranks, the shuttle headed for the orbiting cargo ship.

Greg marked the locations of the three skids on his charts and headed for his cargo ship. The four women who remained on the surface boarded the pirate cargo ship and rendezvoused with Greg's ship in orbit. When they arrived, Greg did something he almost never did. He dug into his personal storage compartment and hauled out a bottle of vodka, a bottle of scotch and a bottle of whiskey.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TEN

WHILE ALL SEVEN of the people who had successfully returned Katherine's shuttle to space found themselves in their own beds the next morning with their clothes on, none of them could remember much beyond starting drinking and laughing themselves silly. The computer was discrete enough to not record the evening's festivities.

They were still nursing their hangovers when Myra showed up.

Myra was entirely too perky for anyone's mood. Hungover, sullen and tired, the others did not react with pleasure when Myra suggested they should fire up the reactors and head out.

Blondie and Katherine assaulted Myra with pillows every time she became excited or loud. While Greg would hardly have approved of their attitudes if this had been a regular Space Force crew, he certainly understood under the circumstances. While he did not aid and abet them, neither did he make any attempt to deflect the abuse Myra was taking. She took it well considering, but toward the end it began to wear on her.

"I have news!" Myra shouted as she floated onto the flight deck.

"Better be good news," Blondie groaned.

"Very good news," Katherine agreed in a gravelly voice that would have been sexy if her facial expression had been a little less pained.

"Somebody circulated the rumor that you were hijacked in earth orbit and forced to take the hijackers to an undisclosed location," Myra bubbled.

"And who would be brazen enough to do such a thing?" Greg asked sarcastically knowing that Myra had sealed his fate. She had finally killed his resurgent hope that he could take his ship and leave.

"Me!" Myra shouted and got hit by two pillows.

"No, dummy, I meant hijack my ship," Greg said with a groan.

"Pierre LaMarche," Myra giggled and then ducked to avoid being struck by pillows again.

Holding his forehead, his eyes bleary, Greg gazed in Myra's direction even if he could not focus on her. "And someone believed this?"

"A couple of well planted journalists helped things along, but the press is calling for an all out man-hunt for Pierre and his crew." Myra held her arms out to deflect blows that did not come.

"And supposedly how did they do this?" Greg asked.

"Stowed away on the shuttles!" Myra exclaimed as Blondie and Katherine hit her again.

"I supposed they overpowered the crews?" Greg offered.

"Yes!" Myra said and ducked.

"Then what? What happened when they got to my ship?" Greg asked.

"They didn't get on to your ship until after you jumped!"

"Excuse me?" Greg said.

"Your smart computer detected a problem with the shuttles. You knew something was up. You sealed off the shuttles and when you spotted the customs ship, you assumed it was a disguised pirate and split! How's that? Don't hit me, again! OW! Stop that!" Myra said.

"As if we couldn't defend ourselves!" Brownie sniffed.

"Play along with me here. They caught you by surprise," Myra wheedled.

It was Brownie's turn to be sarcastic "Ah me, poor little women can't defend ourselves against the big hairy men. So sad."

"They were armed. You weren't," Myra said smugly.

"And why didn't they overpower Greg?" Blondie asked.

"He's a mean, resourceful son of a bitch. Two pirates are no match for him," Myra grinned.

"You under-estimate my fath-air," Monique said.

"Pierre was your father?" Greg gasped.

"Oui."

"You watched me kill your father, and you said nothing?" Greg said softly, astounded.

"Oui," Monique replied quietly.

"You've had a dozen opportunities to kill me, not the least of which was last night, and you've not tried. Why?" Greg continued.

"I would like to live. Your friends would have killed me if you did not do it yourself. Like you, we not fight to die. We fight to live. Maybe you not understand zzat."

"Have you grieved for your father?" Brownie asked.

"Oui, silently in my own way. I have cried for him. Mark gave him a vezzy good funeral. Mark did better than my fath-air did for his own brother. I know you killed him, also."

The mood in the room turned somber.

"I am sorry. I had no choice," Greg said.

"I know," Monique replied. "You were correct. He did abuse children. He abused Myra, and he abused me. I thought it was my fault. I was such a slow learner." Angelina spoke softly, "He was a bad man. You were right to kill him. It was right zzat it was you who did it. You were zzee only one he feared. Now, we can live in peace. The man Helen killed wizz her foot, zzat was my hus-band. We are

better he is gone, too.”

For a minute the room was hushed except their breathing and the sound of the air handler fans. Even the background music stopped.

“Then we must change the story so as to not dishonor your father,” Greg said. “Can you accept it so far? It truly is a brilliant plan, worthy of your father.”

“Oui, if it means we can all live,” Monique said.

“Yes, we, too, fight to live,” Greg said softly. “Let’s try this. Once I jump into hyper space, they take over my ship. I am taken prisoner for ransom. Pierre was no fool. He would know I am worth more alive than dead. He would also hold the shuttle crews for ransom. That was his style.”

“Oui,” Monique said, “Ransom or torture.”

“We can leave the torture part out,” Greg suggested. “When we drop out of hyperspace, he allows me to complete my mission. The horses are of no value. He wants the ship and us unharmed. The ships and their crews can be ransomed. A bunch of dead animals would be a liability and anger the Rescue League. No sense in making unnecessary enemies.”

“Would he be that charitable?” Myra asked.

“Not unless I talked him into it,” Greg suggested.

“Oui, c’est bon, go on,” Monique said.

“We make the drops and other pirate ships join us except that the other ships have been followed by an unknown force that is not the Space Force. We suspect it’s Swordsmen flexing their muscle. Or maybe it’s a rival group of pirates. Or maybe both. I’ll make it as confusing as possible as to who the attackers are. A fire fight develops and all ships except this one are destroyed. Even this one is crippled. The reactor is damaged and has shut down. I only have enough battery power left to send this one message on a courier missile.”

“That could work,” Myra said.

“Monique?” Greg asked.

“Oui. By dying, we are set free,” Monique answered.

“I’ll prepare the message,” Greg said. “I’ll phrase it as a final report to Admiral Davidson. He’ll know it’s bogus, but he won’t be able to do anything because he won’t know where we are.”

“They can’t trace the missile back?” Blondie asked.

“Not if I program it correctly, and Davidson will figure it out. I’ll remove a part and he’ll notice it’s gone,” Greg smiled. “If we agree, I’ll begin. You may listen to it before I send it.”

Everyone except Greg went back to bed. Being hung over in weightlessness was more unsettling than being hung over with gravity. When he was alone, the computer asked, “Do you want to



do this, sir? It is like committing suicide. We will be fugitives forever.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“I do not see one.”

“Neither do I.”

“Very well then, sir, entering dictation mode.”

That afternoon, after Greg had finished recording, they gathered to listen. The computer had added sound effects in the background for realism.

Blondie was the first to react when the recording finished. “Euwww! Gag me with a spoon! Did you have to have me die with my head in your lap saying good-bye to my mother?”

“Did you want her thinking her daughter’s soul would be forever damned?” Greg asked.

“No, I guess not,” Blondie admitted.

Brownie held her hands over her heart and leaned back with her face in the air, “Ah, the melodramatic heroine, frantically trying to save the ship and dying in the process. How nauseating! May I be sick now?”

Katherine was more serious. “I think I would do as you suggest under those circumstances. I would have died trying to escape with my ship even if there was no possibility of success.”

“And I would be there to back her up,” Sam added.

“You have treated my fath-air well,” Monique commented. “He does not seem like such a monstair the way you tell it.”

Not to be out done, Myra had to add her remarks. “Do you think Davidson is going to buy the ending? I mean come on, ‘The only question now is whether the batteries will fail before or after the ship impacts the atmosphere and turns into a giant meteorite.’ What kind of crap is that?”

Greg smiled. “Andersen should buy all of this crap, but Davidson won’t believe a word of it. He’ll know we’re alive. He may think Pierre is alive, but he won’t do anything about it. He won’t because he can’t without blowing a bunch of credibility. He’ll be non-committal. He will refuse to vouch for the message’s authenticity, but he has no reason to doubt it either. Without corroboration, there is no way to know. If he is as clever as I think he is, he will demand an accounting of all Swordsman ships for the time period. He will make the public aware the Swordsmen are building a Space Force and how big it has become. Pierre is overdue, and there are probably searches going on for him. His disappearance will leak out, and re-open the question as to whether the Swordsmen are being truthful in their fleet reports.”

“How are you going to make sure Davidson sees it?” Myra asked.

“By addressing it to him and encrypting it so only he can decipher it,” Greg assured her.

“You can do that?” Blondie asked.

“I regularly receive intelligence data by encoded analog voice recordings,” Myra replied.

“Each message is uniquely coded to the intended recipient. Multiple sub carriers, that sort of thing. He’ll know it’s me because only the key to my code will open it. He will release it to the public unencrypted,” Greg explained.

“Let’s hope this works,” Brownie said.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER ELEVEN

ONCE THE COURIER MISSILE was off, Myra turned back to the group. “We’ve had our fun. It’s back to work. We have a cargo on its way to Triton which we need to meet.”

“Triton?” they said as one.

“Uranus’ moon? Could you pick a spot less hospitable? Nobody goes to Triton anymore,” Greg sneered. “Not since they closed the tracking station. The place has nothing going for it.”

“Which is why we’re going there,” Myra trilled.

“What mean we, white man,” Greg joked.

“We can all go,” Myra replied.

“No, we can’t all go,” Greg corrected. “Someone has to stay here in case of unwanted visitors.”

“Visitors?” Monique asked.

“What if someone comes looking for you?” Greg asked.

“Vraiment, mais oui, people will look for us soon.” Monique said. “You will be in danger.”

“So who stays, and who goes?” Blondie asked.

“I think Sam, Brownie and I should go,” Greg said. “Sam and Brownie can fly the shuttle.”

“If you break it, I’ll kill you,” Katherine joked.

“Myra, stay in your ship. Katherine, take Albert’s scout. Blondie, take the tug to the surface and retrieve the skids. Gather four empty containers and set them where Katherine’s shuttle was parked. When we return we can pick up your shuttle and straddle it over the containers so we can work on the undercarriage. Maintain communication between the ground and the ship. Monique and Angelina, can I trust you with the destroyer?”

“What do you mean?” Angelina asked.

“Trust you to not try to escape or to shoot down the other ships,” Greg said.

“You think we would do that?” Monique asked, offended.

“No, but I have to ask,” Greg replied.

“We will stay. You know who we are and you trust us. We have honor,” Monique affirmed.

“Good,” Greg said. “Park the cargo ship near the asteroid belt where it can be seen Turn on the courier missile homing beacon. The ship should appear as if it’s expecting orders for its next shipment. Park your ships on asteroids where your lasers and missiles can hit whatever is attracted to the cargo ship. If you get a visitor, Myra will hail them and identify herself by her Space Force rank. What you

do next depends on what they do.”

“Got it,” Myra said.

Myra handed Greg a data module. “Recognition codes and landing procedures for Triton. They’re not expecting you to have a shuttle. It will be a pleasant surprise.”

“What are we picking up?” Greg asked.

“Mostly durable goods, tractors, farm equipment, that sort of thing,” Myra answered.

“Well, gang, let’s go,” Greg said as he plugged the module into the ship’s data port.

Everyone was ready within the hour. Katherine, Myra, Blondie, Angelina and Monique headed in different directions as assigned. With the empty shuttle secured to the side of the cargo ship, Greg, Sam and Brownie slowly headed out.

The trip to Triton was uneventful given that they maintained 2 G’s of acceleration the whole way in order to make their deadline. Using the identification of a ship Myra knew to be in a distant part of the galaxy assigned to a mining company, they slid through the Space Force defensive perimeter and slipped into orbit around Triton. Communicating by laser, they received shuttle landing instructions which they loaded into the shuttle’s navigation computer.

Brownie and Sam imitated Helen’s “hug for luck” and headed for the surface of the tiny moon. The runway had been designed for smaller and slower craft than the shuttle, but they were able to land by first turning the shuttle backwards and firing their engines. Once the shuttle was descending at the proper rate, they turned back around and used their forward steering jets to bring them on the proper angle of descent. They touched down gently with the big variable pitch props in reverse blowing madly against what little atmosphere there was. They finally slowed and stopped at the end of the runway. Another shuttle waited on a taxi-way with its props gently spinning. Once Sam and Brownie cleared the runway, the waiting shuttle taxied to the runway and left with a load of cargo containers.

No sooner had they stopped than a man in an EVA suit clambered up the shuttle’s nose and peered in through the craft’s windows. The suit was powder blue with navy trim and tuxedo pant side stripes. Only members of the stevedore’s union wore these suits. He had fabric taped over his number and name on the back of his suit and tape over the name stripe on his chest. Those suits were so hard to come by that their presence could only mean these men were legitimate union stevedores.

“Think he’s free lancing?” Sam asked.

“A little money on the side? Wouldn’t be the first time,” Brownie answered.

The man with his face in the window held one finger pointed up against where his mouth would be if he were not wearing the helmet. Sam recognized the symbol for silence and returned it. The man smiled and gave them thumbs up. They dropped the loading ramp. Through the cameras mounted in the cargo bay they could see containers being pushed through the door into the ship. They could feel the bumping and thumping of the loading process through the ship’s frame. They could see two men on the ground and one driving a large lift maneuvering the containers onto the rollers of the cargo bay’s floor.

When the cargo bay was full, the man returned to the window and made a circle motion pointing up with one finger over his head. Then he pointed to more cargo containers parked next to the

runway. Brownie figured out his meaning and blew him a kiss. He put his hands over his heart and pretended to fall off the nose of the ship. They closed the cargo door and checked to see that everything was secure. They turned around and headed out.

When they arrived at the cargo ship, they prepared to get into their EVA suits and unload when another man, dressed like the first, appeared at the window. Through a series of awkward hand motions which took a while to figure out, the two women realized that they were to stay in their seats. They opened the bay door, and two men in powder blue EVA suits trimmed with navy blue entered. Assisted by personal jet packs, the men rapidly attached the containers to the cargo ship. Sam and Brownie felt uncomfortable watching the others work, but as fast as the work was going, decided not to fuss.

When the last container had been removed, the man appeared at the window again and waved "Bye, Bye" as one would wave to a child. Sam and Brownie headed back to the surface as the other shuttle arrived with its second load.

When they arrived at the surface, they opened the bay door, and the loaders did their thing. When they were loaded, they left again. They returned to the cargo ship and opened the bay door. The process was repeated until all the containers on the surface had been attached to the cargo ship. Once they were unloaded at the ship for the last time, they docked and donned their EVA suits so they could secure the shuttle to the cargo ship for the trip home.

As soon as the women appeared outside the shuttle one of the men made a motion over his chest with his hand in an arc to indicate breasts and pointed at them. The others gave him thumbs up. When the second shuttle's cargo had been transferred and the women's shuttle was secured, the eight men who participated in the loading process lined up with their arms held wide looking for all the world like powder blue gingerbread men waiting for hugs. The women hugged each one in turn. The men waved, climbed back into their shuttle and left.

Surprised at how smoothly this had gone, the women returned to Greg patiently waiting inside the cargo ship. Greg started the engines and gently accelerated away from the small moon. Once he had reached one G of acceleration in standard drive, Greg said, "There's a surprise in the cargo bay. Go on down." When Sam and Brownie looked at him askance, he laughed and said, "Just go."

When they arrived, they found four of the biggest horses they had ever seen tended by a giant of a man and an equally giant woman. Sam's head barely cleared the man's chest.

The man turned to them and said, "Ach, you must be Brownie and you must be Sam. It is my pleasure to meet you. My name is Horst. This is my wife Anna. It is so kind of you to share your ship with us."

They stared at the magnificent huge horses and the emblem on the container doors which was the logo of a prominent maker of adult beverages. "What kind of horses are these?" Brownie asked.

"These are Clydesdale." He pointed to other open containers. "Those are Percheron and more Clydesdale."

"They are massive!" Sam exclaimed, "How will they travel?"

"These are big babies. They will travel fine. You will see. You are worried. Does that mean you will spend time here with us?"

"I guess so," Sam stammered.

"Das is good. You come often. You learn their names. You will love them, too. Yes, you big baby. Pretty lady come to see you." The horse snorted and shuffled its feet. "We must get ready to leave now. We go where it is safe for big horses like you."

Brownie and Sam retreated to the cabin.

"Settle in," Greg said. "As soon as our guests come up from below we are leaving for home."

"Who are they?" Sam asked.

"You already know who they are. The question is why they are here," Greg said.

"I guess," Sam replied.

"The Swordsmen are attacking symbols of activities of which they do not approve. The company that these horses symbolize is on their bad list. Swordsmen have sabotaged the stables and poisoned the feed for these magnificent animals. They have attacked the animals at public appearances and have endangered innocent bystanders. The company that owns them feared for their safety and decided to move enough that if the ones they maintain in public are injured, they can be replaced. What we are being paid for this run covers the cost of all the gear we are hauling to the planet. It would be in our best interest to be nice to these people."

"Do they know where we are going?" Sam asked.

"They don't want to know. They want to save the horses. It is their life's work," Greg said.

Horst and Anna came to the flight deck and went to their quarters to strap in. Greg initiated the jump from standard to hyper drive and the ship jumped to begin the trip home.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWELVE

ADMIRAL DAVIDSON EXPLODED IN ANGER when he finished listening to the recording. “That lying son of a bitch!”

“Sir?” his aide responded.

“This has to be the biggest load of shit I have heard in a long time!”

“Sir, what would you like to do?”

“Release it to the press as it is.” Admiral Davidson paused. “God damn it! That’s what he wants, but I can’t figure out why. He’s up to something. I wish I knew what it was.”

“Sir, are you aware that Pierre LaMarche is missing?” the aide asked.

“I had heard he was overdue.”

“Sir, in this morning’s intelligence briefing the interdiction group reported they think that three of his ships are missing. His daughter seems to be gone, too.”

“His daughter?”

“Yes, sir and she was supposed to be with him.”

“How strange.”

“Yes, sir. The description of the three pirate ships in Captain Solomon’s report exactly matches the description of Pierre’s missing ships, sir.”

“How interesting.”

“From the briefing, according to our pirate sources, the system where Pierre LaMarche is supposedly missing is in the list of systems where Solomon’s courier missile could have originated.”

“Really?”

“Yes, sir. What do you make of it, sir?”

“Here’s what I believe and if you breathe a word, you will be posted to guard duty on Triton.”

“Sir, you can count on me.”

“I believe Solomon has killed or captured Pierre LaMarche and has captured or killed the crews of the three ships. I don’t believe he did it alone. I assume the missing shuttle pilots are involved, and I will give you even money they are alive. He is alive and does not want us to come looking for him.”

“Sir, it seems to me that we win either way. With Pierre LaMarche out of the picture, our merchant fleet will be safer.”

“Yes and Greg’s story gives us the opportunity to investigate the Swordsmen which my unlikely, impossible to prove belief doesn’t.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s issue a press statement on what a good officer Greg was and recommend him for a posthumous medal. We can write a bio that makes him sound like a model soldier instead of the loose cannon he was.”

“But, sir, don’t we like loose cannons for pirate interdiction?”

“Oh, yes. Speaking of loose cannons, Lt. Myrakova might be able to verify the story. Can you have her report to me?”

“She is listed as on patrol in the same sector, sir.”

Admiral Davidson laughed. “Now, I know he’s lying, and that little minx is involved! I love it!” The admiral laughed again and said, “Draft a short press release for my signature. Leave me now, I have some calls to make.”

“Yes, sir.”



## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GREG HAILED MYRA on an open channel as soon as he was in range. She greeted him enthusiastically. All five women immediately requested permission to come aboard and in seemingly no time the entire group was assembled in the cargo hold admiring the gigantic horses.

An animated discussion immediately erupted over the best way to bring the horses to the surface. There was general agreement that while the smaller animals they dropped on previous trips could withstand the stresses of the usual procedures, these behemoths could not. They decided that Monique and Angelina would ferry the horses down two containers at a time in the cargo ship. Greg would drop the farm equipment first by the normal method into the lake by the settlement. Blondie would retrieve the regular containers from the lake and pull them to the shore. Sam and Brownie would unload them and find the farm tractors. They would then use one of the tractors to haul the containers with the large horses out of the pirate cargo ship's hold to the ground. The process would be repeated until all the cargo was on the ground.

Myra and Katherine were elected to stand guard. Greg was feeling pretty good about the plans until he noticed a Model 86 parked on the asteroid. The cargo ship's sensors told him the 86 had been shut down and open to the vacuum of space for weeks.

He looked at Myra and said, "Were you going to tell me about that?" pointing to the addition.

"Eventually," Myra and Katherine left without explaining.

The returning travelers and the new additions were greeted like conquering heroes. Everyone had survived the winter intact and with the coming of spring had planted everything they could get their hands on. Gardens of various sizes dotted the lakeside. The rich bottom land surrounding the lake was fertile, and the plants were doing well. The planet's small omnivores were a problem, but short electric fences seemed to be keeping them at bay at least temporarily.

Mark, as the elected religious leader, had performed weddings. Dr. Miller and Gloria had been the first. Their desire for a religious wedding had motivated the construction of a meeting hall and the conscription of Mark as religious leader. Mark, to his credit, recognized the unusual nature of his duties and treated them with the dignity they deserved, seriously but not heavy-handedly.

Stephanie had married David. She was the best cook he had ever met, and he provided her with stability and comfort. He taught her to play electronic keyboards and often accompanied her on drums. Everyone had agreed that they should live at the far side of the lake. Blondie had dutifully moved their modular homes together on a small protected cove. David had developed a knack for working with the material and parts from surplus shipping containers and had built a couple of fishing boats and a sail boat that handled reasonably well.

Dr. Chris Harrison and Tanya had married. A professional journalist, she had kept a diary of the trip from the moment she had first been approached about joining the expedition. Dr. Harrison, as resident agronomist, found having a literate assistant who not only took copious notes, but who was genuinely interested in his work and was fun to be around too good an opportunity to let go. When it became apparent to him, long after it was apparent to everyone else, that her interest in him was more than scholarly, he formally asked for her hand in front of everyone at the party following David and Stephanie's wedding.

Cyrus and Diane often joined Stephanie and David to play music well into the night. They had asked Blondie to move them together not far from Stephanie and David. They were definitely an item, but did not ask to be married. There was no rule saying they had to marry, and the community accepted them for what they were.

Timmy Willis married Lonnie Bell. Timmy was injured several times as he trained the horses. He was kicked, stomped on and thrown. Each time he would come limping to Lonnie, and she would nurse him back to health. She spent as much time in his home caring for him as she did in her own. Eventually they tied the knot.

Perhaps the oddest pair, at least the one Greg would never have predicted, was Dr. Turner and Jonathan Dearing. Jonathan's mechanical engineering background had allowed him to design much of the equipment David had built. He saw his world in terms of his science and what made things work in a grounded "laws of physics" mind set. Michelle Turner, on the other hand, was equally scientific in her approach the epidemiology which was her specialty, but saw her world as more amorphous and with less defined edges. Both of them were extremely intelligent and well read. They often quarreled over subjects the rest of the community did not understand the basics of let alone the nuances of their discussions. While they had not yet married, the assumption was that they would soon. Fixated on solving the riddle of what had happened to the planet's previous inhabitants, Dr. Turner was often gone for days searching out skeletons for clues to the animals' demise.

Other pairs were forming, George Davis and Linda Danvers were collaborating on writing the script and music for a documentary of the colony. Doug Marlin, who had been instrumental in getting all the homes set up originally, had helped Blondie with all the moves and had moved his own home next to Mary Burke. Their relationship was not as open as some of the others, but they definitely were a pair. Julie Baker had combined her skills as a chemist with Darrell Minor's skills with plastics to develop a process for extracting liquid fuels from indigenous local plants. They had also built a still and were processing some exceptionally potent liquor. It fueled many of the parties at David and Stephanie's. Gwen and Fred were seeing other but they were so quiet few of the others knew what they were planning. Orville and Bridgette were together. Of all the people in the community, Orville was perhaps the most excited to see the tractors and farm implements. A certified mechanic on a variety of liquid fueled devices, he had been bored since most of the previous equipment had been electric. Bridgette, with no computers to program, had also been left with lots of time on her hands. She enthusiastically unpacked the electronics included in this shipment. They had helped where they could, but longed for an opportunity to contribute on their own. Now, with the latest shipment, they could work at their skills.

Only Helen was left without companionship. Gaston was amenable enough to joining the community, but Helen intimidated him so badly, he patiently longed for the next wave of settlers hoping there would be a companion for him. Mark was loving life. The lack of pressure to be someone he did not want to be gave him liberty. He lived quietly save for his duties as religious leader. Celibacy suited him. He had returned to his studies of the materials he had brought with him and was writing an unflattering history of the church.

By the time they had settled the new arrivals and distributed the cargo, spring had started to give way to summer. One of Greg's first priorities after distributing the cargo was moving Blondie's shuttle off the beach so they could work on it. The five kilometer move took them the better part of two days. Greg quickly tired of hearing that the difference between a rich space redneck and a poor space redneck was a rich one had two shuttles up on blocks in the front yard. Once Blondie's shuttle had been

put in place, the empty cargo bay became their home away from home when they were on the surface. They stayed on the surface another two weeks tending to details.

Only when Greg was satisfied everything they needed to do on the surface had been done, did the flight group return to his ship. Over dinner he brought up the question he had been brooding over since his return. "Myra, please explain the 86 parked on the asteroid."

"Actually, Katherine should explain," Myra suggested.

"Probably it would be better if he listened to the recording," Katherine hedged.

"Monsieur Greg," Monique said, "we were in zzis together. It would be best if you listened first and zzen we talked about it." Angelina nodded her agreement.

Blondie held her hands out and said, "I was moving houses."

Katherine instructed the computer. "Start at 0800. Leave out pauses longer than ten seconds."

The recording started. *Myra's voice said, "Unidentified craft entering the system in Sector seven, please identify yourself." The message was repeated half a dozen times.*

*Myra's voice, "Unidentified craft, you have entered a restricted system. Your presence is not authorized."*

*Myra's voice, "Unidentified craft, you have entered a restricted system. This is Lt. Myrakova, Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction Task Force. Stand down, and prepare to be boarded."*

*A man's voice, "Shut up bitch, I don't have to take no orders from no woman."*

Katherine paused the recording. "By this time we had him in visual. He parked off the cargo ship's port bow."

She restarted the recording.

*Myra's voice, "Unidentified Valiant Model 86 Scout stand down and be boarded or I will be obliged to fire on you."*

*The man's voice, American, Southern, "Ah ain't no wimp you can push around, woman. Why ain't you home where you belong?"*

Katherine paused the recording again. "He lit Myra's ship with his targeting radar."

She restarted the recording.

*Myra's voice, "Acknowledge that you have initiated hostile action by activating your targeting radar."*

*The man's voice, "Look, you think one lonely woman in a little scout ship is going to scare me, I a-am here to claim this here system for settlement. Why don't you go home where you belong with your man barefoot and pregnant? You know sweetheart, your job is making babies. My job is out here with*

*the big boys. Besides you think one little woman is going to make me run. Get real. ”*

*Myra ’s voice, “Hey, little man, you got a name? ”*

*The man ’s voice, “I don ’t gotta tell ya, bitch. ”*

Greg interrupted, “I hope you didn’t blow him away because he insulted you.”

“Now would I do that?” Myra retorted.

“Yes,” Greg answered.

“Hush, the both of you,” Katherine scolded.

*Myra ’s voice, “I want to be able to tell your momma after I kill you how you died. Besides under the Geneva Convention and Federation regulations you do. Pirates identify themselves. Even Swordsmen identify themselves. Tell me your name unless you want to die anonymously. ”*

*The man ’s voice, “Bryan Jennings Williams. ”*

*Katherine ’s voice, “Myra, don ’t splash him. Greg would rather we took him and his ship alive. ”*

Katherine stopped the recording, “Myra lit him with her targeting radar. I was concerned if she hit him with a missile at that range the debris would hit us.”

Greg nodded his agreement. “Good call.” Katherine restarted the recording.

*The man ’s voice, “That ’s right, you don ’t want to splash me, now do you. I have something hot waiting for you right here. ”*

Katherine stopped the recording, “He fired a single missile at Myra, and she lasered it.”

She restarted the recording.

*Myra ’s voice, “Listen, you can either live or you can die. You are dealing with a fully armed Space Force P I ship. By myself, I have enough firepower to eliminate all your missiles and have enough left over for two more soda crackers like you. You fired on me. You are now fair game. If you run, we will shoot you down. If you fire again, we will shoot you down. Understand? ”*

*The man ’s voice, mockingly, “But Myra, Greg wants me alive. ”*

*Myra ’s voice, “Not really. He wants the ship. He doesn ’t give a shit about you. Now, let me explain the situation. You know I ’m at your twelve o ’clock nose to nose with you. While you were running your mouth, one of my friends in an 86 like yours took up a position directly over your head and slightly forward of you. Two more of my friends in a destroyer that used to be a pirate took a position astern of you. You can surrender or you can die. It ’s your choice. ”*

*The man ’s voice, “You ain ’t no threat to me! ”*

*Myra ’s voice, “Monique, is this guy one of yours? ”*

*Monique ’s voice, “No pirate would be this stupid. Besides what kind of name is Byron? ”*

*Katherine's voice, "Redneck Swordsman."*

*Myra's voice, "Boy, are you a Swordsman? Our pirate friends say you're not one of theirs."*

*Katherine's voice, "Can't you tell by the emblems on his wings?"*

*Myra's voice, "That's right, no pirate would stoop so low as to masquerade as a Swordsman. They're better than that."*

*Katherine's voice, "Hey Byron, are you a cowboy? A rootin' tootin' six gun shootin' cowboy?"*

*The man's voice, "So what if I am?"*

*Katherine's voice, "Do you know why cowboys are such lousy lovers?"*

*Myra's voice, sounding scandalized, "No! Do tell!"*

*Katherine's voice, "Because they think eight seconds is a long ride!"*

*The women laughed, and the man snarled.*

*Katherine's voice, suddenly calm, "Myra, you know this model of the 86 has the reactor shut off switch mounted behind the pilot's view-port. I can probably laser it from here and shut down his reactor. He should have a couple of days of life support but he won't be able to flee."*

*Myra's voice, "Well Byron, I guess that's it. My friend is going to drill a tiny little hole in your shell with her laser and shut down your reactor. How do you feel about that?"*

*The man's voice, "It's Bryan and take that, you bitch!"*

Katherine stopped the recording. "He fired again, and Myra lasered it again. He had now used up half his missiles. I was surprised he hadn't tried his laser yet." She restarted the recording.

*Katherine's voice, "It's gonna be one teeny tiny little hole. Just like the dentist." There was a pause. "Oh my God! I didn't mean to!"*

*Myra's voice, "Judging by the looks of things, you missed. What did you hit?"*

*Katherine's voice, "The view-port. It blew apart."*

*Myra's voice, "It's an 86. They do that. The good news is that he probably didn't feel a thing. The bad news is that he's probably splattered all over the inside of the flight deck, and the reactor is still on. We need to shut it down."*

*Katherine's voice, "I made this mess I should clean it up."*

*Angelina's voice, "Katherine, I will help you."*

*Katherine's voice, "Thank you."*

Katherine stopped the recording. "I screwed up, big time."

Greg was pensive for a while and said, "None of you were hurt, and that's the main thing. Yes, I would have preferred taking him alive, but having another ship is not bad. I can't believe you teased him so much. He could have been a lot more dangerous angry than calm."

Myra paused before responding, "My experience with men is exactly the opposite. When they're angry they get stupid. We wanted stupid so we could sneak up behind him and board. He wasn't giving us the opportunity."

"I understand," Greg said. He paused, "Katherine, was the first time you have killed someone?"

"Yes."

"Have you dealt with your feelings about killing?"

"Yes, I have. When I cleaned out his ship."

"I have other concerns," Greg said. "Myra, I am surprised you put yourself in line of his laser. We know an 86 has limited targeting capability with its laser, but you were in the direct line of fire. You exposed yourself to unnecessary risk."

"I wasn't actually nose to nose. I had the underside of my ship exposed. The heat shield would take the hit. I was watching through a camera once he came into range."

"Did we ever figure out why he did not use his laser?"

"No."

"Katherine, can you work with the computer and program this scenario as a simulation?"

"Certainly."

"Good, we should learn from this. Have the computer run all the options of what could have gone wrong, especially including what would have happened had he tried to laser one of you."

Katherine smiled, excited, "You mean I get to write one of your games?"

Greg paused, bemused, "Yeah, is it a big deal?"

"Oh, yes," everyone said together.

Greg smiled. "If I had realized you wanted to write the games, I would have let you ages ago. Computer! Command Mode!"

"Aye Sir."

"Authorize all parties present and any others authorized by them to script and edit any new combat simulations they desire. Existing games including mine, may be edited with the addition of new scenarios, options, weapons, personnel and equipment, but no game, once started, may be deleted."

"Aye, Sir."

Greg turned to the women, "Go for it! I expect this will get competitive as to who can produce the best game. I don't want you sabotaging each other's games. Which is why games can't be deleted. A game that doesn't work is a better starting place than creating one from the beginning. Understood?"

There were nods and smiles all around.

Greg continued, "I have other business I need to bring to the group. May I continue?"

Several registered surprise that Greg would ask for permission to do anything given that he had long ago established command. "I think we should bring Helen up from the surface," he said.

"You looking to get laid? One of us - deviates - not good enough for you?" Blondie sneered.

Katherine leaned across the table and slapped her across the face.

As soon as Blondie brought her head back around from the force of the slap, she attacked again, "I'm sure if you wanted a friendly poke any of us would have obliged you!"

Katherine drew back to hit her again, but Greg grabbed her hand. Katherine's face was bright red from the force of her anger. The rest were paralyzed in shock. Greg gently put both of his hands around Katherine's and touched her hand to his lips.

"Let it go. I have offended her and hurt her. No apology will ever change that. Unresolved anger is a poison, and it has been eating at her for a long time. I know she is angry, and I understand. Why do you think I assigned you the way I did especially since Blondie has the most experience in an 86? Katherine, I mean no disrespect, but I think had Blondie been at the helm, our obnoxious fly-boy might not have died. That was my mistake. I feared her anger would have made her do something stupid. Was I right or wrong? Blondie, would you have told Myra to back off or splashed him yourself?"

Blondie thought for a second, as the finger marks from Katherine's slap turned bright red. "I would have splashed him. No question."

"I guess," Greg continued. "I did make the right decision. Back to the subject at hand. We must always be able to speak openly without recriminations. We need to be free to express unpopular ideas."

"Monsieur Greg?" Monique interrupted, "What is this word 'recrimination'?"

"It means getting slapped across the face for saying what we believe."

"Ah, bon, c'est vrai. I agree. Why is she mad wizz you?"

"When we first connected with Myra after our voyage from Earth, I called the settlers misfits and deviates. I lost my temper and said things I regret."

Angelina whispered in Monique's ear. Monique whispered back. Angelina blushed. No words were needed to interpret what had passed between them.

Monique looked at the others, "With all due respect, Monsieur Greg, we are all of us misfits or deviates or we would not be here. We would be on a planet making happy babies and working regular jobs. I have great respect for you, more than I had for my fath-air, but you are not what we would call

normal either.”

Greg laughed, “Let me hear an Amen for that!”

“So, Monsieur Greg, why do you want to bring Helen up here wizz us?” Angelina asked.

“I want you to teach her to fly because we are short flight crews, and I want her to teach you hand-to-hand combat. She is miserable dirt-side and bringing her up here would help her.”

“Is ziss the same Helen who killed my hus-band?” Angelina asked.

“Yes,” Greg answered softly, suddenly realizing he might be making a huge mistake.

“She will teach us?” Angelina asked.

“Happily, I believe,” Greg said.

“She has much to teach,” Angelina said. “I forgive her for killing my hus-band. I will find anoizzer.”

Blondie said, “May I be the one to go get her? I owe her an apology on another matter. This will be a good way to make amends.”

“How about a vote? All in favor say Aye!”

“Aye!” Even the computer voted which drew a laugh.

“All opposed!”

There was silence.

“Motion carries. Next order of business. Myra, Dr. Miller gave me an extensive shopping list. Since you are the one with access to the bank accounts, you should go shopping. Instead of schlepping all the way here, send a courier missile. We’ll leave the beacon on. While we are at it, I need a couple dozen courier missiles and a hundred or so of these with standard Federation Postal Service mailing boxes.” Greg handed her a data module. “Further instructions are on the module,” he added.

Myra looked at the data module and then at Greg. “May I ask why?”

“Mark’s unauthorized history of the church is about to become a best seller. We are going to tie all our ships’ computers together and link to Bridgette on the surface. We are going to create the most realistic combat simulator anyone has ever seen for the wide array of hand-held devices and personal data assistants in use now and for the foreseeable future. We are going to make the movie Linda and George are working on and as soon as I figure out how to get paid for all this, we will be able to finance the future growth of this community.”

There was stunned silence. This was the first time that Greg had publicly committed himself to the community’s future. The unspoken fear that he might take his ship and flee was finally laid to rest. He had always done what needed to be done for the refugees, but there had been lingering doubt as to his commitment. The doubt could be relegated to history.



The ship's computer broke the silence, "Communication between all ship-board computer systems is verified. Communication with Bridgette Carson's personal workstation is verified. Communication with all personal workstations on the planet's surface is verified."

"I didn't know you could do that!" Greg exclaimed.

"There are lots of things I can do you don't know."

Myra hopped out of her chair with the data module gripped firmly in her hand and bounced over to Greg. She bounded into his lap and said, "Hug for luck!" She kissed him and bounced away racing as fast as she could in the direction of her ship.

"Sam and I should do a damage assessment on that 86," Brownie offered.

"Good idea," Greg replied. "It's been a tough evening. Everything I have to do can wait for morning. I'm turning in."

"Um, gang," Blondie said. "If you don't mind, I would like to get Helen now. I would feel better not waiting." She got up and left.

Greg whistled a few bars of "Good Night Ladies" as he wandered off to bed, leaving the others chatting at the table.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HELEN LEARNED TO FLY faster than the others learned hand-to-hand combat. She understood the strategies used in the simulations and quickly absorbed the tactics of combat in space. The difference in how objects moved in a vacuum as opposed to in the atmosphere became second nature to her. Perhaps more than the others, she understood why killing in the relative impersonal distance of space was so different from killing face to face. She had assimilated the experience of killing Angelina's husband, a man with a face, a name and a family, but found no peace in the knowledge. Even so, she knew if she were faced with the same situation again she would do again as he had done before.

The idea of swapping the landing gear on the two shuttles turned out to be impractical. The parts could be removed, but once on the planet's surface, they would be too heavy to manipulate. It looked as if Blondie's shuttle was going to be permanently grounded. Greg was standing under the "up on blocks in the front yard" shuttle obstinately, desperately, trying to figure out how to get the shuttle off the ground again when David wandered by.

"You know," he said, "if we cut six containers in half and bolt them together we can make a barge big enough to float this monster. We can haul it to that lake you used last winter and maybe once the lake freezes over, it can take off on its belly."

"A barge three hundred meters long? Greg asked.

"One hundred meters would do it. We only need to pick the ship up near its center of gravity."

"How wide?"

"Perhaps twenty meters wide and three meters deep."

"What would we tow it with?" Greg asked.

"That little cargo tug," David answered. "We could weld a prow on the containers to make a barge so it doesn't pull down or swamp and you would have to go slow to keep the shuttle from bouncing out, but you could get it to the lake before the cold weather hit."

Greg mentally started to calculate the time it would take to make the trip. His biggest concern was whether the tug could fly slowly enough to keep the shuttle from getting airborne and falling into the water if it hit a big wave. Suddenly an idea hit him, and he started jumping up and down.

Greg hugged David. "You're brilliant! You've solved the problem! We can use the shuttles again!" He hooted with joy and did a little happy dance laughing at the top of his lungs. Blondie, Monique and Angelina were nearby and heard Greg shouting. They came running.

Greg pointed at David. "The man is a genius!" The women looked at Greg as if he had lost his mind. David stood with his mouth open. "He has solved the puzzle! A barge! A giant barge! We put the shuttle on the barge! We pull it with the tug until the shuttle achieves airspeed and it lifts off!"

"I think building a runway is a better idea," Blondie said.

"In the long run," Greg answered. "Do you have a couple million cubic meters of concrete?"

"I guess not."

"Why can't we carry it to the frozen lake like we did mine?" Katherine asked.

"Because we need to set it down on its landing gear, and this ship doesn't have any gear."

Blondie looked pensive. "I think the top surface of the barge needs to be smooth so the ship doesn't get damaged as it scrapes off."

"Fair enough," Greg said. "We need some kind of attachment and release mechanism so it doesn't try to lift too early."

"I think we can work this out," David said.

Construction of the barge took over a month. Summer had given way to fall when they were ready to mount the shuttle on the barge. They experimented with the empty barge several times before deciding they were ready. The plan changed somewhat as it developed. The final plan called for the tug to get the shuttle and barge started, but before the shuttle reached airspeed to slack the line and let it drop. The tug would peel away to the right. By this point, the shuttle, capable of lifting that many full containers from a paved runway, should have enough lift to keep its nose up and drop the barge when it was ready to lift off without endangering the tug.

Before dawn, when the water was at its calmest, they pointed the assembly out to sea and started the motors. As Katherine had done almost a year before, Blondie tested each motor individually. She listened for vibration in the giant props. She rested her fingers on the airframe to check for any sign that something was not right. Brownie and Sam had been over every inch of the shuttle and pronounced it safe. They had tested the tug as well and pronounced it ready.

The day dawned bright and clear. There was a slight breeze off the water. They pointed their noses into the wind and headed out to sea. On a normal concrete runway, a fully loaded shuttle routinely took up to seven kilometers to reach airspeed sufficient to lift. Blondie took her time to build air speed and traveled almost twenty kilometers before she lifted off. Even then she held the barge for longer than they had planned. Given the way the barge tumbled when it hit the water, this was probably a good thing. Cheers and shouts rose from the shore as the big bird, grounded no more, took once again to the skies. Before the barge had settled into the water, David resolved to figure out how to attach a parachute to the barge so it dropped right side up. He also resolved to tackle the tougher problem of hydrofoils.

The buoy attached to the barge's tow line bobbed to the surface, and Greg hooked it to the tug. The barge's flotation bags inflated, and the barge slowly rose to the surface. Greg lifted the barge into the air as the water sluiced off its surfaces. He set it right side up on the lake in front of where the shuttle had sat for so long. They now could get loaded shuttles to and from the surface whenever they needed to. All that remained was finding the parts to repair the damaged undercarriage.

Helen took over Blondie's tug duties and Blondie moved to the pirate cargo ship with Sam and Brownie. They had detached the damaged crew module from the 86 that Katherine had shot up and placed it inside the cargo ship's hold. This allowed them to work in a pressurized, climate controlled

environment and still have the benefits of working in weightlessness. Progress was moving slowly as David and Darrell had to machine parts they did not have. Manufacturing parts out of materials on hand salvaged from the cargo containers without the proper specifications was a tedious process, but they were making headway. The only part that seemed hopeless was the surface of the view-port itself.

Julie and Darrell took the challenge of developing a clear high impact polymer that they could mold to the shape of the damaged view-port. Creating a new substance under the conditions at hand seemed impossible, but they were excited about the prospect. Part of what made the task so difficult was the lack of petroleum distillates they would have had on Earth. They were forced to use oils and resins derived from plants they were currently growing. One of their favorite basic materials, corn oil, appeared in a large number of the processes they developed.

Helen took residence on Greg's ship. She seemed more at ease there than on the planet's surface. She convinced Greg to resume their daily exercise habit. No longer restricted by her fears, she routinely bested him in their duels. Monique and Angelina patrolled in the destroyer, but a couple of times a week they all gathered at Greg's ship for dinner because he still had the best galley.

Every evening after dinner Greg settled into his command chair to work on a new simulation. One such evening Sam floated over to him. She watched over his shoulder for a few minutes and then asked, "Greg, have you had sex with Helen yet?"

"No," he answered, "and if I had, why would it be any of your business?"

"Why not?" she asked, ignoring his question. "She wants you to."

Greg turned to face her. She held up her hand to stop him from speaking, "You are the dumbest smart white man I ever met."

Greg started to speak, but she stopped him again. "You are eat up with the dumbs. You gave her back her life. Twice. When she was down, you lifted her up. She has no other way to thank you."

"Would you say this if we were the same sex? Why is this different?"

"Well, you ain't. It is what it is." Sam had an annoying habit of only answering those questions she wanted to answer. "You go down there, and you have sex with the lady like she wants. She don't want to marry you. You're too alike. She wants to have sex with you. I know you do that. Have sex with women I mean. So go do it or I ain't feeding you no more."

Greg sat stunned as she drifted away.

The next morning, Greg and Helen had their regular workout. Everyone else was away. After one particularly strenuous series of moves, Greg tripped and found himself on his back with Helen on top of him. With her face mere inches from his as they both tried to catch their breath, he reached up, pulled her face to his and kissed her.

She blinked and said, "Why did you do that?"

"An impulse."

She gently brought her lips down to touch his and held there for a long time. They spent the better part of two hours there in the cargo bay, weightlessly, softly, gently and languidly. Celtic music

frequently graced by lilting soprano soloists played sensuously in the background. That evening when the crew came together for dinner, Sam took one look at them and laughed. She was gracious enough to not share what she found so humorous with the others.

Myra's courier missile showed up a few days later. She had arranged another pickup on Triton. The repairs on the 86 were at a critical point. Darrell and Julie had figured out how to fabricate a view-port out of a hard polymer material derived from corn oil and the resin of a native tree they had been experimenting with and were almost ready to test it. Putting the second 86 back into action was important enough to not want to delay it for a supply run. Since Helen could handle attaching the containers to the cargo ship while Greg flew the shuttle and the stevedores would do the load, it was decided that Helen and Greg should make this run by themselves. Only Sam saw anything unusual in the arrangement and she approved.

The run to Triton at two G was uneventful as far as the ship was concerned and quite delightful for the two humans on board. The load went smoothly, although the stevedores expressed their disappointment that the two ladies had not returned.

The cargo included more farm equipment, medical equipment and supplies, computers, welding gear and supplies and enough machinery to build a saw mill. There were fifty passengers. One of the cargo containers was a modified troop transport, which lacked class, but at least it had bunks for everyone. This trip promised to be much more comfortable than the first one.

Among the passengers was a giant of a man named Sebastian. He had been a forest ranger until he objected to a Swordsman owned lumber company clear cutting old growth forests. After two attempts on his life, he disappeared into the forest where he hid out until he could ambush his pursuers. He killed two and fled. An anti-Swordsman organization found him and whisked him away.

Sebastian was as quiet as he was big. The only time anyone heard him say anything was during Helen and Greg's daily workouts. He watched with interest and cheered and applauded whoever made the best moves. About a week into the voyage, he asked Helen if she would work with him. She agreed willingly. They worked well together. She threw him to the mat at least a half dozen times each session. Each time he laughed as he sprang to his feet. At the end of each session, he hugged her as he had seen Greg do, and then discretely kissed her on the cheek.

Even Greg noticed Sebastian's interest in Helen growing with each passing day. Much to his own surprise, rather than feel jealous, he felt relieved. Sebastian's pursuit of Helen was a much discussed source of pleasure for the other passengers. There was a pool going as to when she would figure it out. Only Greg was aware of any potential conflict in Helen's mind. As far as the passengers knew, Greg was Captain, and Helen was crew. They had agreed that proprieties should be observed. Only he and Helen knew differently.

One evening after dinner, Helen caught Greg alone at his console working on a simulation. "Greg, I have a problem."

"Pregnant?" he quipped.

"Don't joke about that! It's not funny."

"Alright, I won't. What's the problem?"

"Sebastian."

“How so?”

“I think he likes me.”

“Likes you? He’s head over heels smitten, bonkers, crazy for you.”

“And you don’t mind?”

“Sometimes, but he’s better for you than I could ever be. If I had to pick who I would lose you to, I would pick him. He needs you in a way I will never need anyone. You need to be needed.”

“I don’t understand what he sees in me.”

Greg smiled. “You throw him to the mat, and you do it routinely. You are probably the first woman he has ever met who is not afraid of him. He probably thinks of most women like china dolls, beautiful but fragile. Delicate things terrify him. Look at the size of his hands. He probably breaks things picking them up. He doesn’t have to worry about hurting you. He would never do it on purpose, of course, but if he hurts you accidentally, you won’t break, you’ll probably kick his ass. He knows he can relax in your presence. He can be his rough and tumble self in your company. It’s wonderful.”

“You would let me go like that?”

“To him, yes. To most other men, no.”

“I love you, Greg.”

“And I love you too, but he needs you. He worships the decks you walk on. He will be a better husband for you than I could. Don’t look back. Go and be happy. Make lots of happy babies.”

“We will.”

Not long after they landed, Helen moved Sebastian’s and her houses together on the edge of a pristine mountain lake. They returned to the settlement long enough to get married and pack a half dozen horses to take them to their new home. Mark performed the ceremony. Greg gave away the bride. The six bridesmaids dressed in their finest flight suits made an unusual wedding party. Even Timmy was happy to see the horses he had trained placed in such good hands. The wedding was one of the happiest moments in the community’s short history.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MARK STONEBRIDGE FINISHED HIS BOOK. Linda Danvers finished her documentary, and Greg finished his "Pirate Interdiction" simulator. There was discussion about the risks involved with publishing Mark's book and provoking the Swordsmen, but the need for the revenue from the book's sales outweighed the fear of retribution given the secrecy of their location. They loaded the works on to the data modules and put the data modules into unmarked Federation Postal Service boxes with delivery addresses, but no return. No sooner had they finished preparations than Myra sent another courier missile. Work on the 86 had ground to a halt for lack of parts. Sam and Brownie were chosen to accompany Greg on this trip.

When they arrived at Triton, they found the usual stevedores. They picked up another four dozen refugees who took their places in the troop transport. Brownie passed two steamer trunks with the data modules to the stevedores. The stevedores passed a note after the traditional line of hugs.

The note read, "Location too hot. Space Force P I. Do not return."

Sam acknowledged after reading the note and blew the stevedores a kiss.

They quickly prepared for departure.

The Pirate Interdiction ship's computerized hail on an open frequency caught them by surprise. It was as if they had jumped off a building and slammed face down into the ground.

"Command mode!" Greg shouted, "Identify unknown craft." The flight deck displays showed the ship and its identification codes.

"Oh, shit," Greg said softly, "We're busted." His face lost its color. He started to tremble. Tears appeared in his eyes for a moment. Now that he had his freedom, he was about to lose it, but not in the way he would have predicted.

"How much trouble are we in?" Brownie asked.

"Is there anything we can do?" Sam asked at the same time.

Greg sighed. "It depends on who is on that ship. There is nothing we can do. Stand down and prepare to be boarded. That's Avi's ship. I assume she's still on it. We can't out run it. It is extremely well armed. Even without her, it's clever enough to defeat our defenses. I helped program it. With her, we're sitting ducks. Computer, would you concur?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please initiate docking procedures."

"Aye, sir."

"Brownie, please go to the airlock to greet our guest."

"Yes, sir."

“Sam, we should tidy up a bit.”

They put away the few dishes remaining from their most recent meal and closed the doors to their sleeping quarters.

A few minutes later Brownie escorted a tall shapely woman with long dark flowing hair to the flight deck. This woman was the first spacer Sam or Brownie had ever seen with long hair. Spacers wore their hair short. On most women a flight suit obscured their figure. On this woman, the impeccably tailored flight suit with all its hoses and attachments only served to accentuate the perfect hourglass shape.

“Gregory!” she exclaimed. “What a delightful surprise! It’s been a long time.” She used a tone that meant it was not a surprise or not delightful. Sam and Brownie instantly disliked the woman.

Greg moved to greet her. “Captain Avelina Bardwell please allow me to introduce my crew, Specialist 5, Nancy Regenstein formerly of the Federation Space Force and Specialist 4, Samantha King also formerly of the Federation Space Force. Brownie, would you please get our documents for the Captain’s inspection?”

“Brownie?” Captain Bardwell said reaching out to touch her arm gently, “That won’t be necessary.” She looked at the women and nodded. “I guess you ladies must be two of the missing shuttle pilots.” She shook her head slowly. “Oh, My! Gregory, dear, you have been exceedingly naughty.” Her tone, while seemingly light and convivial, had an edge of haughtiness to it the other women did not like or understand. “Give me a kiss for old time’s sake.” She pointed to her cheek.

He leaned over to kiss her and she slapped him hard across the face. Unlike the incident with Blondie, he made no attempt to fend off the blow and took the hit solidly without flinching. The sound of the slap was so loud Brownie and Sam winced in shared pain. “Delores sends her regards.”

“How is Delores?”

“She is well, no thanks to you and your buddy, Andersen.”

“That was not my doing.”

“But you could have prevented it.”

“I don’t think so.”

Brownie and Sam stood with their mouths open in amazement.

“I was glad to hear you divorced that shikse bitch you married. I tried to tell you she wanted your money, and when she found out you didn’t have any, she’d dump you. That’s what you get.”

“She didn’t dump me. I dumped her. She cheated on me. All right Avi, now that you found me, what do you want?” Greg’s patience was wearing thin. Fear tinged the background of his thoughts. He needed to assert himself quickly with Avi or he would be in deeper trouble than he was already. As difficult a concept as that would be to explain, it would be hard to believe that Avi could make more trouble for him than the obvious, but then few people knew her as well as he did.

“You, my dear. All I want is you. Why don’t you show me around the ship?” Greg shuddered.



One of his worst fears had been realized. Sam and Brownie observed his reaction in amazement.

Captain Bardwell slid her hand between his elbow and his side, ran her fingers down the inside of his forearm and intertwined her fingers with his. The color had not returned to Greg's face. Sam and Brownie correctly interpreted Avi's move as control and not intimacy. They understood that more was going on here than was obvious. Whatever it was, they did not like it. Greg and Avi left the flight deck together as if they were attending a formal occasion wearing fancy clothes instead of touring a space going freighter in flight suits. The sway of her ample hips and the fluid motion of her rich full hair spoke volumes to the two stunned women left behind on the flight deck. This was a voluptuous woman who reveled in the power she had over men. What was more important was the power she had over this man. Sam and Brownie looked at their less ample endowments and were instantly jealous.

Once they had left, Brownie asked the computer, "Who is she, and what does she have on him?"

"She is Captain Avelina Bardwell of the Federation Space Force. She was in Greg's class at the academy. She spent her summers at the same Marine encampment he did. She is every bit as adept at hand-to-hand combat as he is. In fact, the fight in which Daniel Esperanza and two of his followers died may have been fought over her. Some of the testimony is contradictory."

Sam shook her head, "He killed three men in a fight over a woman? Then he didn't keep her?"

"There is evidence to support the contention that she killed one of the men, but what is clear is that as a fighting unit, they are a formidable force. If I were human, I would not mess with them. I would advise against confronting her if I were you."

"What about this Delores person?" Sam asked.

"I have no records of Delores. There is nothing in my data base that offers any explanations."

Brownie thought out loud, "Instead of one lethal personality we have two who don't get along."

"The first part of that statement is certainly true," the computer offered. "The second part may not be accurate. Neither is as mentally stable as they would have you believe. Having said that, you may be better off with them together. They tend to stabilize each other. It is an unusual relationship."

"Greg did not appear happy about her arrival," Brownie said.

"With good reason, but he may be better off this way," the computer replied. "A lot depends on how she treats him in the next few hours."

Brownie and Sam waited for permission to leave orbit. They had been in one place long enough and they were anxious to be on their way.

When Greg and Captain Bardwell returned to the flight deck, they were still arm in arm.

Brownie spoke first tentatively and then growing stronger, "Captain, ma'am, I hope I am not out of place here, but we have grown rather fond of Captain Solomon, and we were wondering what your intentions were with him."

She pulled herself to her full height and puffed her chest in defiance. Even at her tallest, the top of Brownie's head was even with Captain Bardwell's breast. Greg smiled at Brownie's protective tone.

Captain Bardwell laughed. "Ah, Gregory, must I always fight for you? Brownie is it? Sweetheart, you are a dear. I can tell you and your friends have taken good care of my precious Greg in my absence. I thank you. I mean you no harm. My intentions with Greg are entirely dishonorable." She giggled and swished her hips sensuously. "Men like him are hard to find. Now be a sweetie and secure my ship to this one. We are going home."

Sam and Brownie looked at each other in terror. "Home? Earth?"

"Not Earth," Avi replied calmly. She smiled at Greg before continuing. "Take me wherever you were going with this load of cargo and passengers. Where you and my darling Greg have been hiding the past few years. Let's go there. Isn't it safe there?"

Greg nodded. "We call the planet Homestead." The women scampered off for their EVA suits.

When Sam and Brownie returned, Greg and Avi were in the galley talking. They each held a warm coffee container. Greg, like most naval officers dating back to the time of the tall sailing ships, loved good coffee. That was one subject about which all the flight crews agreed. Dr. Miller and Dr. Turner had tried to talk them out of their coffee habit, but had finally given up in frustration.

Brownie said, "Sir, we need to light the candle and head home. I am sure our passengers are tired of weightlessness."

"Before we go," Greg asked, "Avi, are you sure you still want to see our little Homestead or do you want to head on with your other duties?"

"Are you kicking me out?" She pouted in that controlling manner little girls often use on their fathers when they want something they should not have.

"No, I wanted to know what you thought was best." He recognized the pout and shuddered. There was a time when he wanted to marry this woman. Yet he had run from her, not without cause. She wanted him back, and there was nowhere he could run that she would not find him. On one hand he knew he could not marry anyone else, but he wondered if he could survive married to her. Did he really want to do this to himself? One thing was certain, life with Avi would not be dull.

"Let's go to your place because we can't go to mine anymore." She grinned at him. "Computer! Command mode! Take us to Homestead!"

"Aye, Aye, ma'am! Homestead it is! Initiating acceleration to one G. Would the Captain prefer a straight line or elliptical trajectory?"

"Whatever you did last time," she replied.

"Roger that!"

Brownie stared wide eyed at Avi. "Why did it obey her without being told when it didn't obey us?" she asked.

"There's a long story which I don't want repeated. Computer, you hear that?" Greg replied.

“Aye sir.” It responded in Avi’s voice. Avi laughed, her eyes sparkling.

Greg smiled. “Brownie, go to the flight deck. You have the con. Avi and I are staying here.”

Once the ship had stabilized on its acceleration, Brownie and Sam returned to the galley. When Avi spotted Sam and Brownie, she asked, “Greg, dear, may I bring my stuff over?” Even though she asked it as a question, there was no question what the answer would be.

“Yes, of course.”

“Could I ask you ladies to help me?”

“I’ll do it,” Greg offered.

“I’d rather the ladies helped me,” Avi smiled, “if they are willing.”

Brownie looked at Greg with one eyebrow raised in question. Greg nodded. Brownie said, “Sure, let’s go.”

As soon as the three ladies had entered the P I ship’s crew quarters, Avi turned to the others and asked, “Ladies, so I don’t shoot myself in the foot here, what is your relationship with Greg?” Her tone had a plaintive quality the others had not heard before. There was a slight tremble in her lip.

“He is our Captain,” Brownie answered. “We are his crew. We travel together. We are building a small fleet of ships to defend ourselves against pirates and Swordsmen. We are building a community together.”

“That’s it?”

“That depends on what you’re doing with the information.”

“I’ll level with you. I’ve chased Greg half way across the galaxy. I drove him away once. I am not doing it again. I made a horrible mistake letting him go. He is the only man who can give me what I need. He is the only man who understands me. I am the only woman that can give him what he needs. We all make mistakes. I made a one a few years ago and I intend to fix it. I have searched too hard for him to let him go now. I want him back, and I will go wherever he goes to make it happen.”

“Well then, sister,” Sam interrupted, “you’re going about it all wrong. You shouldn’t be ordering him around. He hates it.”

Avi shook her head. “Not so. Greg likes being in charge, but he also likes not having to be in charge all the time. Does he have someone he turns control to sometimes when he doesn’t have to?”

“Yes. Blondie most of the time, and Katherine some of the time,” Brownie answered.

“And what is his relationship with them?”

Brownie hesitated. “Look, the computer told us about your fracas with Daniel Esperanza. It told us about your training. Frankly, we’re afraid of you, and now that you’re here we’re more afraid of him. If I tell you something bad, will you promise not to take it out on us or on him?”

Avi sat slowly. Sadness consumed her. The trembling in her lip abruptly stopped. "Brownie, Sam, please understand, we fight to survive. We don't enjoy it. We hate that we have to do it. Our people learned to fight only a relatively short time ago. Once we learned to do it, we found we had to be the best. Greg and I have fought side by side many times. I would really rather forget what happened with Daniel Esperanza and the thugs he hung out with. When things stopped flying in our direction, Greg grabbed my arm and we ran. It is one of my most horrible memories. I still wake up in the night from the nightmares. You may tell me whatever you want to tell me without fear that I will harm either him or you. I promise I will not hold a grudge about anything that happened in my absence."

Brownie took a deep breath. "We were stuck in orbit with him for during a hurricane, and during those two days Blondie and I had sex with him several times. He's pretty good for a guy."

Avi raised an eyebrow. "For a guy?"

"Well yeah, I mean, well you know, Blondie is my life partner."

"And you, Sam?"

"Katherine."

Waves of relief washed over Avi. "And that's it?" She started to laugh.

"Almost," Brownie offered, "when Greg went over to Myra's ship..."

"Myra?" Avi interrupted, "Myra Myrakova? Is she with you?"

"Yes."

"That's how she knew! I should have figured! I love it. I'm sorry, I interrupted you."

"When Greg went to Myra's ship he left his communicator on. We heard him argue with Myra."

"Must have been a beaut!"

"It was. He referred to us misfits and deviates. Blondie will barely talk to him. Sometimes I have problems with it."

"And you Sam?" Avi asked.

Sam nodded slowly.

Avi looked at them for a moment before continuing. She spoke softly and gently. "Greg is not long in the sensitivity department. Well, sometimes he is. Sometimes he doesn't get it. That is one of the reasons I treat him the way I do. Sometimes you have to clobber him to make him understand. I can get away with that. You can't. I intend to keep Greg. Our relationship will be tempestuous. We will shout at each other. We will get physical, but we never hurt each other. Once we get established, you will see a new Greg and you will like the new one better than the old one. The difference is that what you see as the new Greg will be the Greg I knew at the Academy."

Sam said, "We like Greg the way he is."

Avi smiled, "You will like him changed better. Please help me pack. Ladies, we will get along fine. Please believe me. I will do everything I know how to do to see that it stays that way." They packed quickly and hauled her luggage to the other ship. She headed for Greg's sleeping quarters.

"Avi, no." Greg stood in front of his door.

"But Greg..."

"Avi, please, I need some time."

"As you wish."

Brownie led the way to the first unoccupied sleeping quarters and unpacked Avi's luggage.

After they had finished unpacking, they headed back to the galley. Greg was pulling some freshly thawed cinnamon rolls out of the oven.

Avi's face lit up. "Greg, you remembered!"

He smiled. "How could I forget? Running out in the middle of the night to get cinnamon rolls? These aren't the best I've ever had, but they are the best I can do on short notice."

They settled in with a round of coffee and cinnamon rolls. After the seconds on the rolls, Sam asked, "Avi, what's a shikse?"

Avi looked at her and closed one eye. She put her hand gently on her forehead and whispered "Oh shit." She looked at Greg and said, "I did one of yours."

"That didn't take long," he said smugly.

"I will apologize and then explain. I should have thought before I opened my mouth and I didn't. I meant no offense. Please accept my apology. A shikse is a non-Jewish female. Generally the term is meant to be derogatory."

"Are you Jewish?" Sam asked.

"Yes," Avi replied.

"We both are," Greg added.

"We never knew," Sam said.

"It didn't matter," Greg answered. "Does it change things?"

"A little, in a good way I think," Sam thought out loud.

"While we're chatting," Avi said, "I have important news."

"Oh?" Greg raised one eyebrow.

"The Federation Supreme Court passed a ruling that impacts us. You know that the Space Force treated Pirate Interdiction pilots as subcontractors because they figured none of us would survive a full

term of service and they did not want to pay survivor benefits. At the same time, the Force held the reward money the P I pilots earned from the insurance companies for the recovered ships, crews and cargoes. The court ruled unanimously that the Force could not have it both ways. The reward money the insurance companies have paid to the pilots of P I craft that have successfully thwarted pirate raids belong to the pilots and not to the Space Force. They did compromise and allowed the Space Force to hold the funds in escrow until the pilot retired, but the funds must be released in a lump sum payment. If the pilot died before mustering out, the payment was made to a spouse or dependents. My lump sum payment was great enough that I could buy my ship. That ship out there is my personal property. The Space Force is short of cash to buy new ships, and I lease this one to them complete with the services of myself as pilot for a nice fee. I've been on quarterly contracts for a couple of years."

"Sounds like a dream come true for someone who wants to fight pirates for the rest of their life," Greg said mildly sarcastically.

"Or someone who wants to travel searching for something they lost," Avi answered. "All I have to do to terminate the contract is fail to show up for payment at the end of the quarter. I can report to any Space Force installation to continue the contract. I spend a couple of days filing after action reports and go out again. But there's more. The Judge Advocate General's Office ruled that payments made before a divorce was filed were to be included in the divorce proceedings. However, payments made after the divorce proceedings started, regardless of when the incident motivating the payment occurred, did not go into the divorce payment calculations. In your case, all of your payments were made after your divorce. You are a rich man."

"Wonderful! I have all this money I can't get at. I'm a fugitive, remember?"

"I'm getting there. I have a cousin who's an attorney at the financial center on the moon who can get your money, except that what good is all that money way out here? So, here is my idea. The Swordsmen haven't figured out who I am yet so I can still travel freely. I will take your power of attorney and have your money transferred to an account at a bank on the moon. We will then buy your old P I ship."

"Won't it raise some alarms if my money is moved?"

"Not if someone posing as your ex-wife does it with the help of a banker willing to look the other way."

"Sure, we walk up to the bursar's office and hand them a credit card and walk away with a heavily armed warship. I don't think so," Greg said sarcastically.

"Well, we can't actually buy it. We have to steal it. If we try to buy it, the six months it will take to complete the negotiations will give someone plenty of time to plant a homing courier missile on the ship which will lead directly back to us. We steal the ship. The insurance company pays the Space Force. We quietly pay the insurance company using my cousin as an intermediary. The insurance company informs the Space Force that the ship has been located and drops the criminal charges but we keep the ship."

"Can we do that?" Brownie asked amazed.

“We can’t steal just any ship. We can steal Greg’s old ship because he programmed it to react to his instructions even if they violated standing orders. Apparently it has gotten cranky in your absence. It is giving fits to everyone assigned to it since you left. It does not appear to like any of its new pilots. It locked one out. A technician took three weeks to figure out how to get into the ship. Once he got in, the ship locked him in, and it took him a week to get out!”

“A Space Force tech or one from the manufacturer?”

“A Space Force tech, why?”

“There’s a trick the Space Force doesn’t know. The manufacturer left a data port where they could take over control of the ship when it arrived back at their service bays for overhaul. The assumption was that normal control systems might not be functioning properly, and this gave them an alternative. Every Saturn Space Industries ship has one somewhere. The trick is to know where it is.”

“The Space Force will be happy to get rid of that troublesome ship and buy a new one.”

“Do you know where it is now?”

“Last I saw it was parked next to the Space Force base in Sector 5.”

“Excuse me a moment,” Greg went into his room. They heard some rummaging around before he finally emerged smiling. He plugged a data module into the ship’s console. “Command mode.”

“Aye sir,” the computer replied in Brownie’s voice. Brownie giggled.

Avi shook her head. “Always loved talking to his machines.”

“The data module contains the instructions and pass codes necessary to assume command of my old P I ship. Please program a courier missile to lock on to the P I ship’s transponder and pass along the commands and pass codes. Have the courier transfer a navigation algorithm that will bring the ship from sector 5 to orbit around the uninhabited fourth planet in system two of sector twenty-one. We will send the courier missile to Sector 5 as soon as we drop out of hyper. We will have Myra meet the ship in sector twenty-one and bring it home with another program which you will write.”

“Aye sir.”

The trip back to Homestead was loud and raucous. Greg’s attitude had changed. Previously he had worked alone developing the simulations and games they played. Now that Greg had company, he and Avi developed new simulations and added diabolical challenges to old ones. Due to the amount of time Greg had previously spent alone, Brownie and Sam had assumed he was more comfortable with his own company than with others. He and Avi were always together and after a few days of travel in hyper drive, she quietly moved into his quarters. In spite of Greg’s suddenly cheery disposition, Brownie did not quite trust Avi and in some ways was jealous of her. She often wondered what Blondie would think when they arrived.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ADMIRAL DAVIDSON AND HIS AIDE were on the third leg of a six station inspection tour. The aide was reading what appeared to be a popular novel on his e-reader. The Admiral leaned over and asked what the aide was reading as much out of boredom as curiosity.

“Swordsman Lies,” the aide replied.

“Isn’t that the controversial history of the Swordsmen by the excommunicated son of one of the Swordsman Church senior executives?”

“Yes, sir, it is. Did you know my father is in this book?”

“No, he was a Space Force officer wasn’t he?”

“He was the first to spot the Swordsman military build up. He worked in the Federation General Accounting Office, Military Division. He ran credit checks on people buying surplus hardware. He noticed disturbing patterns. Unfortunately, one of the people he told his suspicions to was a Swordsman agent. The book doesn’t mention my father by name, but the details are right. My mother said the Swordsmen killed him, but we could never prove it. The book tells how he died.”

“Yes, I remember. Your mother was not alone in that belief. How old were you at the time?”

“Twelve, sir.”

“Well, now you know. I understand the Swordsmen are very upset over the book.”

“Yes, especially since the Federation Courts are interested. Cops all over the Federation are looking to get promoted at Swordsman expense.”

The Admiral smiled, “I would think so. What about their military? What are they doing?”

“They continue to buy our surplus equipment and are training a force in System 12. Until they attack someone, under Federation law, we can’t touch them as much as I would love to nuke them out of existence.”

“You and me both, but that is hardly the way to win the hearts and minds of the populace. Although, you know they are kind of doing us a favor.”

“How so?”

“Their prison ministry is quite effective. They have been taking the convicts after release and training them for the Swordsman military.”

“How does this benefit us?”

“By taking criminals who would otherwise have nowhere to go except back to a life of crime out of our cities.”



“That hardly justifies the rest of the damage they have done to our political institutions.”

“Granted, but we do need to look at the balance.”

“Oh by the way, sir, have you seen the new simulator game based on pirate interdiction?”

“I have heard about it. I have not seen it.”

“You should play it, sir. I have it here on my hand-held data assistant.”

The admiral played the game constantly except for short breaks for the rest of the voyage. As they disembarked, the Admiral remarked to his aide, “That game is frightening. It includes the real specifications on every ship in our fleet, the pirate fleets and every aircraft and space capable vehicle military or civilian.”

“Yes sir, very thorough. What concerns me is that some of the scenarios are only taught at the Academy. I believe an academy graduate must have written the game.”

“I agree.”

“Sir, did you look at game number 22? That’s a tactic I have never seen before. I didn’t know a battleship was vulnerable to that tactic.”

“It would take a tremendous dead weight to make that work. The only guy I know who would use a tactic like that is Solomon.”

“Solomon, sir? Isn’t he dead?”

“Son of a bitch!” The admiral paused as the realization of what he concluded hit him. “I was right! This means he’s not dead. The bastard.”

“Sir, if he’s not dead, then I have some disturbing news. Captain Bardwell is missing.”

“Captain Avelina Bardwell? You know the connection?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When I retire I am sending you over to intelligence.”

“Thank you sir.”

“I’ll bet Bardwell found Solomon and took off with him. I wonder where they went.”

“I may know, sir.”

“Do tell,” the Admiral smiled.

“Sir, the people distributing the game are the same people publishing the book. They are also distributing a documentary about a group of refugees who landed on an uninhabited planet.”

“How does this tie together?”

“All the outlets apparently received identical unidentified data modules. They all went public the same day. The book, the game and the documentary carry appeals to make donations to the same four charities, all of which are known fronts for anti-Swordsman activities.”

“I am definitely sending you over to intelligence when I retire.”

“Thank you, sir. If you look at the documentary closely I think you can determine what system it’s in.” He pulled up a galaxy map on his personal data assistant and pointed. “Right here, sir.” Then he drew a circle with his finger on the display. “This is the sector where Captain Solomon is believed to have gone down.” He drew a smaller circle centered on the same point. “This is where Pierre LaMarche is believed to have disappeared.” He drew a yet smaller circle centered on the same point. “The Swordsmen lost a scout in this area. Lt. Myrakova has concentrated her patrols in this area as well.” He looked up at the Admiral.

“When was the last time we were in the area?”

“Not since the original survey team labeled the planet uninhabitable.”

“Can we send a reconnaissance scout?”

“Consider it done, sir.”

“Intelligence, definitely intelligence.”

“Thank you, sir. Oh and sir, I almost forgot one interesting characteristic of the games.”

“Enlighten me.”

“Actually sir, Captain Linda Dankese pointed it out to me. The player’s crews are either completely female or evenly mixed. Where the player has a superior officer, the officer is always female. All the opponents are male regardless of rank.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“So no Swordsman or pirate will play the games and learn from them. No Swordsman or pirate will accept taking orders from a woman. Captain Dankese has purchased copies for everyone in her command. She conducts study sessions with her crews on the tactics in the games.”

“And what do they think?”

“They found a few small errors, but they find the games very instructive.”

“I wonder what the academy thinks.”

“They have ordered copies for their students, faculty and staff.”

The Admiral laughed, “Greg, my friend, you always were a brilliant renegade! A pain in the ass, but brilliant!”

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GREG SPENT MOST of his time on the trip to Homestead with Avi. Sam and Brownie took care of the ship and its passengers. Greg and Avi maintained the same exercise routine he had established with Helen. They were obviously evenly matched and neither was to be tangled with in a back alley. The trip went smoothly. The months in transit passed quickly.

As soon as they entered Homestead's system, Myra hailed them for a meeting prior to bringing the passengers and cargo to the surface.

Myra was the first to arrive on the flight deck and greeted Avi as the old friend she was. They had served a year together on a pirate interdiction task force. As Greg had suspected, Myra had, in fact, been instrumental in seeing that Avi "happened" to be patrolling near Triton when Greg arrived. Monique and Angelina quickly joined them. They greeted Avi warmly. Katherine joined them a little later. Katherine had heard of Avi by reputation and was slightly in awe of her. Helen joined them a few minutes later with Sebastian on her arm. Once she realized the nature of Avi and Greg's relationship, she instantly became Avi's sister in spirit. Obviously pregnant, Helen quickly became the focus of attention. Greg wondered if the warm glow on the flight deck could be seen out the ports.

All that changed when Blondie entered. She spotted Greg with his arm around Avi's waist and stopped at the doorway. Avi was wearing the same form fitting Space Force flight suit she had worn when she had come aboard. The room went silent. Blondie's face, normally pale, went completely white. It was as if the temperature on the flight deck dropped ten degrees.

Avi strode to Blondie with her hand extended, "Lt. Amanda Freeman I presume. I understand your friends call you 'Blondie'. Greg speaks of you often. I am Captain Avelina Bardwell. You can call me 'Avi' if you wish. How should I address you?"

Speechless, Blondie stared at Avi for a moment. Her expression changed from shock to anger.

Sam charged at her out of nowhere and pushed her back against the wall. "Bitch! You didn't want him when you could have had him. Now you want him because you can't have him. It's too late! Back off!"

Blondie looked down at Sam standing before her with her clenched fists on her hips and then around the rest of the room.

Blondie's eyes misted a little. "Please call me 'Blondie' like everyone else, thanks." She looked up at Avi who was quite a bit taller and said, "I have heard some incredible stories about you."

"If it's good, it's probably a lie," Avi said. "If it's nasty, it's probably true. Right, Greg?"

"More than likely."

Blondie gently pushed Sam aside and offered her hand. "It is an honor to meet you, Avi. Welcome to our little home."

"I'm glad to be here. Shall we unload some cargo?"

“Aye, Aye Ma’am!”

Once the cargo had been unloaded, Helen and Sebastian took the tug back to their mountainside retreat. The rest of the flight crews assembled in the cargo ship’s galley for dinner. Other than entirely too many cooks in the kitchen, the dinner was a lighthearted and rambunctious affair.

After the dishes were done and everyone settled, Brownie asked for everyone’s attention.

“Folks, we have a problem. The fissionable material on this ship is approaching the end of its useful life. We need to refuel. I would be concerned about making another run to the central system. I could not promise we could make it back. We could get there empty. We might get home empty, but we will not make it home loaded. No one knows what happens to a ship in hyper if the reactor fails. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to find out.”

Greg asked, “What about the rest of our ships? We have a squadron out here.”

“I think everything in our fleet will need to be refueled within the next two to three years. If we start conserving we can stretch that for another year.”

Greg turned to Sam, “Do you agree?”

Sam said, “I think she is being optimistic as to how long the existing fuel will last.”

“Computer,” Greg called. “Do you concur with Brownie’s assessment?”

“We have discussed this. My calculations fall between Brownie’s estimate and Sam’s. If we allow a ten percent deviation, then I concur with both of their estimates.”

“Why have you not told me this before?”

“I tried to, sir, you didn’t listen, and neither would Captain Bardwell. Brownie spotted it without being told.”

“Very well, I accept the reprimand.” Greg said. “We aren’t going to come up with any grand ideas tonight. Let’s meet here for dinner again tomorrow, and we should have had time to come up with some options.”

After dinner the next evening Greg brought up the subject they all dreaded. “It’s not like we can drive up to a service station and fill it up. Can we buy what we need somewhere?”

“We have enough money thanks to Mark’s book,” Myra said. “But anyone we could buy from is Federation, Swordsman or Pirate. There is no independent source. We might find enough for one shuttle on the black market. Most of what is out there is weapons grade, but not fuel grade.”

“That’s comforting.” Avi said.

“You know, we should pick up some weapons grade, too.” Greg commented.

All heads spun around in shock. “If the Swordsmen are building the force Myra says they are and they have the battleships Mark says they have, they certainly intend to use them. If they attack us

as we expect that someday they will, we need something heavy to throw at them. That takes nukes.”

Breaking the silence that followed Greg’s pronouncement, Monique said quietly, “If we are willing to fight for it, I know where we can find fuel.”

“Please explain,” Greg said softly.

“Pierre built a supply depot in sector 37. It was an abandoned mining station. The base is underground and hard to find. It is usually guarded, but sometimes when they needed a large fleet for a big raid, they would leave it alone for a couple of weeks at a time.”

“How heavily is it defended?” Greg asked.

“If the fleet is in, it could be a few dozen ships. If it is out, could be as little as a single destroyer. No way to know without going.”

“What about passive defenses?” Avi asked.

“Like mines?” Monique asked.

“Or tracking satellites, that sort of thing.”

“No mines. Pirates aren’t good at threading through mine fields. Maybe tracking satellites.”

“Looks like a single ship probe and stand off until clear. Everyone agree.” Those that understood what Greg said nodded. Those that did not looked mystified.

“Computer,” Avi called, “Please calculate travel time to Sector 37 at optimal speeds.”

“Twenty-three days at one gravity.”

“Thank you,” Avi said.

“Who stays, and who goes?” Greg asked.

They decided Blondie and Katherine would stay and keep the 86 and the destroyer for defense. Monique and Angelina would take the cargo ship as an alternative vehicle to get home with if Greg’s ship failed along the way. Myra and Avi would each travel in their P I ships since the P I’s were independently hyper capable. Greg, Sam and Brownie would travel in the big cargo ship.

Myra left first. After sufficient time for Myra’s hyper energy wave to dissipate, Avi left. Monique and Angelina followed. Greg, Sam and Brownie left last.

The system had three planets and one of them had a single airless moon. The depot was on this moon. Monique had explained to Myra what to look for, and Myra headed for the moon. They did not detect any tracking satellites or passive sensors that might alert the defenses to their arrival.

Myra had made a single orbit of the moon when she was hailed on an open frequency. She close to jumped out of her skin when the call came. “Federation Ship P I 1658 C, identify your personnel on board.” The voice was female, firm without being strident.

Monique keyed her communicator, “Don’t! It’s a trap! Get out!”

“Too late,” Myra replied, “I am in it now.”

“Federation Ship P I 1658 C, this is the officer in charge of the planetary defense network. Identify your personnel on your ship.”

“Lt. Myra Myrakova, Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction Task Force active duty.”

“Welcome, Miss Myrakova, please proceed to the landing site.”

Greg thought he heard cheering in the background.

“Are you prepared to guarantee me safe passage?”

“You are guaranteed safe passage, you and your friends.”

A voice in the background shouted, “Myra! It’s me! Jennifer!”

“Jennifer? Jennifer Cartier? Give me proof of life!” Myra sounded excited.

“Do you remember when we were kids, we said if we were ever in this situation I would ask you if you still wore the ring I gave you on your left big toe? I never understood that. You wear it on your right big toe.”

“Jennifer, I’m coming in,” Myra said excitedly.

The voice from the planet spoke again, “Federation Ship P I 1156 B, please identify your personnel on board.”

“How do you know who we are? We have disabled our transponders,” Avi asked.

“High powered astronomical telescopes. We can read the letters stenciled on the side of your ship. Speaking of which, Miss Myrakova, why do you only have one skull and crossbones under your view-port? Our records show you have earned many more.”

“Because my crew chief put it there. He refused to take it off, and I refused to let him put any more on,” Myra answered.

“Very good. Ship P I 1156 B, please identify yourself.”

“I am Captain Avelina Bardwell Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction Retired.”

“Thank you Captain, please proceed to the landing site. You are showing no pirate kills on your ship, and our records show you have many such kills on your log books.”

“Myra and I had the same crew chief.”

“Very good. Unidentified cargo ship Class 3 please identify your personnel.”

“Monique LaMarche and Angelina...”

That was as far as she got before a voice in the background screamed “Monique! M’aidez! C’est moi Avril.”

“Avril, Comment ca va votre belle mere?”

“Monique! Tu m’blessez. C’est horrible que vous ne me souvien! Ma mere est morte.”

“Combien de anes?” The tone was hard and cold.

“Dix.”

“Bien.” Monique paused, her voice more relaxed. “Greg, Avril is my half sister. It is not a trap.”

The voice from the ground said, “Greg? Are you really Captain Gregory Solomon Federation Space Force retired?”

“Yes,” Greg replied.

“According to my records, you and your ship are missing in action.”

“Reports of my demise are exaggerated,” Greg quipped.

“Where is Pierre LaMarche?” the voice asked with more than a little fear.

“Reports of his demise are not exaggerated,” Greg replied.

Cheering could be heard in the background.

“You are welcome to land on the landing pads. You will notice that there are no ships here. We have no offensive weapons. We are at your mercy.”

“We come to trade,” Greg said. “We wish to buy what we need and depart peacefully.”

“We shall discuss trade once you have arrived. It is nice of you to bring your own shuttle. You will not need it. There is a cradle for your type of craft. You are not the first to bring such a ship.”

As the ships descended to the surface, Greg was appalled at the condition of the station. Empty containers or at least Greg assumed they were empty, were strewn around the perimeter like driftwood on a beach. Containers labeled as containing fissionable or hazardous materials were mixed with containers labeled as holding foodstuffs. It was as if a hurricane had blown through and tossed the containers like a child tossed toys. Greg reflected that in space there are no hurricanes and only humans could make this big a mess.

The four ships settled on the landing cradles specific to their type of ship. The crews donned EVA suits and exited through the airlocks to the ground. They followed the directions as marked and entered the station’s airlock as a group.

About fifty women and a like number of children stood and watched as they entered. The flight crews had barely removed their helmets when two women came running out of the crowd. The one who wrapped herself around Monique was talking so fast and crying at the same time that she was impossible to understand even for those who understood French. The one who ran for Myra was less vocal, but her joy at their reunion was no less heartfelt. A tall distinguished looking woman walked toward Greg.

“Captain, welcome. I must inform you that in spite of our assurances to the contrary, you have indeed stepped into a trap. Should you or any of your companions make a single inappropriate move,

we shall be obliged to destroy you and your ships.”

“I knew it was too easy,” Greg mumbled. Then he said, “We come to trade, to barter, or do what we need to do to procure supplies which I believe you have in stock. It is not our intent to harm you or disadvantage you in any way.”

“Can you defend us?”

“Against what?”

“Swordsmen or pirates or whoever shows up first.”

“Not here, no.”

She regarded him closely contemplating his answer. “But you can defend us somewhere else.”

Greg did not like where he saw this going. “Yes, I believe we can.”

“Then you must take us there. All of us.”

The flight crews, listening intently to the negotiation, gasped at the same time each aware of the enormity of the task they were being asked to do.

“You may have anything you want from the station and its stores, but for payment you must take us with you, and you must do it now before the pirates return.”

“And if I don’t, you will destroy my ships, and thereby eliminate any chance you might have had of escape,” Greg said. “I hate Mexican stand-offs.”

“You could be held for ransom,” she added brightly.

Greg was skeptical. “Maybe. Do you have a name?”

“Justine Donnelly.”

“Alright Justine, first tell me how you all came to be stranded here on this claustrophobia inspiring supply depot.”

Greg looked around at the women. He looked back at Justine and asked, “Is this some kind of brothel? I had heard that there were places like this. Is it true?”

She looked down, clearly embarrassed. “Yes, we are captives. We have been taken from our homes, from our ships, from all over the galaxy, and we have been forced to do the pirates’ bidding.”

Greg gently lifted her chin and said, “You know, if you had told me that first, we would gladly have taken you with us.”

She looked up at him and he said, “And after what we just learned I would probably be facing a mutiny if I didn’t offer to take you with us under these circumstances.”

The people within earshot cheered.



“When are the pirates due back?” Greg asked.

“They are overdue now,” Justine said.

“How long overdue?” Greg asked.

“Six months.”

“I doubt they are coming back,” Greg concluded.

“We had come to the same conclusion,” Justine affirmed.

“Where did they go?” Greg asked.

“They went to raid a Swordsman base. They said it would be easy pickings because the Swordsmen are so poorly trained,” Justine replied with skepticism.

“Obviously not. I am surprised the Swordsmen have not come to take this station.”

“We are too. But we know that if the Swordsmen come, they will kill us,” Justine said.

“Why?” Greg asked.

“They kill whores. To them we are full of dread diseases they do not want let loose on their populations. Swordsmen kill those they do not trust. They do not trust whores,” Justine offered.

Greg called out. “Monique, Angelina, can you fit all of these people on your ship?”

Monique looked around and said, “Yes, I think so, but how will we feed them?”

Greg turned to Justine, “How much food to you have in stock?”

“Enough to last a month at most. We were getting desperate.”

Greg commanded, “Gather the women, children and all the foodstuffs that you can find. Look for dry goods and prepared foods that don’t need refrigeration. Load them on your ship. Take whatever you can carry. When you have the ship loaded with as much food as you can fit, decide how much of their personal effects each person gets to take with them. Once you are completely loaded, go home. Run at one and a quarter G. Take all these people with you. Understand?”

“Aye, Sir,” they chorused.

The women turned to go, and Greg reached out for Justine. He caught her by the elbow and said, “Not you.” Greg gently held her arm and said, “You don’t go with them. You stay with me.”

“Why?” she asked.

“You are my insurance. Once your ship is out of danger, what is to keep you from sending a signal that destroys us here on the ground? No, you stay with us.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “It is a small price to pay for the safety of my people.”

"I hoped you would see it that way. You will stay and help load what we came for." Greg called Sam and Brownie. "You need to decide. One goes with them, and one stays."

Brownie did not hesitate. "I'm staying. Sam can go."

Sam looked at Brownie said. "You are crazy, child. I'll go, but we both should stay."

"Not enough seats on the trip home," Greg said, "One of you has to go now."

Greg called Avi and Myra. "Take your ships and stand off the planet so we have warning in case we get intruders."

The next eight hours were a frenzy of activity as they emptied the station's stores and loaded the smaller cargo ship. Twelve hours after touching down, the ship headed out with its cargo of refugees bound for a new land.

Greg, Brownie and Justine loaded Greg's ship using the giant cargo handlers and monstrous material lifts from the supply depot. They loaded all of the fissionable material they could find. They carefully wended their way through the morass of containers to select the ones they needed and hauled them with the big lifts to the ship and attached them to the ship's tie points.

For four days, they loaded cargo. Greg finally decided his ship was so overloaded it jeopardized his ability to lift off. Resolving to return, or more accurately, hoping to return, he instructed the others to board the ship for departure. The cargo ship rendezvoused with the sentries.

"Justine, you go with Myra. Brownie, you go with Avi."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Avi asked.

"You need to get home quickly. I will follow. If something happens to this ship, we only lose one of us. I am the most expendable. Myra, as soon as you are away, send a courier missile to the nearest Space Force station and recommend they assume control of these facilities." After a few moments of protest, Greg convinced them he was right.

"Intruder alert!" The computer brought them back to reality.

"Identify!"

They watched the displays as the ships dropped out of hyper and on the far side of the system.

"Four destroyers. Two scouts. One tender," the computer gave the total when it appeared that no more were coming.

"Federation, Pirate or Swordsman?"

"Swordsman with transponders active."

"Time to run!" Greg said. "Let's go!"

Myra left first. As soon as it was prudent to do so, Avi followed. Greg left shortly thereafter. The ship responded sluggishly and Greg blamed the depleted fissionable material in the reactor and the fact that the ship was seriously overloaded. He settled in for a three-week ride home.

Five days into the voyage, he was napping in his command chair when the general alarm sounded. He sat upright and noticed the warning. One of the cooling fluid pumps on reactor number one had failed. Reactor Number One was overheating.

“Computer! Command mode! Shut down reactor One!”

“Aye sir,” the computer responded

With a reactor shut down and as heavy a load as it was carrying, the ship could no longer maintain the current acceleration. They would be late arriving home.

“Computer, what is our status?”

“Reactor Two appears to be functioning normally. However, we do not have enough power for hyper drive. We can coast at this speed but we cannot accelerate.”

“How long will the trip take us at this rate?”

“Three months,” the computer replied. “We do not have adequate food. As long as one reactor is operating you will have recycled water and oxygen, but you will starve to death before we arrive.”

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“INITIATE MAXIMUM POWER CONSERVATION.”

All over the ship, airlocks closed and, with the exception of the flight deck, the life support systems that allowed Greg to wander freely through the ship without his EVA suit shut down. The cargo decks and containers were allowed to drift toward the cold of space.

“Computer, can the pump be replaced?”

“With difficulty. We cannot make repairs while we are traveling at hyper speed because you cannot do an EVA. Unless there happens to be a similar pump in the cargo holds from the material acquired at the pirates’ supply depot, the only possible replacement pump is on the shuttle and it has half the capacity of what we need. If we find an appropriate pump, we need a welder to install it. One other thing, the installation is not a simple procedure.”

“That much I guessed. But the alternative is death.”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, we don’t have much choice. Decelerate to standard drive.”

“Aye sir.”

Greg donned his EVA suit and shut down as much of the ship as he could. While the ship decelerated for the transition back to standard drive, he rummaged through the cargo holds searching the material commandeered from the pirate base for the parts he needed. He found welding rods on the first day. He found the hose and nozzle rig on the second day. He continued to look as the ship decelerated. On the tenth day they dropped out of hyper into standard drive. Failing to find any further materials, Greg returned to the flight deck.

“Do you have a fix on where we are?”

“Yes. We are seriously in the middle of nowhere.”

“Can we send a courier missile from here?”

“Yes.”

“Could it find its way back?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a similar pump on an 86?”

“No, nothing matches.”

“Could we arrange a manifold with several pumps to accomplish the same task?”

“Perhaps.”

“Could we take four of the pumps we used to supply water to the animals in the cargo containers and force the water through a manifold?”

“Yes, if you had a way to manufacture a manifold.”

“Open the drafting program please.”

“Aye sir.”

“I am drawing the general shape of the assembly. You need to fill in the flanges and attachment points. Is the power compatible?”

“Yes.” The computer filled in the flanges and rendered the solid forms to develop the drawing.

“Put that on a data module and send it with our status, course, speed and location information.”

“Aye sir.”

Greg settled in to wait. The remaining reactor could safely power the life support systems in the crew quarters and flight deck far longer than the food supply would last. Pointed in the general direction of Homestead, the ship drifted silently through space. He continued to explore the cargo areas for parts that might be useful, but other than relieving his boredom, he met with little success. The cabin was comfortable as he floated weightlessly not knowing how long he would wait for rescue.

\* \* \* \* \*

To say the courier missile caused consternation when it arrived would be an understatement of the first order. Its arrival was the first anyone realized Greg was late.

Chaos had reigned when Justine and company arrived. Homestead's population had doubled overnight. Justine insisted that they be settled a distance from the others. She repeatedly commented that there was no sense in putting temptation before the men who were already there. Most of the men took offense at the idea that they could not be trusted. Others understood. Mark served as peacemaker. The new arrivals were eventually settled in their own community around a protected bay near a river delta a hundred kilometers south along the coast from the original settlement. This seemed to be the most effective compromise between the need to support each other and the need to be isolated.

The entire community dove into the task of building homes for the new arrivals. Justine, the women and children pitched in to the extent of their abilities and the project was moving along when the courier missile arrived. Greg's delay had passed unnoticed with everyone so focused on settling the new arrivals. Myra was on patrol when the courier arrived at the decoy site.

Myra assembled the flight crews. They agreed Avi should leave immediately with as much food as she could carry. Sam and Brownie would follow in the smaller cargo ship with the replacement parts. There was no need in risking any more people than necessary on what could be a difficult and dangerous repair. Reactor system repairs required the deftest of touches and while Sam had confidence in Brownie's abilities, Brownie was less certain.

David manufactured the required parts by welding together pieces of pipe from other systems. Concerned that the assembly would overheat, he encased the entire thing in a cooling water jacket. He

built flexible extenders for the flanges so that if the manifold and jacket made the assembly too large for the space available, they could extend the entire contraption outside the reactor cowling.

Two weeks after Avi left, Sam and Brownie headed for a point in space.

Greg's ship's sensors picked up Avi's ship as soon as it dropped to standard drive. Greg was in his EVA suit rummaging through the cargo when the call came.

"Well, hello there! Rescue is at hand."

Greg checked his EVA suit. He had been wearing it a lot lately. "Ripe" was the word that kept coming to mind. Still in his suit, Greg returned to the flight deck as Avi entered her ship through the airlock.

"Shew! You stink!" Avi said when Greg removed his helmet.

"Well, that's a hell of a greeting!"

"Get out of that suit before I throw you and it into the hygiene unit!"

"I was thinking you'd be happy to see me. Running to me with your arms wide."

"After you're cleaned up, I'll be glad to see you. You're nasty!"

Duly chastened, Greg stowed his suit in the decontamination locker and headed for the hygiene unit. He had become rather shaggy in the weeks he had waited for rescue and the hygiene unit had its work cut out for it.

Drifting weightlessly through space, light years from anything, Greg and Avi savored the weeks they spent together floating in the cargo ship's cabin dining on the supplies Avi had carried on her ship. When Sam and Brownie finally showed up, Greg and Avi were almost disappointed.

Greg's suit had been decontaminated in the interim, and the four of them began the repairs. They spent another four weeks working on the ship before Brownie judged it fit to travel. She initiated start up procedures.

"Computer," she commanded when the start up was complete. "Please run complete diagnostics, and produce a hard copy report."

"Diagnostics starting."

The report was several hundred pages. Brownie spent two days reviewing it. Not long after she had run the report, she pulled Greg aside. "Greg, you need to take Avi home. She's not well. Sam and I can finish."

"What do you mean?" Greg asked beginning to panic.

"I don't know. Something is not right. Her color is off. She's queasy. Take her to a doctor."

"To Earth?"

"No, Dr. Turner will know what's wrong. Please go now."

"Avi won't want to go."

"I'll take care of that. Get ready to ship out."

True to her word, Brownie convinced Avi to head back with Greg. They barreled home at 2 G and landed at the settlement. Greg immediately woke up Dr. Turner and brought her to the ship.

An hour later Dr. Turner emerged from the crew compartment, still angry at having been awakened and said, "I assume you will marry the lady. Should I have Mark make arrangements?"

Greg stared at her not comprehending.

Dr. Turner shook her head. "She's fine. She's pregnant."

"How can that be? We're..." Greg stammered.

"Too old?"

"Yes."

"One of the side effects of the birth control system the military uses is that it delays the onset of menopause a decade or more." Greg stared at her. "What about," he paused, "diseases?"

"Neither of your family histories show genetic problems. I did what tests I could. We will need to do more later. So, are you going to marry her?"

"Yes! Yes, of course. Call Mark. Can I see her now?"

"No. I gave her something to make her rest. Some women have morning sickness worse than others. Give her some room, and don't baby her."

"Yes, ma'am."

Avi's pregnancy was greeted with universal happiness. Even Blondie seemed pleased on hearing the news. Helen, busy with her own baby, a boy named Sean, was excited and offered to mid-wife. They agreed that the wedding should wait until Sam and Brownie returned with the ship. Mark expressed his concern that he did not know how to conduct a Jewish wedding. Greg assured him as long as they were pronounced man and wife at the end in front of witnesses, little else mattered.

Sam and Brownie had not been on the ground an hour before the ceremony started. Justine and a delegation from the satellite settlement rode in on horseback as soon as they were notified. The day was about as beautiful a day for an outdoor wedding as could be hoped for. As to the ceremony, they made it up as they went along, but in the end they were pronounced man and wife and kissed in front of everyone. As Greg said many times, little else mattered.

Myra left to go shopping and to see if the plan to "steal" Greg's ship had worked.

In order to minimize the risk to the settlers from unstable cargoes in the atmosphere, the plan for the cargo ship was to unload and marshal the cargo in the decoy area on the asteroid. Then, after inventory was complete, they would ferry the materials going to the planet's surface from there. Once the materials were properly sorted, repairs and refueling could be accomplished. Greg was passing over the decoy area when he observed significantly more ships parked on that asteroid than had been there when he left. He called Blondie and Katherine to report with an explanation.

"We netted a few fish while you were gone," Blondie giggled.

“Blondie’s aim with her laser is better than mine,” Katherine smiled.

“These guys keep coming in. They’d hear the beacon, and head right for the 86. Of course, six of what you think are ships are wood and fabric mock ups. Doug built them. We hauled them out here and assembled them,” Blondie said.

“They see the ships, but their monitors don’t, and they get confused. While they’re trying to figure it out we sneak up behind them.” Katherine added.

“We talk to them like Myra did, and when they shoot up one of the decoys we punch a hole in their ship at close range. Works every time.” Blondie said.

“How many ships have you taken?” Greg asked.

“Four.” Blondie answered.

“How many pilots survived?”

“None.” Katherine answered.

Greg stared at the ships arrayed in front of him. “Four scouts, each equipped for a crew of two. We have all this hardware and no people to run it. It won’t do us much good to have gear we can’t use.”

“What do you propose?” Blondie asked.

“Flight school?” Katherine suggested.

“I think so,” Greg replied. “We need to ask Justine how many of her people can be trained to pilot our new acquisitions.”

“We should look at what our inventory is and determine what we need,” Avi suggested.

“Let’s do this in order of arrival,” Greg suggested. “This ship is mine and I can crew it alone, but it is designed for two. Each of you has shuttle, but they won’t do us much good in a fight.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Avi said, “but clearly Katherine and Blondie would be better used in warships.”

Greg thought out loud. “There is no way Sam and Brownie can maintain this fleet. They will need trained help. That will take time. Let’s hold off dealing with maintenance. Myra has her ship. We can leave Monique and Angelina together in the destroyer or split them. Properly staffed the destroyer holds nine. The cargo ship needs two and the 86 we captured needs two. Of the thirteen we need to properly staff those three ships, we have two. Helen is dealing with the tug. We have five damaged ships which, once repaired, will require ten crew. With the two of you, that leaves eight. To properly staff the ships we currently have in inventory, we need to train two dozen flight crew personnel.”

“Tall order,” Avi said, “but not impossible. We start flight school on the ground, and then each of our existing pilots takes a student everywhere they go. It may take us a year or two, but we can do it. Justine had fifty adult women with her and a dozen or so teenagers who should learn quickly. Once



they become adults, they get ships of their own.”

“What about recruiting new settlers as they arrive?” Greg asked.

“We don’t have time. We need to start now,” Avi said. “I’ll talk to Justine and get this moving.”

Justine was nervous when Avi showed up unannounced. “Has one of my girls stepped out of line?”

“Not hardly,” Avi said. “I am about to ask you to do something that may be difficult for you to do, but I can’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Fire away.”

“I need to train a couple dozen of your people to fly our warships.”

“Is that it?”

“I need to train another dozen to maintain our fleet.”

“For your flight crews, would you like mother and daughter pairs?”

The question caught Avi completely by surprise. “I never thought of that. I don’t know. It might work. It makes some sense. They certainly know and trust each other. I guess. I don’t see why not.”

“How about sisters?”

“What if one gets killed?”

“Better they fly together. If one of a pair is killed, the survivor will be devastated. Better, if they die, for them to die together and not leave one half behind.”

“Yes, I guess. If you think that’s a good idea.”

“Avi, for all your combat experience, you are naïve. You and your friends have rescued us from a living hell. More than that, you have rescued us from death by starvation. We feared watching powerlessly as one by one our friends died in our midst. We are eternally in your debt. Learning to fly and fight is probably the greatest opportunity anyone has thought of for us to repay our debt. We are willing to work to earn our place on this glorious planet. We have ideas, let me show you one way we wanted to return your gift.”

Justine led Avi out to a meadow where a dozen naked women were posing in front of a camera. Justine pointed and said, “Pornography is one of the most profitable businesses ever known. We are preparing a series of pornographic materials that look like the normal stuff you see everywhere, but are high quality lessons in the proper ways a man should treat a woman. By having naked women narrating and taking the parts of the men, men will watch. We hope that as they watch they will learn why what the Swordsmen teach in their male dominated culture is wrong. We hope that we can convert the men to understand the women’s revolution. Others have used pornography as propaganda before. This is not a new idea. Does this make sense to you?”

“Part of it does, but I would think your women would object to being seen as sex objects.”

“My dear Avi, most of us have been prostitutes our whole lives. I started when I was twelve. This is fun compared to some of the things we’ve had to do at the hands of our men.”

At that moment two of the women who had been trying to hold an awkward pose fell into the grass amid gales of laughter.

“This is something we know how to do. Sex has been our business for all of our adult lives. Any of the women who are capable will be thrilled to become pilots and service technicians, but for now, we will do this and make lots of money.”

The community reaction after viewing one of Justine’s projects was mixed. While everyone recognized the need to support the economy, there were several who were uncomfortable with having the women used in this manner. Justine explained to them as she had explained to Avi why this was not as exploitative as it seemed. She carefully and gently explained what life had been like before and how being naked on a video shoot was simply not a big deal to any of these women. Only after Justine assured everyone that no one would be hurt, no one would be forced to do anything they did not want to do, no men would participate, and no children would be used, did the community agree to the export of the materials.

One group who opposed the export of the materials did so for a different reason than the others. They argued that there was no sense in irritating a giant. By distributing the materials Justine and her group were producing they would so anger the Swordsmen that the attack would come sooner rather than later. They were putting themselves and the rest of the community at greater risk than they had by publishing Mark’s book. They finally agreed that the need for revenue was greater than the risk so the distribution of the materials was authorized by general vote of the population.

Not wanting to wait for Myra to return, Avi set off in her P I ship with the latest load of materials for sale. Greg had finished “Pirate Interdiction II”. Mark had a second book done. The community’s entire creative energies when not spent farming or developing infrastructure were devoted to writing, producing, scoring and editing some of the most high class pornography any of them had ever seen. Those who had been skeptical in the beginning had been won over. Many of them were especially proud of the theme music and had prepared recordings to be sold separately.

While energies were high and spirits soared, everyone knew that sooner or later, the Swordsmen would come for them, and the battle would be intense.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SPACE FORCE BROUGHT an entire battle group to the pirate supply depot that had originally been a metals mine in response to the courier missile Myra had sent on their hurried departure after their raid. The Swordsmen who occupied it retreated as soon as they realized who was approaching. Even if they had been ready to tangle with the Federation, the battle group had them significantly out-gunned. The Federation Space Force Interstellar Logistics Command commandeered the depot and set up a garrisoned frontier trading post. Once having established the operation of the depot, the Federation sold it to a company owned by the brother of the Federation's vice president.

Greg's P I ship materialized from hyper drive near Homestead's decoy site on its own and politely identified itself while it waited for instructions.

Homestead's flight school turned out to be a brilliant move. Highly motivated, the women were excellent students. Within a year, all the ships were staffed. Sam and Brownie trained maintenance personnel who could fly as well as fix the ships. When the time came for the big battle they all knew was looming ahead, most of the maintenance personnel would take their places on their ships either as flight engineers or as fire control officers.

Avi transferred all of Greg's money to a banker who delighted in the fact that the money would be used to oppose the Swordsmen. She started incorporation proceedings to have Homestead incorporated under Federation commerce and banking rules. This would allow them to process financial transactions without having to go through the Rescue League. Not long after Avi's return to Homestead from the Central System, Greg and Avi became the proud parents of a girl who they named Rachel. Rachel was as much at home in weightlessness as she was on the ground. Clearly her mother's daughter, she was active, intelligent, and rambunctious with an eye for mischief. Even Blondie laughed when some of Rachel's stunts were at her expense.

The second edition of "Pirate Interdiction" earned enough money that Greg was able to reimburse the insurance company for his cargo ship and the title was quietly transferred. Before long, the titles to the two "missing" shuttles were also transferred. The shuttles legally became the property of their pilots and the Homestead Corporation.

Scout ships continued to stumble into the system. Most of the scouts were independent pirates, freebooters or lightly armed free-lance explorers in search of a quick fortune. Some surrendered peacefully when challenged. Some needed convincing. Helen's hand-to-hand combat training became an important part of the "recruitment" process. If Helen had ever doubted the wisdom of teaching everyone unarmed combat techniques, the success of the flight crews with boarding and capturing wayward ships dispelled any concerns she might have had. Thanks in part to Helen's training, killing one of the intercepted pilots became a rare occurrence. Ships wandered into the system so frequently that capturing them became almost routine.

One such confrontation involved one of Greg's old enemies. Four crews in the earliest stages of their flight training were practicing attack formation maneuvers when a pirate destroyer appeared at the edge of the system and homed in on the cargo ship's beacon.

Greg was in his P I ship watching the exercise from the surface of a nearby asteroid. Avi was on

Greg's cargo ship with another group of students teaching them how to work in weightlessness. Greg recognized the ship's transponder code and called Avi. "Take a look in Sector Twelve. Who do you think that is?"

"I'd swear that's Vladimir Andropov, but where's the rest of his fleet?"

"I thought the same thing. Shall we let Justine handle this?"

"We should stay out of sight, but not too far away."

"Roger that!"

The destroyer approached the small freighter and circled it with its weapons pods extended. The pilot clearly suspected a trap. He was right, of course, but it was already too late.

A flight of four small scouts which included two 86's appeared from behind a nearby asteroid and surrounded the destroyer. They did not activate their targeting radar. Under normal conditions, the destroyer probably could have taken the four scouts in an even battle, but a quick visual inspection revealed that the destroyer was heavily damaged.

"Unknown vessel, you have entered a restricted system. You are ordered to stand down to be boarded." Justine recited the legal protocol.

"Brave talk for a woman in an 86," a man's voice replied. "Do you know who I am?"

"You are an intruder in a restricted system. Under Federation guidelines, you are to stand down and accept representatives of the local security patrol to negotiate your surrender."

"I am not surrendering to a woman in a single 86."

"There are four of us. I am at your twelve, we have one at your three, your six and your nine. Would you care to continue this conversation or must we take you by force?" The four small ships extended their weapons pods. While opening fire could not legally be justified at this point, tensions had clearly escalated.

"Justine," Greg said. "Let me take it from here." He moved his ship to where it could be detected and its transponders verified. "You have done this exactly correctly. Stay on position until I tell you otherwise."

"Roger that."

"Hello, Vladimir. It has been a long time."

"Gregor? I thought you were dead." He pronounced it "Graig-or-r".

"I can't imagine where you got that idea!"

"I knew that message was bogus." He laughed. "Davidson bought it hook line and sinker." He laughed again and then coughed. "What about LaMarche?"

“He’s dead.”

“Good riddance.”

“Vladimir, let’s talk about the terms of your surrender.”

“Gregor, what makes you think I am willing to surrender?”

“You are in my missile range and I have my old P I ship.”

“Gregor, in the old days you would have killed me already. Have you gone soft?”

“Perhaps, but I am capable of killing you now.”

“That is not necessary. What terms do you offer me for my surrender?”

“You and your crew will be transported to the planet’s surface. Depending on your skills and abilities, you will probably be given a plot of land and some farm animals. You will be expected to operate this farm as if it is your own because it will be. You will be free to move about the planet as you wish, but you will not be able to leave the planet.”

“What if I don’t want to farm?”

“We will find something else productive for you to do.”

“I have wounded on board. How will they be treated?”

“They will be tended to as best we can with our limited facilities. It’s not as good as hospitals on Earth, but we do have doctors and they will do whatever they can for your crew.”

“What about court trials and prisons?”

“Vladimir, you and I know your history, but if you don’t tell anyone I won’t. As long as you are a contributing member of the community, no one will care who you are or what you did.”

“You won’t turn me over to the Federation?”

“No.”

“My crew and myself, we will be safe?”

“You will be safe from us. I cannot promise any of us will be safe from the Swordsmen. We have reason to believe that we will have to fight them.”

“Are you expecting me and my crew to help you defend yourselves against the Swordsmen?”

“Yes.”

“You got rocks in your head? You plan to fight the Swordsmen?”

“If they attack us.”

“Gregor, we need to talk. We accept and surrender even if you got rocks in your head.”

“Please dock with the cargo ship. When you enter the cargo ship, your weapons will be confiscated. Those of your crew needing immediate medical attention will be transported to the surface for treatment. The remainder will be allowed to return to your ship under guard to remove personal items. As soon as transport can be arranged, they will be transported to the surface for settlement. Your small weapons will be returned to you once you arrive at your final destination.”

“Gregor, after my crew has left for the surface, I would like to remain behind on the cargo ship. We have much to discuss.”

“Vladimir, we have another ship that is more comfortable. Once your crew has departed I will have one of the ships currently guarding you transport you to it.”

“That would be acceptable.”

Greg and Avi greeted Vladimir as he entered the air lock on Greg’s cargo ship. They were shocked by what they saw as he approached them.

“Request permission to come aboard, sir.”

Vladimir’s right arm was gone below the elbow. The bandages were stained with red. He had bandages along one leg and across his torso. An ugly burn mark stood out above his right ear.

“Permission granted.”

“You should have gone to the surface to see the doctors,” Avi exclaimed.

“Captain Bardwell?” Vladimir asked, ignoring her comment.

“Yes,” Avi replied.

He gently took her hand in his remaining hand and raised it to his lips.

“Now, I am glad I surrendered,” he said softly. “I might have given your dear Gregor a good battle, and I might have beaten him with his novice assistants, but the both of you, this even I could not win. This way we all live. I have done the right thing for my crew.”

Greg lead Vladimir to the galley. They ate silently. Vladimir ate as one who had been hungry for a long time.

“Gregor, I am an old man. I have been a pirate since before you were born. I long for somewhere I can live my last years in peace. You tell me I have found that place, but I know better.”

Greg started to speak, but Vladimir held up his hand to stop him.

“The Swordsmen, they are looking for you. If they find you they will kill you. When they found my small fleet they attacked with a vengeance that far surpassed their skill. We escaped with only one ship. You are in grave danger, my former enemy. They will kill you, and all the people that know you. They are getting stronger. A few years ago they would never have attacked my destroyer. Two weeks ago they did. They almost killed us. I lost four ships and many men. We escaped but we are damaged and I am wounded. I fear my ship is a total loss. Greg, you are right to be afraid. Be very afraid, the Swordsmen are coming.”

“Until they do, we will live in peace, but prepare for war,” Greg asserted.

“We will prepare together.”

Vladimir brought Greg and Avi up to speed on all the gossip from the pirates and the P I forces before joining his crew who had been transported to the planet. Vladimir’s crew settled not far from where Albert had built himself an impressive fortress. Vladimir was right about the condition of his ship. It was so badly damaged that Brownie could not repair it and cannibalized it for parts.

Greg no longer flew the long supply runs to the Central System although he continued to fly the shorter ones to other outlying systems. He often turned the cargo ship over to Blondie who used it for flight training. On each trip she took a contingent of the new pilots and fledgling maintenance personnel. The stevedores were always thrilled to see the women. Occasionally one of the stevedores would defect and join them for the trip home. Refugees continued to pour in on each supply run. Monique and Angelina both married captured flight crew members who had stumbled into the system and recruited them to assist with crewing their cargo ship. The two couples were relieved of defensive patrol duty so they could run supplies with their cargo ship. With the former pirate cargo ship and Greg’s ship running full-time, they were able to keep their rapidly growing population supplied with luxury items as well as necessities. Once having proved that they held legal titles to their ships, no one questioned the irregularity of how Greg and company had acquired all that space going hardware.

Greg wrote a new game from scratch called “Onward Valiant Soldiers” and refused to let anyone else see it. He wrote it with the P I ship’s computer and treated it as a personal secret. At the same time he was working on “Soldiers” he started a new game called “Planetoid Defender” which involved input from the captive flight crews as well as the newly trained flight crews and maintenance personnel. “Pirate Interdiction” was in its fourth release and he had long ago grown tired of it.

Greg and Avi had a second daughter. They named her Wendy. Wendy was more deliberate in her actions where Rachel was impulsive, but she was no less intelligent and far more manipulative. There was no question that when Wendy wanted something done, she could get someone to do it for her. Not intentionally mean or greedy, she understood that people would do what she wanted if she merely found the right way to ask.

Admiral Davidson and his aide were given substantial incentives to retire from the Space Force and run the former mining outpost, then supply depot built by the pirates, briefly occupied by the Swordsmen, then by the Federation and finally sold to a civilian conglomerate funded by an insurance company owned by the brother of the Federation’s vice president. The conglomerate built a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant adjacent to the depot and happily supplied any buyer who could demonstrate good credit or pay cash. The refueling facility was the depot’s cash cow. The depot was accepted as neutral territory. Free-lance explorers, merchant ships of all types, Space Force and Swordsman warships all stopped there and traded. Hostilities and rivalries were left behind at the system’s boundaries or the offenders were encapsulated in the brig and their ships confiscated. Sealed containers of freight could be transferred there for only a moderately outrageous handling fee. The depot grew and became the gateway to the wave of humanity settling on the planets found at the end of this small arm of the very big galaxy.

The cost of hyper drives plummeted as demand grew. The reduced cost inspired more demand, and soon a huge wave of humanity spread out across one arm of the galaxy. As St. Louis had been the gateway to the American West, the depot became the gateway to outlying planets and systems.

Travelers referred to the depot as 'New St. Louis', and the name stuck. Mail addressed to General Delivery care of New St. Louis could be picked up at the post office. The Homestead Corporation officially "moved" to a bank office at New St. Louis where tax laws were less stringent than in the Central System.

Vladimir Andropov's father had owned a gourmet meat packing plant on Earth until he sold it to pay off his gambling debts. Vladimir had kept the "secret" recipes. Vladimir and Stephanie Remington Schultz collaborated on the development and refinement of those recipes. They created new recipes that could be frozen and packaged as in-flight meals for space ship crews. The Space Force had done away with kitchen personnel on all but the largest ships and most crews relied on prepared frozen meals for the majority of their time in space. The production of flight rations reduced Homestead's dependence on food from the Central System. As the production capabilities grew, they looked forward to selling the meals through the depot at New St. Louis. But first they would have to figure out how to bring the Federation health inspector to certify their processing facilities without compromising their secrecy. In the opinion of Homestead's flight crews, the quality of the meals Vladimir and Stephanie produced far surpassed anything the Federation was producing. There was little question that once they were able to bring the meals to market, they would do well.

Admiral Davidson was the perfect choice to manage what could have been a chaotic and dangerous frontier outpost. He ruled New St. Louis with an iron hand in a velvet glove. He oversaw a thriving refueling operation, a substantial free trade zone, a cargo marshaling and transfer operation as well as a small city of support personnel with all the services they required. He was the de-facto military commander for the area's Space Force personnel and their attendant Marines. In a very real sense, New St. Louis was a kingdom and Admiral Davidson was its benevolent dictator. Many of his former enemies as well as his friends acknowledged the skill with which he chose what activities to regulate and which ones to leave alone. For example, recognizing that sex-for-sale was a part of port activities which could give him serious difficulties if he mishandled it, he quickly formed a team of business owners, workers, medical and law enforcement personnel whose responsibility was to ensure the workers and patrons were treated well and keep the enterprise adults only. His law enforcement personnel had been drawn from some of the best the Space Force had to offer. Where New St. Louis could have been a lawless frontier town, it was safer than most of the cities on Earth.

Admiral Davidson had been in command of New St. Louis for two years when Federation Government Service Clerk Level 2 Jennie Augustine requested an immediate meeting with him. When pressed for an explanation, she stated that it was a private matter that the Admiral would need to deal with personally, and she would be violating confidentiality laws if she divulged any further details except directly to the Admiral. Jennie's job was to examine the passenger manifests for incoming ships and determine if any of the passengers were fugitives from justice or known troublemakers of a variety of political persuasions. Fugitives and troublemakers could land at New St. Louis. They could not stay. Normal extradition procedures were so cumbersome that undesirables were routinely shipped out on the next outbound vessel that could be blackmailed into taking them.

Admiral Davidson stood as Jennie was ushered into his office. "Please have a seat, Miss Augustine, can I get you some coffee or a soft drink?"

She sat on the edge of the chair obviously ill at ease and glanced back and forth between the Admiral and his aide. "Um, no, sir, thank you, sir."



“There is nothing you can say to me that he can’t hear unless you have come to tell me he has done something inappropriate, and I will send him away.”

“Um, no sir. It’s not about him, sir. It’s about you, sir.” She fidgeted in her chair. She held her hands on her knees and sat upright.

Admiral Davidson’s eyebrows raised. “You have my undivided attention.”

She handed him a print out. “Sir, these names appeared on the manifest for the passenger ship that recently entered the system. What first drew my attention to them was they listed this as their final destination. They listed you as their sponsor. I did a background check and discovered that they are your ex-wives. Sir, they are sharing a cabin. Sir, if I may be so bold, are you in any danger?”

Most of the color had drained out of the admiral’s face. He closed his eyes. “No, but thank you for your concern. I don’t think I am in any physical danger. Psychologically, that might be a different matter entirely.” He paused. “It depends on what they want.”

“Sir, is there anything I can do for you? I mean you have been great for the station, and I would hate to have anything unpleasant happen to you.”

Admiral Davidson smiled. “No, thank you. You have no idea how much I appreciate your taking the time to warn me. I will be prepared for whatever these two interesting ladies have in mind for me. Thank you very much. Is there anything else you have to share with me?”

“No sir, that was it.”

“Well, then, thank you. I do appreciate your concern. You may go.”

“You are most welcome sir. Call on me any time you need anything.”

As soon as she was out the door, Admiral Davidson said to his aide, “See that she gets employee of the month.”

“Consider it done, sir.”

Within the hour after the passenger ship’s arrival at the port, two women showed up at Admiral Davidson’s outer office requesting to see him. Both Admiral Davidson and his aide had tracked their progress with the security cameras through customs as they hit the various checkpoints along their route to his office. They wasted no time coming to see him. By the time they reached his desk, the aide knew what both of them looked like and had determined from the purposefulness of their stride that they were focused on their mission and he should not delay their access to the admiral. He ushered them in immediately.

Admiral Davidson rose to meet them. “Ellie Mae, Elvira, what a surprise.”

Ellie Mae, the tall blond, looked him in the eye and said, “Now, Bunkie, don’t give me the surprise nonsense, you’ve had cameras on us since we stepped off the ship.”

“Bunkie!” The aide exploded in laughter. “Bunkie?”

“If you breathe a word I’ll shoot you myself!” He turned back to his ex-wife, “Please do not use that name in public again. It’s embarrassing.”

The aide was doubled over in laughter. Tears ran down his face. “Sorry sir,” he stammered before he lost it again.

Ellie Mae tried to push him out the door to the outer office, but he collapsed into a chair and would not move.

Elvira shrugged and said, “So much for a dignified entrance. How are you? You look well. You look like you have been taking care of yourself.”

“Yes, thank you. I see the voyage was not too difficult. Space travel can be stressful.”

“Not bad,” Elvira answered. “Others had it worse.”

“So, what brings you to this tiny corner of the galaxy?”

“You do, my dear,” Ellie Mae answered.

The aide stopped laughing.

Admiral Davidson went pale. “How so?”

“Elvira, tell him. It makes me angry, and I might say something I will regret,” Ellie Mae said.

Elvira took a breath. “I think you realize that when we divorced you it wasn’t because we didn’t love you. We did.” Ellie Mae nodded her agreement. “You know it was because you were gone so much, and if we were to be in love with a man, we should at least be in love with one that was home more than you were.”

“Fair enough,” he replied.

“We both remarried and had children. I think we both did well in our choices and found caring loving men who were good to us.”

“Yes, I had heard that,” he commented.

“Our husbands converted to the Swordsman church. That’s where we met. We were at a Swordsman meeting when we started talking and discovered that we had both been married to you.”

“How unusual for the two of you to run into each other,” the aide commented.

“Not really,” Admiral Davidson explained. “I met them when I was on leave at home. Not at the same time of course. But my sister introduced me to both of them.”

“That makes sense,” the aide said.

“Have you heard from her?” Ellie Mae asked. “Last we heard she was headed off planet with her husband and their kids.”

“They have a farm in Sector 28. They appear to be happy. She doesn’t write much,” Admiral Davidson replied.

“So, back to us,” Elvira continued. “The boys converted and suddenly life around the house got real difficult. We became prisoners in our own houses. Two nice gentle guys turned into cave men. Sex became more like rape than like making love. We couldn’t go out without their permission. They controlled everything we did. They controlled the money. The only time we could talk that they weren’t listening was at the sisterhood meetings at church. They insisted on being present at our doctor visits to be sure that the doctor was not performing an abortion they did not know about. They only let us go shopping by ourselves because they had to work and otherwise we could not have dinner ready when they came home. One day at the supermarket a woman handed me a flier. The flier offered women who were being persecuted by their Swordsman husbands a free ride off planet. At first we thought it was a trap but eventually things got so desperate we decided to try it. In the middle of the night we sneaked out. The address on the flier was a children’s hospital at a university. We walked all night for three nights to get there. We hid in drainage culverts during the day and traveled in darkness.”

Elvira paused and Ellie Mae said, “I’m glad I didn’t try that alone. I wouldn’t have made it. Elvira found us clean water to drink and plants we could eat. We had no money.”

Elvira continued, “When we arrived at the hospital, there was a protest going on. A female police officer stopped us and asked us where we were going. We told her we were going to the hospital. She asked why. We told her my sister’s baby was in there, and her husband wanted the baby to die, and we were there to try and save the baby. I don’t think she believed a word of it, but she took us around the back and showed us where we could get into the hospital if we ran quickly. We thanked her, and we ran. We got in the hospital, and a guard stopped us. We asked for the person named on the flier. He nodded and pointed to a door. We went in the door, and there was a woman seated behind a desk. She told us to fill out a form like we were being admitted to the hospital. I was afraid they were going to lock us up in a prison, but I figured going back would be as bad.”

Ellie Mae said, “You know, we kept talking about you. We both loved you, and if you’d been around more, we’d still be married. We agreed that it wouldn’t be fair for only one of us to go to you, and we decided we could live with sharing you, if that worked for you. Thinking about you was the only thing that kept us going.”

Elvira continued, “The hospital people put us in a van with some other women. We drove a long time. I don’t know how long it was. The van had no windows we could see out of except for a tiny one over the driver’s shoulder. I think we slept most of the drive. When I awoke we were pulling on to a dirt road somewhere in the south. I could see palm trees, and the van rocked a lot. We drove for a while, and the door opened. We were ushered into an old horse barn, and the van left. While we were there an elderly woman told us that we were safe and to bed down in the stalls for the night. A couple of days later a truck pulled up to the barn with one of those big shipping containers. I only hoped that we weren’t going to be kidnapped by slavers. I hear that slavers are more active these days than ever. We climbed in with the sleeping bags they gave us and what little other clothes we had.”

“When I think of how many people we trusted who could have turned on us, I am thankful we

arrived here alive," Ellie Mae said.

"The container smuggled us to the moon. Once there, a Federation Space Force officer told us we had amnesty and could book one way passage to any of a dozen places where the Federation is establishing colonies, and the Federation would pay the fare. We checked the routes and found one that stopped here on the way. Once on the ship we convinced the captain to change our destination. He was happy to do so since he got to keep the difference in the fare. So, here we are. We are as you see us. We come to you with only the clothes on our backs hoping you will have room in your heart to let us stay."

Admiral Davidson smiled. "There was never a question in my mind. Of course you can stay. There are other questions to be answered like what are you going to do now that you are here. Everyone here has a job."

"We could run an underground railroad for women escaping the Swordsmen," Elvira offered.

"You might be able to do that, but it's not the kind of job that pays money. I'll send you over to Staffing Allocation Department in the morning. They will find you something. Being commander of the post does get me a few perks. You realize there are Swordsman agents and operatives here. You need to watch for them."

"I assumed as much," Elvira responded. "Perhaps we can impede their activities."

"It is certainly worth a try. Now, about living quarters. Mine are dreadfully small."

"If it comes to that, we can sleep in sleeping bags on the floor," Ellie Mae said brightly.

Admiral Davidson shuddered. "No, my old bones won't handle that well at all. We are not sleeping on the floor."

"I am sure that we can figure something out. After all, two of us are glad to be here, and I hope you are as glad to see us as we are to see you," Elvira said.

Admiral Davidson turned to his aide and said, "Hold all my calls until I return to the office. I am going to take the ladies shopping. They can't wander around looking like this now can they?"

"As you wish, sir."

Admiral Davidson offered an arm to each of the women, and they left the office in the direction of the station's commercial district.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY

**H**ELEN AND SEBASTIAN HAD A DAUGHTER they named Colleen. Sean, Colleen and Greg and Avi's two daughters, Rachel and Wendy were constant companions before they were out of diapers. Working together, the families built houses on rocky outcroppings overlooking the mountain lake where Helen and Sebastian had originally set up housekeeping. Their old modular homes were recycled for use by newly arrived refugees. They converted a meadow bordering the lake into a flight apron for the cargo tug and the P I ships. The mountain lake in front of the house provided them the ability to travel freely since the preferred method for landing and taking off the P I ships and the tug when a hard runway was not available was from the water. They could take off and land vertically, but that used significantly more fuel than taking off horizontally. Horses grazed in the meadows, around the house and along the water's edge.

A stranger viewing the scene for the first time would probably have used the term "bucolic" to describe their living conditions. The residents, however, still preferred the term "primitive" over anything more poetic. Not that they minded, primitive living conditions free of fear from persecution were better than living in the lap of luxury in fear for one's life.

A mountain stream guaranteed a constant supply of fresh cold water. The fish in the lake and the small game in the forest provided the growing children ample opportunities to provide dinner for their families. Sean's skill with a bow and arrow enabled him to hunt the small omnivores that lived in the forest. Sebastian often remarked how they tasted like raccoon. No one else had eaten raccoon and did not challenge him, but these little furry beasts certainly acted like raccoons and seemed at least as smart. Killing them seemed to be the only effective way of keeping them out of the crops. Their pelts were highly prized for their softness and Sean quickly found success as a fur trader.

Sebastian taught the children the love of nature and all things living. Greg and Avi taught them math, science and the mechanics of space flight. Helen made sure they stayed in shape. Gloria taught them the arts and literature. Mark Stonebridge taught comparative religion. Dr. Miller and Dr. Turner both contributed to the children's life sciences education. Timmy taught the kids how to ride horses as soon as they were big enough to sit upright. Timmy had long ago given up on saddles so everyone rode bareback and used rope halters. None of the horses Timmy trained used a bridle or a bit. None of them needed one.

Avi took the longest of the group to learn to ride, but she was the most enthusiastic once she did. The eight of them would often ride horseback out to the satellite settlement when Greg and Avi needed to be there to assist with the flight school. They often commented at the irony of riding horses to go teach the mechanics of interstellar travel. The humor was not lost on the children.

Avi and Helen often traded small private jokes between them that the others were not privy to. They did share some of their jokes like the one about having spacecraft in the driveway instead of automobiles like normal people. They helped instill finely developed senses of humor in their children even if their husbands were left out of most of the jokes.

All four of the children would often join their parents on trips to meet the cargo ships bringing supplies and taking export products, but only Rachel and Wendy left the system when Greg and Avi took the cargo ship out on a supply run to New St Louis. Rachel and Wendy became as comfortable in weightlessness as they were on the ground.

When Wendy, the youngest of the group, was four, other babies were born to some of the original settlers and the first batch of children found themselves no longer the objects of attention that they once were. Adapting to the change, they found ways to amuse themselves that did not involve their parents. A large part of each day was devoted to their studies. They each had a workstation in their bedrooms which linked to each other and to their cargo ship when it was in orbit. Home school curriculum materials developed by professional educators on Earth had been loaded on the machines. Their progress was closely monitored by their parents to make sure that their lessons were not shortchanged.

Avi and Greg insisted that the girls stay fit, and they spent several hours each day in physical training even when they were on ship. A substantial amount of the physical training was devoted to marshal arts and small arms practice since both Avi and Greg felt strongly about their importance. "Home schooling" took on a new meaning as this family practiced it. With the help of the ship's computer and its monstrous library, the girls were reading earlier than any of the current child-rearing texts said that they should. Math was part of their daily lives since they used it to help navigate the ships and manage the cargo loads. Having their parents constantly with them helped provide them an enriched environment in which they thrived. If they had any complaints, it was that they had few friends their own age. Sean was older than they were and Colleen was between them, but other than those two, there were no other children on Homestead less than four years younger than Wendy.

The children learned to swim in the clear cold water of the lake and played together in the shallows at the water's edge never out of sight of their parents view from the houses above. Often on clear cold dark nights they stretched out on the side of the hill and tried to name the constellations above them. The stars in the system further out on the arm of the galaxy from the home central system bore no resemblance to the ones in the text books and they enjoyed making up stories to go with the constellations they created out of random patterns of stars.

Were it not for the intense classes in combat tactics, military strategy and weapons systems and the long hours spent in flight simulators preparing for an attack that could come at any time, the children could have been said to have had an idyllic childhood.

More than almost anything else the girls loved going with their parents to pick up supplies and refugees from New St. Louis. For the trip out they had their parents' undivided attention, and for the trip back they had lots of new friends to play with. Many of the refugees found the two preteens calming and reassuring. Other than their traveling companions, the girls were often the first openly friendly faces the refugees encountered after leaving Earth. The girls were quite happy to tell the new arrivals whatever they could about their new home.

On one such trip, Rachel and Wendy quickly shucked their EVA suits and secured them in the locker. They had checked the seals on the transport pods and verified that the pods could safely be opened into the ship's hold.

"Mom! We're going below!" Wendy shouted into the comm.

"You have one hour before we jump into hyper. You better be in your seats! Make sure everyone is secure back there!" Avi replied.

"Yes, Mom!" both the girls answered.

"Did you see the baby with all the spiky hair?" Rachel effused.

“No, must have been on your side.”

“She was so cute! She smiled at me when I went by her view-port.”

“Race YA!” Wendy propelled herself through the passageway that lead to the cargo bays. Weightlessly careening the length of the ship, her smaller build gave her a definite advantage over Rachel and she arrived well before Rachel did.

They opened the doors to the personnel transports and checked in on each occupant to make sure that they stayed strapped in their seats until after the transition to hyper drive was complete. The refugees were all women and small children. Ellie Mae and Elvira had seen them safely to this point, and now they were about to start the final leg of a journey that for some of them had started six months ago. The presence of two happy, energetic preteens was a welcome surprise. Rachel and Wendy answered as many questions as they could in the time they had. They finally found the baby with the spiky hair. Her mother was quietly crying when the girls entered the compartment. The woman was thin and frail looking. Her cheeks were wet with tears. She was pale with deep set eyes.

“Hey, there,” Wendy said soothingly after introducing themselves. “You’re in the home stretch now. In three weeks we’ll be there.”

“Where are we going?”

“We call the planet Homestead.”

“What will happen to us when we get there?”

“You’ll go to school for six or eight weeks, and then you’ll probably be given a piece of land to farm. You and your neighbors will help each other build houses to live in. You’ll have some cows and some horses and maybe some chickens. You’ll be a farmer.”

“Do I have to pay for the land?”

“Nope, it’s yours as long as you live on it and farm it or until the Swordsmen come.”

The woman burst into fresh tears. “You know they hate you.”

“We’d heard that,” Rachel replied.

“If they find you they’ll kill you.”

“We know that, too.”

“What are you doing to protect yourselves?”

Rachel looked at Wendy before she answered. “I can’t tell you. It’s kinda secret. There is one thing I can tell you. Did you see the ship attached to this one when you docked?”

“The one with all the antennas?”

“That’s a Pirate Interdiction warship. We own it. Actually our mother owns it. We could blast anything that attacks us out of the sky with it. Wendy and I can both fly it. Our Dad has one, too. We

left it behind at Homestead. We have more ships, too. If they attack us, we'll kill more of them than they kill of us."

"You're little girls, do you really fly warships?"

"We've done it since we were babies. We take one of the P I ships with us wherever we go. We've been attacked by pirates, and we've had to defend ourselves. We don't lose."

"Do you go into combat?"

"If we think there's going to be a fight, Wendy and I stay on this ship and monitor the sensors," Rachel said with pride. "Mom and Dad actually do the fighting."

"Have you helped them shoot down pirates?"

"Yes."

"So young. It must be awful growing up like that."

"No worse than some of what other folks like you have told us of their lives. It is what you make it," Wendy said.

Suddenly they felt a low rumble that translated itself through the ship's frame as the big engines fired. The weightlessness they had enjoyed started to go away as the ship started to accelerate. "We have to go now," Wendy said. "We need to be in our seats when we jump to hyper. We'll come back to play in a couple of hours!"

They waved to the baby who waved back, and they raced for the flight deck.

"Glad you could join us!" Greg said from the pilot's seat as the girls sped through the flight deck to their cabins to strap in for the transition to hyper drive.

"You have two minutes to transition!" Avi shouted from the co-pilot's seat at the fleeing girls.

"We'll be ready!" Rachel shouted back.

"Kids!" Greg said, exasperated, "The fruit falls not far from the tree!"

Avi laughed. "Those are certainly our kids!"

They held hands for a few seconds before Greg initiated the control sequence that would effect the transition to hyper drive.

Once the ship was established in hyper drive, Avi and the girls headed back to the cargo bay. They showed the passengers the kitchen and galley that were in one of the adjacent travel pods. They organized cooking, cleaning and housekeeping details. They also started the education process that would culminate in the passengers becoming contributing members of the community on Homestead. When they were finished at the end of the first day, Wendy noticed the mother of the baby with the spiky hair crying silently to herself, rocking back and forth seated on the floor tightly holding her baby.

Wendy quietly sat beside her after all the others had returned to their quarters. "Hey, are you



okay?"

The woman looked up. "Oh, hi, Wendy," she sniffled. "It's been so hard. First Billy died and then his brother's wife died in childbirth, and then his brother wanted to take me." She looked up at Wendy. "She had ten kids. Ten kids in ten years and he wanted more. He didn't take care of any of them. They were all monsters. She couldn't do it, and he beat her when the kids cried, and they were crying all the time. He wanted me to be their mother. I couldn't do it. I have my own baby. She's all Billy left me." She sobbed quietly.

"Was Billy your husband?"

"Yes. He was a good man. I loved him. He was gentle and kind. We didn't have much money, but his love was enough for me."

"What did his brother have to do with anything?"

"If a Swordsman dies, his male next of kin is required to take care of the man's children. He gets to keep the wife as a trophy. Billy's brother is a hard, heartless man. I would die if I had to live with him. As soon as I sold everything in our house I fled. What else could I do?"

"You did the right thing. I know it's hard, but you have to put all that behind you. You're going to a new world. Just about everyone here has a past they would rather forget. Let it go. Pick up the pieces, and join the future. You'll be happier."

"You're a smart kid."

"Thanks! I have a smart mommy." Wendy scuffled the baby's hair and said, "and so does she!" They smiled at each other. Wendy headed to her quarters and bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sean and Rachel became more competitive as they approached their teen years. Their competition manifested itself in many forms. They strove to get better scores on their tests and to show that each knew more than the other in their academic classes. Physically, though Rachel was larger than average height and weight, she was no match for Sean's strength. She often tried to best him in physical contests, but he would beat her every time. This was a source of great frustration for her.

Sean's greatest skill, the one for which even his father was no match, was his ability with a bow and arrow. Sean could spot an arboreal animal, shoot it and catch it as it fell before it hit the ground. The kids were even matches at knife throwing and other combat skills. Rachel was a little faster swimmer and Sean was a little faster runner, but with bow and arrow Sean had no equal on the planet. It was at this skill that Rachel set out to beat him.

Every spare minute she could find, Rachel practiced with the bow and arrow until she was reliably striking the target. She varied the size of the target and the distance and kept hammering away until she felt she had mastered the skills to beat Sean at his own game.

Sean's voice changed suddenly. One week he was a squeaky tenor, and the next week after a few days of silence, he was a throaty baritone. The girls noticed other changes in him soon after that. His muscles seemed more defined. His walk changed. He became more difficult to get along with. One sunny morning in the midst of the changes Rachel asked Sean if she could go hunting with him. Sean, like most boys his age, taunted and teased the girls unmercifully. Rachel's request to join him drew out his worst instincts, and he picked on her the whole time they walked through the forest in search of game. Wendy and Colleen tagged along behind waiting to see if a fight broke out between Sean and Rachel. They expected one any minute.

Sean and Rachel had been fighting a lot, and today promised to be spectacular. The younger girls were breathless in anticipation. Few things were as exciting as a good fight especially when they were not in it. On their most recent trip to the satellite settlement Sean had spotted a wooded hillside that looked like it might be the home for abundant quantities of the small omnivores they called "home-coons" because Sebastian thought they resembled raccoons without the stripes. The hillside was about two kilometers away so they headed out first thing in the morning to hunt. The "home-coons" were diurnal, hunting at dawn and dusk. They spent most of the day lounging in the crooks of tree branches watching the traffic below. They could be tempted down out of the trees by something shiny and glittery, but mostly they relied on their coloration to keep hidden from their historical predators who had all suddenly died off along with the large grazing animals.

As they walked, Wendy spotted something white and out of place among the trees. "Hey, everybody! Look over there! Bones." She took off running in that direction.

"Wendy! Come back here!" Sean shouted. "You know we are supposed to stay together!"

"OOOH, It's big daddy, Sean!" Rachel teased as she took off after Wendy. "Catch us if you can!"

"Dad's going to be mad with you taking off!" Sean shouted back genuinely concerned that he was going to be punished for their actions.

Sean and Colleen ran after Wendy, and soon the four of them found themselves in the midst of the biggest collection of bones they had ever seen.

"Don't touch anything!" Sean ordered. "Dr. Turner will want to see this just like we found it."

"Yeah, yeah, we know," Rachel sneered. They stared at the bones for a while until Rachel saw something move in a tree over her head. Quickly raising her bow, she shot an arrow at it. The arrow thudded into the branch below where the 'coon had been watching them. The 'coon hissed at them and scampered away.

"Now it will go warn the others," Sean barked at her. "We'll get nothing. You should have let me shoot it. I wouldn't have missed."

The settlers had noticed that the 'coons did seem to have some form of communication with which they could warn each other of danger. While they did not seem to react to one of their number being killed by an arrow, one escaping a shot was often able to raise an alarm and send the others into hiding. Rachel's missed shot virtually guaranteed a wasted hunting trip, but the discovery of the bones should make up for the loss.

“You couldn’t have hit it either. It looked right at you and was getting ready to run away,” Rachel shot back.

“I would have hit it.”

“You didn’t see it. I did.”

“But I would have hit it.”

“Not if you didn’t see it.”

“I would have seen it.”

“But you didn’t.”

“You couldn’t hit it anyway. You can’t shoot worth anything. I don’t know why you even carry that thing.”

“I can too shoot.”

“You missed.”

“I shot too soon. It was moving.”

“You couldn’t hit a ‘coon if it held still and made faces at you.”

“I could too!”

“You couldn’t hit me if I stood still and made faces at you.”

“I could too!” She raised her bow at him.

“Don’t threaten me with that! I don’t want to have to break it!” Sean was turning red with anger. He started to turn away. It was his way of getting the last word. He often ended arguments by turning his back and walking away.

“Don’t you ignore me!”

“What are you going to do? Shoot me?”

“Yes,” Rachel said as she let the arrow go. As she had with the ‘coon, her shot was low. The arrow lodged firmly in the back of Sean’s thigh. Sean’s scream echoed across the hills.

For a few seconds, the girls stood paralyzed with fear as Sean screamed in pain. Regaining their thoughts, Wendy and Colleen raced to get the horses and their parents. Rachel assisted Sean to a sitting position on a nearby moss covered stone. She cried and apologized and did what she could to stop the bleeding. Once the initial shock subsided, Sean tried to tough it out. With clenched teeth he glared at Rachel as she pleaded for forgiveness.

Wendy and Colleen gathered their parents. The silence of their anger as they tended to Sean was more painful to Rachel than if they had shouted at her. Her various punishments went on for months until the four adults agreed that she had been punished enough. Sean’s wound healed although it occasionally caused him residual pain. Rachel was never allowed to carry a bow and arrow again, nor

was she allowed to accompany Sean on his hunting trips. Rachel's moment of anger caused a rift between them that would last a year until it finally dissipated.

The collection of bones they found on the hillside would bring Dr. Turner to the conclusion that the animals had not died of a contagion. They had died of complications of infections that had taken root in the blisters from extensive sunburns. Dr. Turner surmised that something cataclysmic had damaged the ozone layer to the point where the animals had developed second degree sunburns. The blisters had become infected, and eventually the infections had spread to the rest of the animals' bodies. Thus the mystery of the disease that had caused the survey to label the planet off-limits was solved.

Rachel learned from the consequences of her rash action, and while her hot temper never totally subsided, she learned to control it so that she would not instantly lash out when threatened. Rachel was surprised to learn that her mother had been equally quick tempered, and she, too, often battled with controlling it. She knew that her parents fought routinely, but she had assumed it was her father's low flash point that started the arguments. Avi disabused her of that notion. She explained how their tempers were almost balanced but Greg was the calmer one of the pair. Rachel came by her temper naturally. What Avi did not understand was how Wendy could be so even-tempered and steady. Perhaps that was why Rachel tended to gravitate towards her father and Wendy towards her mother. Opposites attract she rationalized.

This was not the only time Rachel's competitive spirit got the best of her. Their grandmother, Avi's mother, found that she could send them packages by addressing them care of the commander of the supply depot at New St. Louis. She sent all four children off-road bicycles. Helen was the only adult who had ever been on a bike, and she taught the children how to ride. Rachel insisted on racing everywhere she went, and one day while trying to pull ahead of Sean by going around him through the rough area beside one of their riding trails, hit a boulder and took a header. She split open the skin on her forehead. Like most head wounds, this injury bled profusely. Terrified that she would bleed to death, she raced home with blood streaming down her face. Sean raced behind her trying to get her to stop so he could tend to the wound. Avi was surprisingly calm when Rachel showed up covered in blood and quickly cleaned the wound. This turned out to be another in the long series of trips Rachel made to see Lonnie who, as she patched up Timmy when he got hurt, patched up Rachel.

Rachel had a series of "accidents" growing up that would have driven less understanding parents to distraction. She routinely broke the controls on the simulators in her excitement over the games. She set a tree on fire with the laser from her mother's ship trying to prove that she did know how the fire control system worked. She almost drowned trying to demonstrate she could swim across the lake and back. She tipped one of the farm tractors over trying to drive it. She ran one of the sailboats aground in her haste to beat an incoming storm after she had been out too long. Timmy had tried to teach them the fine art of barrel racing on horseback. Rachel never could master controlling the horse as it ran through the obstacle course and frequently found herself in a cloud of dust on the ground. Of all skills Rachel tried, the one she did best was fly. Handling the P I ships in space came naturally to her. By the age of ten, she could safely land or take off in the P I ships and the tug. Flying to her was not a competitive sport. It was something she did well and enjoyed.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GREG AND AVI TOOK THE GIRLS flying as often as possible. Flight school was a special treat that the girls viewed as a reward for working hard in their classes. Reluctant to disabuse the girls of that opinion, Greg and Avi saw Rachel's and Wendy's flight school as a vital part of their training. As they entered their teen years, they assumed greater command of the two P I ships.

"Warning! Intruder Alert! Unknown vessels range 3,000. Vessels changing course to intercept!"

"Oh, shit. Move over. Flight school is adjourned for the day," Greg said.

"Da-ad! What's going on?" Rachel whined.

"We're about to be attacked. Rachel, get in the fire control seat!"

"But Da-ad what am I supposed to do?"

"Just like the simulators, kid."

"But Da-ad!"

"GET IN THE SEAT!"

"Yes, Dad."

Greg called Avi over the comm. Her ship was slightly behind his. "Hey, Avi, bogeys dead ahead. See them?"

"Yeah, we need to engage," she answered.

"Roger that! Rachel is in the fire control seat," Greg said.

"Roger that! Wendy is on her way. I think we are about to initiate two of the youngest P I fire control officers in the history of the Force." Avi laughed.

"Dad, are you sure this is a good idea?" Wendy asked timidly.

"Do you want them to follow us home like a bunch of lost wolves?" Greg asked.

"No, but we could hyper out, and they couldn't follow us," Wendy suggested.

"And they'll be waiting for us when we get back," Greg replied.

"I guess. Beginning arming checklist," Wendy reported.

"Good girl. Keep your wits about you!"

"Yes, Dad."

Greg had been listening as Rachel talked herself through her arming checklist. This was the moment of truth. Barely thirteen years old, she had flown in these ships since she was a baby, actually before that since her mother flew when she was pregnant. This was the first time she had flown into

combat. All the other times they had fought pirates, the girls had monitored the sensors in the cargo ship and provided targeting information for their parents who did the actual fighting. Rachel verified each step in the process twice to make sure she was not missing anything. Greg heard the servos whine extending the weapons pods, and he knew that she was almost to the end of the checklist. He heard the sphere of displays close around her forming an air tight seal that would protect her in the event the hull was breached by a missile or laser.

As he had done before entering every conflict he had been involved with since he had flown this ship in the Federation Space Force, Greg reviewed his ship's status and his inventory of munitions. Equipped with lasers, missiles, mines and electronic countermeasures, the P I ships were formidable. The pilots often joked that the tough little ships were designed by terminally anal-retentive engineers who were doing serious drugs. Greg was one of the few who knew the truth about the intensity of the team who had designed this incredible little warship. He had been part of it. The ships were virtually indestructible. Disabling a P I ship generally took multiple missile strikes or concentrated barrages of laser fire. Their only weakness was from directly astern. A single missile properly placed in the propulsion system would destroy a P I ship. Of course the same could be said of most current space ships. Greg was confident in his ability to overcome the approaching force even though the ships, which he assumed to be pirates, outnumbered them ten ships to two. He and Avi had attacked larger forces solo and had lived to tell about it.

"Warning! Targeting radar locked!" The ship's computer sounded the alert.

"Acknowledged. Send our identification codes. They should know who they're up against. It's only fair," Greg replied.

"Sending codes, aye sir," the computer responded

Under Federation rules of engagement, a targeting lock constituted an act of aggression allowing the targeted party to open fire without recrimination. In practice, a targeting lock meant little since the lock could be accomplished well outside effective missile range.

"Rachel, got your sighting helmet on?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Strapped in tight?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Got a fix on the approaching ships?"

"Yes, Dad."

"All lasers showing green?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Wendy, how are you doing over there?" Greg asked his younger daughter.

"All systems locked and loaded," ten year old Wendy replied.

"We're ready," Avi assured him.

Some kids train to be gymnasts and compete at young ages. Some kids train to be musicians and perform before large audiences. Rachel and Wendy trained to fly warships. They reminded themselves as they prepared for their first battle that their parents were two of the most successful pirate interdiction pilots in the history of the Federation until they went into hiding. Greg and Avi understood the art of war. Rachel often joked that it was like growing up in a circus family only more lethal. They were preparing to find out exactly how lethal. They were not a family circus. They were the “Solomon Family Warriors”.

Rachel’s seat was immediately behind Greg’s. When fully deployed, the sensor displays on the P I ship’s rear seat made a complete sphere around the seat. The seat itself was mounted on gimbals so that when the gimbals were unlocked, the seat had complete range of motion. Icons representing various types of craft were displayed with small identifying legends. The weapons controls were built into the seat. Targeting was accomplished by looking at the icon on the display. A pair of small lasers mounted on the operator’s headset highlighted the icon. The operator pushed a button for the device they wanted to use and the ship’s targeting systems did the rest. Missiles were on the fingers of the right hand with a separate button for each internal tube or external missile mount. There were no missiles in the external mounts, but for this action, they probably would not be needed. Mines, countermeasures and chaff were on the right thumb. Lasers were on the left hand. The feet controlled the seat. When the ship was flown solo, flight control was via a joystick that could be operated with either hand. When the ship was fully crewed, the joystick sat out of the way secured to the seat.

With the four weapons pods on each ship fully extended, the two Pirate Interdiction warships raced forward toward the intruders. Greg did not believe in firing first. He always waited until his opponent fired, but he always got the last shot. The few times he had been forced to retreat had been temporary setbacks followed by more carefully planned attacks to finish what he had started. Few pirates escaped his attacks, but it did happen. He knew that reinforcements were at best a couple of hours away. They would be monitoring his transmissions, but it would be a while before they could assemble and rally to the defense. This engagement would be the two little warships against whatever was in that fleet.

“Targeting radar disengaged,” the computer intoned.

“How strange,” Greg commented.

“Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! This is Orion Metals Industries convoy requesting rescue!”

“Avi, what do you think?”

“Hard to tell. Could be real. Could be a trap,” Avi replied.

“Not the first of those I’ve seen.”

“Stay alert girls, we don’t know what we have,” Avi cautioned.

“Dad, three of the ships are Interstellar Freight Industries Class 2 cargo ships,” Rachel offered. “It’s possible that they’re really in trouble.”

“It’s also possible that pirates have already taken the convoy,” Greg replied.

“I see two Saturn Industries Model 12 passenger ships,” Rachel said.

"I'm showing one Valiant Class G destroyer," Wendy sang out. "Transponder inactive."

"It's a pirate," Greg responded.

"I'm reading three Valiant Model 86 fighter interceptors," Avi observed.

"How do you know the destroyer's a pirate?" Rachel asked.

"Orion Metals is too cheap to properly protect their fleets. They could never afford a destroyer. The 86's were probably the convoy's original escort, but my money says now they're held by pirates. Do you see a Class 5 cargo ship around anywhere?" Greg asked suspiciously.

The distance between the two P I ships and the convoy continued to decrease. Within a few minutes, they would be within missile range of each other.

Rachel spotted it first. "Saturn Industries Class 5 cargo ship standing off to port at range 4500."

"I knew it! Thought I would forget, didn't you! Brad Falconer, you old sea dog, I got you this time!" Greg shouted with glee. "Change course to intercept the Class 5! It's clobbering time!"

The two P I ships abruptly changed course toward the cargo ship.

"We'll do a short hyper jump." Greg read off a set of coordinates. "We'll drop out of hyper immediately behind him. When we do I expect to see weapons pods pop out all over the ship. As soon as you can, fire your lasers into the junction of the weapons pods and the hull. Point your sighting helmets where the display shows the weapons pod hinge. Hold it until the hinge blows. Avi, you ready to dance?"

"How sweet of you to ask. Ready to dance," Avi replied.

"Dad, the destroyer is breaking away from the convoy," Rachel shouted. "It's coming after us!"

"Excellent. What are the 86's doing?" Greg asked.

"No movement," Wendy said.

"Excellent. Prepare to hyper jump."

The girls had never been on a ship when it executed a short hyper jump. Since the short jump was strictly a combat maneuver, this would be their first time experiencing the tactic. They inflated the high G support structures in their suits. Without the suit's support, the G forces of the sudden acceleration and the transition would cause them to black out if the blood in their bodies flowed away from their heads. They controlled their breathing as they had been trained. The ride was brutal. The quick transitions into and out of hyper were as painful as they had been warned. The effect on their bodies was painful. Soft tissue was especially sensitive to the transition between the two states.

Exactly as Greg said they would, weapons pods emerged from under what otherwise appeared to be the solid hull of a cargo ship.

The few seconds delay while the girls recovered from the transition from hyper drive was all the Q ship needed to start firing its lasers at the two suddenly appearing P I ships. The girls immediately returned fire as their parents spun the ships so that the heat shielded underside of the ships faced the Q



ship's lasers.

Greg and Avi then “danced” their ships. Rapidly changing direction and speed, they initiated a series of evasive maneuvers designed to make them difficult targets for the Q ship's lasers. Rachel and Wendy had heard their parents discuss this form of “dancing” but had never witnessed it. The ride was almost as rough as atmospheric re-entry. The difference was on re-entry all they had to do was hold on. This time, they had to maintain steady and constant fire on very small targets. Spinning rapidly on their gimbaled seats inside their sphere of displays, the girls poured as much power as their lasers could give them against the Q ship's weapons pods. This combat seemed like a simulator game, except simulators do not bounce the game player around dodging lasers and missiles. One of the challenges complicating the “dancing” was that the heat shield on the under side of the P I ships had to stay toward the Q ship. With the P I ships' nose facing away from the target, their missiles were of little use and only three of the four weapons pods could bring their lasers to bear.

The situation was exactly like one that the girls had practiced many times in the simulations their parents had written for them. This was the first time they had done it for real and the ships' bobbing and weaving made the process more difficult. They bored away at the bases of the Q ship's weapons pods until one by one the pods exploded and broke away from the hull. Due to the close range between the ships, the Q ship could not fire its missiles out of fear that one would turn back around and mistake it for the target. The Q ship did manage to disable one of Rachel's weapons pods before the combined assault from both P I ships disabled the Q ship's lasers. The Q ship could not flee because in doing so, it would expose its vulnerable propulsion system to the attackers. At this point the battle was technically over, the range of outcomes significantly reduced.

“Hey, Falconer!” Greg called on an open channel.

“Solomon! I thought you were dead!” A man's voice replied in anger.

“Surprise! Surprise! Surprise! I thought I would give you the opportunity to surrender.”

“I almost killed you last time! This time I won't fail.”

“I had the same thought,” Greg challenged.

Small mines and electronics countermeasures devices popped out of the Q ship.

“Arm two armor piercing heat seekers each!” Greg ordered.

“Armed,” the girls replied.

“Clock then destroyer!” Avi yelled.

“Roger that! Now!” Greg ordered.

The two P I ships spun and quickly took positions at 3 and 9 o'clock on the Q ship.

“Rachel, stand by to fire!” Greg commanded.

“Ready!”

“Fire two!”

“Two missiles away!” Rachel replied.

The missiles left the tubes and Greg hyper jumped away not waiting long enough to see the results of his actions.

“Wendy, stand by to fire!” Avi commanded.

“Ready!”

“Fire two!”

“Two missiles away!” Wendy sang out.

As soon as the missiles were away, Avi hyper jumped her ship as Greg had done.

The heat seeking missiles sensed and targeted the Q ship’s unprotected reactor cooling panels. The missiles penetrated the thin panels and detonated behind them destroying them. The two P I ships had already jumped out of the way of the explosion that followed. With the cooling panels disabled, the Q ship’s reactors quickly overheated and detonated leaving a rapidly expanding ball of gas and debris to mark the demise of one of the most dangerous pirates currently working the shipping lanes.

“Hey, Falconer, didn’t think you’d find me here did ya?” Greg said under his breath as he headed for the destroyer.

“Dad, who’s Brad Falconer?” Rachel asked.

“Brad Falconer was one of the most intelligent and resourceful pirates to ever harass the shipping lanes. The insurance companies will be thrilled to hear he’s gone,” Greg replied.

They dropped out of hyper drive on either side of the destroyer. The destroyer fired missiles immediately. The girls devoted their attention to destroying the missiles with their lasers while their parents maneuvered the ships to launch their own missiles.

Avi called the next maneuver. “Arm one range effect for RF homing. Arm one armor piercing for heat seeking. Prepare to fire simultaneously on my mark!”

“Ready!” Rachel responded.

“Ready!” Wendy responded.

Once in position, Avi called “Fire all missiles!”

“Missiles away!”

At close range, four missiles sped toward the destroyer overwhelming its defenses. The heat seekers were destroyed by the destroyer’s defenses before they could do any damage, but the range effect missiles got through. Homing in on the antennas that ringed the flight deck, the missiles penetrated the view-port and detonated inside the flight deck. The entire control module separated from the rest of the ship. Sensing a catastrophe, the reactors automatically shut down. The ship was dead.

They turned their attention back to the rest of the convoy.

“Dad, how did you know to look for the Q ship?” Rachel asked as they headed back toward the convoy in standard drive.

“The sensors picked up ten drive signatures. I saw nine ships. The last time I ran into Falconer, he almost got me with the Q ship. I saw it in time to escape. Ever since then, I count drive signatures against identified ships. When we came up one short, I got suspicious.”

“Rachel,” Avi added. “Falconer killed more Federation Space Force pilots than anyone else. It’s too bad we can’t collect the ransom for him.”

“Why not?” Rachel asked.

“We would expose the location of our planet and secrecy is our best defense,” Avi replied.

“Did we really kill one of the most dangerous pirates?” Wendy asked.

“Almost seemed too easy,” Rachel commented.

“We got lucky,” Greg said. “You spotted him soon enough that we could surprise him. If we’d reached the convoy without spotting him, he would have as handily killed us.”

“We still have three 86’s to deal with in the convoy. We’re not out of the woods yet,” Avi said.

“Load an armor piercing heat seeker in tube one,” Greg said. “Put an RF seeking range effect in tube two. Put a light seeking grapeshot in tube three. Put an electronic countermeasures in tube four.”

“Dad, what’s the grapeshot for?” Rachel asked.

“In case we have to go after the passenger ships, we can clear the flight decks without harming the passengers.”

“Ugh,” Rachel shuddered. “Messy!”

Greg laughed, “But effective!”

As they flew back toward the convoy they scanned their sensors and displays to determine where to strike first. The three 86’s were in a triangle with one well behind the other two.

“Well, that makes it easy,” Greg said. “I’ll take the one on the left, and you take the one on the right.”

“Roger that!” Avi replied.

Suddenly the situation became easier. The 86 behind the other two fired on the ships ahead of it. The 86 fighter interceptor was equipped with two missile tubes. One of the missiles was targeted at each of the other ships, and while they hit their targets, did not disable them. A second volley finished the job.

“Unknown Federation Space Force ships approaching the convoy please hold your fire!” The woman sounded desperate. “Please hold your fire!”

“Please identify yourself,” Avi responded.

“Orion Metals Security Officer Madeline Stevens. I have regained control of the remaining Valiant 86.”

“What is the status of your convoy?” Avi asked.

“All ships have been boarded and are controlled by pirates.”

“Are any of the other ships armed?” Avi asked.

“Negative.”

The 86 retracted its weapons pods as a sign of surrender.

“Do you have security personnel on the ships who might have been taken captive?” Avi asked.

“Negative. They have all been killed.”

“Who is left on board?”

“Mining engineers, machinists, mine workers and their families. All non-combatants.”

“How many pirate personnel are on the cargo ships?”

“The cargo ships have flight crews. Three or four people at most.”

“Hey, Dad,” Rachel said. “I have the plans of those two passenger ships on the display. The simulations say it’s time to board the ships. What do you want us to do?”

“Hold that thought,” Greg answered. “Avi, shall we suit up and clean out the passenger ships?”

“I don’t see much choice,” Avi replied.

“Should Wendy and I keep guard on the cargo ships so they don’t try to escape?” Rachel asked.

“Good plan. Stay in your seats and keep your shells closed,” Greg said in that “father knows best” tone of voice.

“Yes, Dad,” the girls huffed.

Greg and Avi put on their armored EVA suits and retrieved their laser shields from storage. Rachel and Wendy docked the P I ships to the passenger ships as they had docked these ships to their father’s cargo ship many times. Greg boarded one ship and Avi boarded the other as they had done dozens of times before. As was their habit, they left their communicators open. No sooner had the air lock doors closed behind them than the girls heard the unique zing noise of the battery packs that powered their parents’ laser weapons discharging and reforming after the intense power use of each shot. Whatever was going on inside those two passenger ships was certainly ugly. The girls’ only comfort was the knowledge that this was what their parents did for a living.

Wendy and Rachel repositioned their ships ahead of the three cargo ships keeping all three in sight and in easy missile range.

One of the cargo ships started to pull away.

Rachel watched it dismay for a few minutes hoping it would return to the formation. It continued to gain speed away from the rest of the convoy and Rachel realized that she needed to do something to stop its flight. Mustering her deepest voice, Rachel commanded, "All vessels will maintain formation." The cargo ship continued to pull away.

"Wendy, you stay with these two. I got this one."

"Roger that!" Wendy replied in her deepest voice.

"Who are you to stop me?" a man asked.

"A P I ship with a missile full of grapeshot for your flight deck," Rachel replied.

"Only one man I know carries grapeshot missiles."

"Would you like to talk to him?" Rachel said, knowing her parents were listening to the transmissions. "He's kind of busy and won't be real happy you interrupted him."

"Ah, but you're only a kid, you couldn't hit me anyway!" The cargo ship continued to pull away.

As Rachel had done dozens of times in simulations, she set the distance and tracking program for one of her missiles. Once she was certain that the cargo ship was not coming back into the formation, she fired a countermeasures missile which detonated exactly where she intended it to, immediately outside the cargo ship's view-port. Hundreds of small blinking lights, tiny radio transmitters, bits of shiny metal and thermal radiators burst in a colorful explosion outside the cargo ship's flight deck and impacted the outside of the view-port. A hail storm of small electronics, chaff and missile parts rattled the crew inside.

"Pull back in formation or the grapeshot is next," Rachel said.

The cargo ship gracefully slid back into the formation.

"Nice going, Rachel!" Greg called. "Hey, I have control of my passenger ship. I am docking it to your cargo ship. No fireworks, OK?"

"Roger that!"

"Hey gang," Avi called, "we're secure over here. I am docking to one of the other cargo ships."

The two passenger ships docked to the cargo ships. They heard Greg's laser weapons fire a few more times. Apparently the pirate that Rachel had convinced to get back in line did not get the message.

"All Clear here!" Greg called a few minutes later.

"All Clear here!" Avi called a few minutes after that.

Greg and Avi spent the next couple of hours verifying that they had control of all three cargo ships, the two passenger ships and the sole remaining fighter interceptor. The survivors assisted by cleaning up the blood and miscellaneous body parts left of what was once a substantial band of pirates.

Once the ships had been properly restored, Greg called the girls to dock to the cargo ships at the opposite ports from the ones where the passenger ships were docked.

Once docked, Rachel called her father on the comm. "Hey, Dad, we're done. Can I drive the rest of the way home to Colleen's birthday party?"

"No, we're not going to Colleen's."

"What?" Rachel was indignant. "We were supposed to be going to the party! This was supposed to be an afternoon ride out to the asteroid belt and then back to Colleen's for the party."

"We are going to escort these nice people to the safety of New St. Louis."

"But Da-ad! It'll be two months before we get home! Why can't Blondie escort them with your cargo ship. She's planning on making a run after the party."

"We need to send armed ships. We're all going. We'll send our regrets. Blondie can meet us here with the cargo ship, and we'll go in her place. She can go home in the tug."

"But, Da-ad!"

"Rachel, that's enough."

"Yes, Dad."

"Hey, Rachel," Wendy called, "New St. Louis! We get to go shopping! We can pick up a nice gift for Colleen and Helen, too!" The conversation quickly disintegrated into a free-for-all over what they would buy once they arrived at New St. Louis.

After a few minutes, Greg interrupted. "We destroyed one of the most dangerous bands of pirates in the history of mankind and you're thinking about shopping?"

"Well, yeah, Dad that's what you and Mom do, right? You kill pirates. We go shopping!"

"Avi," Greg said exasperated, "they're your daughters!"

Avi laughed and said, "Greg, they're our daughters!"

Greg, Avi and the girls regularly traveled to New St. Louis on supply runs with the cargo ship and one or both P I ships as escort. Greg continued to maintain a low profile, but Avi and the girls routinely shopped at the supply depot they had helped liberate. It was one of their few luxuries. The girls grew so quickly that keeping them in flight suits was a challenge. Their builds were so different that old suits could not be passed down. Custom built flight suits tailor made to their growing bodies appeared to multiply in their clothes lockers. They would spend hours in the small shopping mall that had been built to service the families who populated the increasing numbers of emigrants leaving the central system, tramp freighters and treasure hunters. The price of hyper drives and reactors dropped steadily to the point where anyone who wanted one could get one. The big ones were still prohibitively expensive, but the smaller ones that could power a scout, small yacht or tramp freighter had almost become disposable commodities. Fuel was still expensive, but the reactors themselves were cheap. The refueling operation drove the depot's economy.

After turning the Orion Metals convoy over to the protection of the Space Force and unloading their cargo, Avi and Greg took the girls shopping for new flight suits. One of the first things Avi normally did when they arrived at New St. Louis was head for the post office. Her mother and several of her cousins knew that they could send mail to her care of the post office and eventually she would respond. She and the girls would then head to the ice cream shop for a snack and read the mail. Avi always read the letters from her mother first. Normally her mother's letters made her laugh, but as she read this letter she started to cry.

"Greg, I need to go get her."

"How?" Greg knew better than to ask why Avi wanted to do something or give her strong opposition once she had figured out her plan. His only recourse once she was set on an idea was to ensure that the plan was sound.

"I can have one of my cousins get her to Triton and pick her up there," Avi replied.

"Will she survive the trip?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, I think she will," Avi said.

"What ship do you plan to use?" Wendy asked.

"I'll take my P I."

"Won't Grandma be uncomfortable in the small cabin for so long a voyage?" Rachel asked.

"Perhaps, but if it means coming to see you, I think she'll put up with it."

"Why now?" Greg asked.

"Dad died." There was a moment of silence before Avi continued. "You girls did not know my father. Greg did. He was a hard and cynical man. He worked in collections for a credit card company. He distrusted people and their motives. He might have been right. While he was alive, organized crime enforcers protected him from the Swordsmen. When he was collecting, he saw that they got some of their money and the credit card people got some of theirs. The criminals knew he would work with them, and he helped keep a lot of people from getting beat up. He made sure the deadbeats paid and stayed on them until their debts were cleared. When he died, the protection ended. Mom couldn't even give him a decent funeral. Swordsmen had purchased all the funeral homes and refused to allow him to be buried in the plot he had purchased for them unless she converted both herself and him posthumously to the Swordsman church and paid fifty years of back tithing."

"When do you want to leave?" Greg asked.

"As soon as possible," Avi said.

"Rachel, Wendy, go with your mother and make sure she has enough food and supplies for the trip. I'll tend to the rest of getting the ship ready. Do you want me to file a flight plan or are you going under the radar?"

"Under the radar. Get me a couple of spare couriers," Avi replied.

“Got it. Battle stations everyone!” Greg commanded.

Avi left a few hours later.

Greg and the girls finished their shopping and left New St. Louis for Homestead with a full load of supplies for the settlement and another group of refugees.

Avi dispatched a courier missile to her cousin Buzzy. Buzzy was the attorney who had helped her transfer Greg’s money, and she knew she could rely on him. The first courier told him what he needed to do, but since she did not know what defenses she would encounter in the central system, she could not tell him when he needed to do it.

P I ships are designed to be stealthy and slide through the best defenses undetected. Avi parked her ship in the asteroid belt and sent Buzzy a courier. She monitored ship traffic until she saw what she was looking for. A small private passenger craft landed on Triton, stayed for ten minutes and left headed to one of the outer planets in the system. She had noticed a Space Force sentry ship in the area on what appeared to be routine patrol. It did not appear to have spotted her.

Avi put on her EVA suit, waited until she was sure her hyper drive would not impact the departing ship and short jumped to within a few hundred kilometers of the surface. She quickly landed using standard drive. A solitary person in an EVA suit sat on a space going steamer trunk the end of the runway. Avi put on her helmet and exited the ship. She walked over to the person and pressed her helmet against theirs so the sound would conduct through the physical contact.

“Hello, Mom.”

“Hello, Avi. It’s good to see you. Have you come to take me away, ha ha?”

Avi could hear the smile in her voice. “Yes, we need to boogie before someone finds us.”

“Hug first.” Rose stood and hugged her daughter, picked up a flight case and headed for the ship’s ladder. Avi picked up the rest of the luggage and stowed it in the ship’s hold. Avi directed her mother to the fire control seat. She helped her mother out of her helmet and made sure she was strapped in. Avi was pleased to notice that her mother wore a flight suit under the EVA suit. Once certain her mother was secure, Avi took the pilot’s seat. She was still strapping herself in when the sentry ship hailed her. Her sensors told her it was accelerating at two G in her direction. At that rate it would need an hour to be in missile range. As long as she kept the P I’s heat shields to the sentry, its lasers would not harm her so she was not worried about it. In a face to face battle, the sentry was no match for the P I. Avi hoped the pilot realized what he faced if he attacked. The Avi’s only concern was that this type of ship had a short operating range which meant that a mother ship was not far away and there was no telling what was attached to it.

“Well, Mom shall we light the candle and blow this pop stand?” Avi said cheerfully.

“I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Without responding to the hail, Avi kicked the throttles open and headed for open space. As soon as it was safe to do so, she transitioned into hyper drive. Twenty minutes after Avi arrived on Triton, mother and daughter were safely on course for Homestead. They escaped without a shot fired.

“Avi? Who was that that called us?” Rose asked.



“A guard ship. A sentry,” Avi replied.

“Are we in danger?”

“Not any more. Once we transitioned into hyper drive, they can’t follow us,” Avi explained.

“Why not?”

“Sentry ships are not hyper capable.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Rose paused a few minutes before asking, “How long is the trip? Is it far to where we are going?”

“Yes, it is very far, and how long it takes depends on how fast we go. It is so far that the star we are going to can only be seen from Earth with a strong telescope. We are accelerating at one G in hyper drive now. That feels the same as the force of gravity on Earth. If we increase our acceleration we will get there faster, but we will not be as comfortable due to the increased apparent weight on our bodies.”

“What is the fastest we can go?” Rose asked.

“The ship can go faster than we can survive. Two G is as fast as I think is safe,” Avi replied.

“Can we try it? I am in a hurry to see the kids.”

Avi smiled. “You’re on. Is your flight suit inflated?”

“It is now.”

“Then we’re off!”

Once they had reached 2 G of acceleration, Avi noticed how labored her mother’s breathing had become. “Mom, you can use the face mask to increase the oxygen if you like.” She heard the rustling as her mother put on the face mask.

“Much better,” Rose said after she had secured the mask in place. “I’m exhausted. Do you mind if I nap?” Avi smiled. “Be my guest. It’s a long flight. We’ll have plenty of time to catch up.” Rose “napped” for twelve hours. Avi slept part of the time and was awake when her mother woke up.

“Avi?”

“Yes, Mom?”

“It is true. I thought I dreamed it. Is this your ship? The one you wrote me about?”

“Yup, one of the coolest, meanest, nastiest, toughest, most heavily armed little warships ever built. We could take on a warship a hundred times our size and beat it.”

“Well, let’s hope we don’t have to do that,” Rose said.

“Let’s hope not.”

“What do we do for breakfast?”

Avi had removed her EVA suit, but kept her flight suit on. She helped her mother out of her EVA suit and showed her the galley. In short order the scent of cinnamon buns wafted through the cabin. However much Avi liked cinnamon buns, her mother liked them more.

“I still can’t believe I’m traveling faster than the speed of light. Can I look out the window?”

“Not much to see, but sure.”

Rose moved slowly. The force of the acceleration weighed her down. Avi noticed her difficulty and asked, “We can slow down if you would be more comfortable.”

“No dear. I want to be there yesterday. I will learn to live with this. Is this why you are so strong? Do you do this all the time?”

“I do it a lot and yes, it is part of the reason.”

“Greg does this too?”

“Yes, and the girls, too.”

“They must be strong.”

Avi smiled. “Yes, they are. Rachel has turned into something of a hellion.”

“Like her mother?”

“I was never this bad.”

“I’ll be the judge of that!”

“Mom, I know you loved me and you will love Rachel, but I hope you will love Wendy.”

Rose smiled. “I will love them all and their friends too. Have no fear. Tell me about them.”

For most of the first half of the voyage Rose slept as much as she was awake. The force of the acceleration tired her quickly and she slept soundly in long stretches. The time she was awake they spent chatting about the girls, Greg and the community on Homestead. By the time they reached the half way point where Avi turned the ship around to begin the deceleration, Rose felt like she knew everyone in Avi’s life and felt prepared to jump in with the family that had seemed so distant.

Buzzy had sent Avi a letter which Rose carried with her. Avi read it out loud to Rose who vehemently protested that she did not read other people’s mail. *“My dearest second cousin once removed, would that you had married me. Life would be so different.”*

“His wife is a dear. Don’t let him fool you,” Rose commented. “Besides, you would have killed him. You’re more woman than he could handle. I was heartbroken when you turned him down, but you were right, my dear.”

*“The Swordsmen are making life difficult. It is reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition. Jews are being singled out and forced to leave their jobs and their homes. After we drop Rose off as you requested, I am taking my family, my brother’s family and my sister’s family to one of the new Jewish*

*colonies for resettlement. The cost of the ship rental will leave us broke when we get there. Being poor where we are going is better than being rich where we were. I will write you care of New St. Louis when I know where we land. Take care of yourself. Give Rose a hug for me. I miss you. Buzzy.*”

“Buzzy always was a good boy even if he was a lawyer,” Rose said.

Avi laughed. Greg had taken the time to load the ship’s data storage with movies and music that he hoped Rose would like. The second half of the trip was spent watching the movies from the luxury of their flight seats. Avi showed Rose how the exercise and fitness features of the seats worked, and they developed a work out schedule that kept Rose from becoming stiff with the long sedentary periods in the chair. Even with everything Avi knew how to do to make the voyage as comfortable as possible, they were both ready for the trip to be over when they approached Homestead.

Myra was on patrol when Avi and Rose dropped out of hyper drive at the edge of the system. Within minutes, the defense tracking system had acknowledged her presence and directed her to the landing spot next to the house. “Hey Avi! Welcome home!” Myra called.

“Good to be home,” Avi replied.

“Hello Rose, welcome to Homestead.”

After fumbling with the microphone control for a moment, Rose said, “Thank you. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

“I’m Myra.”

“I am glad to be here. Will I see you when we land?”

“I’ll be on patrol for another few days, but I’ll stop by after my watch is over.”

“I look forward to meeting you.”

“The girls are breathless in anticipation of your arrival.”

“I was hoping to surprise them.”

Myra laughed. “Too late for that. Greg had the alert system programmed to call his personal communicator the moment you hit the system. He’ll be there waiting for you.”

“Well, Mom let’s go home,” Avi said.

“Don’t I get a chance to put on my makeup?” Rose asked.

“Mom, we don’t wear any here.”

“No makeup?”

“Nope. We are who we are. That’s it. Besides when we first settled here merely getting a bath was a challenge. Makeup seemed like a waste of time, and we never looked back. Don’t worry, everyone will love you the way you are.”

“If you say so.”

As Avi made her final landing approach she noticed with pleasure that a new room had been added to the side of the house. A picture window faced out over the lake. She hoped her mother would be happy here. If not, it would not be for lack of trying on their part.

The girls did not wait for Avi and Rose to exit the ship. As soon as Avi dropped the crew ladder, Rachel and Wendy raced inside the ship. Their loud, energetic, tearful greeting quickly dispelled any doubts Rose may have had that this was the right thing to do. Almost ignoring their mother, the girls whisked their grandmother off the ship to help her get settled in her new room grabbing the luggage on the way. Once the noisy entourage had faded out of sight, Greg quietly ascended into the ship. He gave his wife a long hug and kiss before he said, "Go tend to your mother. I'll do post-flight."

"Greg, you know I love you."

"Yup, and I love you, too."

Rose was quickly assimilated into a community accustomed to assimilating new people. Within a month it was almost as if she had been one of the original settlers. The girls thrived on Rose's attention. Sean got his share of attention, but he tended to prefer more solitary activities than the others. Rose recognized his need to be left alone and reacted accordingly.

Avi was watching Rose interact with the children when she realized that during the whole trip she had not heard a word about her siblings. She had an older brother and a younger brother and sister. She wondered what had happened that her mother did not mention them. It was not as if she was on speaking terms with any of them, but for her mother to not mention them at least in passing was odd. Avi knew better than to press the issue and left it alone. Rose would tell her when it was time. Rose had an uncanny knack for knowing when the time would be.

As Avi had anticipated, of the children, Rachel was the one who related to Rose the best. They had long philosophical discussions. Where before, Myra had been Rachel's confidant in times of confusion, Rose provided Rachel a sense of perspective no one else, even Myra, could match. They often walked together through the forest picking wild flowers or fruit in season.

One afternoon Rachel and Rose sat on a rock overlooking the settlement and Rose said, "You know, on the trip here I wondered what it must be like living in so isolated a community without the companionship I had growing up, but you seem to have done fine."

"I think since we have our parents so close, we've never been lonely. Even when we take the long trips through space, the four of us are always together. Living and working with our parents has made us closer than we would have been if we were in a normal household where we spent more time apart than we did together."

"I would have thought you would miss the social life."

"I am not sure you miss something you've never had," Rachel said slowly. "I mean it's not as if we lack for companionship. Myra has been my special friend since I was born, but she's away on patrol a lot and I don't see her as much as I would like, but we talk all the time except when she has to leave the system. You met Brownie and Blondie. We travel with them sometimes. We don't spend much time with Katherine or Sam, but they come by from time to time."

"I know. It's that sometimes I fear you have not had a childhood. You spend so much time

learning to be fighters,” Rose said with a sigh.

“Mom worries about that, too. But you know we get to fly one of the coolest, meanest, nastiest, toughest, most heavily armed little warships ever built. We could take on a warship a hundred times our size and beat it. That certainly beats the daylight out of Cotillion!”

“Your mom used those exact words.”

“The fruit falls not far from the tree as they say,” Rachel said looking out over the lake.

“You know, Rachel, you will always be a warrior. It suits you. I fear you will fight many battles and some of them will be soon. I know you are worried about the Swordsmen attacking, and I think they will eventually, but I am not worried about that battle. Somehow I know you will survive it. You all will. There will be others, and I am not so sure of those.”

“Grandma, when one takes up the sword, one has to be aware of the risks. We have all taken the sword. It’s not like we had a choice, Mom and Dad being who they are, but we are comfortable with it. It’s what we do. If we are going to do something, we should at least do it well.”

“I understand.”

“I get the feeling you don’t approve.”

“I sort of do and sort of don’t. George Orwell once said that we sleep soundly in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm. As long as humans are greedy and selfish it will always be this way. You are preparing to visit violence on people we believe intend us serious harm. Someone has to do this. Your mother and father are violent people.”

“I noticed,” Rachel interrupted.

“But they are experienced and can lead a force into battle. I can accept their decision to be those rough and violent men. But you are children. I have a problem sending children into battle. They have robbed you of your childhood.”

“Perhaps, but if we do nothing the Swordsmen will rob us of our adulthood.”

“Must it always be so? Could we somehow change things?” Rose mused.

“I wish I thought we could.”

“When your grandfather and I were young we went to a peace rally. One of the speakers said that the purpose of a strong military is not to make war, but to enforce the peace.”

“How can you do one without doing the other?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t know, but you, my dear, need to figure it out. With the human race expanding beyond what was imaginable as little as hundred years ago, we will need to figure it out or the strong will be picking off the weak forever and the human race will return to the dark ages. The danger is not so much for your generation. These things take time to happen, it would be your children and their children for

whom I fear.”

“And you expect me to figure this out?” Rachel asked.

“Not by yourself. You will need help, which brings me to where I was going with all this. You, my dear Rachel, are your mother’s daughter in a way that Wendy is not. Wendy is like Avi’s sister.”

“Mom never told us she had a sister.”

“She has two brothers I’ll bet she didn’t tell you about either.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“I’m not surprised. My point is that I do not want to happen to you and Wendy what happened to Avi and Tanya. Tanya is four years younger than Avi. She adored Avi. Avi was her protector. We lived in a tough neighborhood, and Avi defended Tanya from the street thugs. They had an argument. Avi walked away from Tanya in anger on a street corner. Avi had gone around the corner when the thugs jumped Tanya. Avi heard the screams but she was so angry she did not turn back. The thugs raped Tanya and beat her so badly she was in the hospital for months. If a shopkeeper hadn’t come out with his gun and started shooting, they might have killed her. Avi never forgave herself or her brothers because neither of them would ever go out of their way to take care of their sisters. Buried in their books, they ran like frightened rats when they were on the streets and hoped no one ever bothered them. When she got out of the hospital, Tanya made things worse by insulting Avi in public for failing to keep her from being assaulted. They haven’t talked to each other since. Not long after that, on her eighteenth birthday, Avi joined the Air Force.”

“Some of this I already know,” Rachel said. “She went to Air Force Basic Training. While she was there she took a whole bunch of tests and some psych whiz kid straight out of college decided she was officer material.” Rose chuckled. “She told me about the whiz kid. He tried to make a pass at her.”

“So her squadron training instructor gave her this long speech about how she should become an officer because the pay is so much better only she knows she can’t because she hasn’t gone to college. She only has a high school diploma. To become an officer she has to go to flight school, and that’s an eight year hitch,” Rachel recited from memory.

“And she blew him off,” Rose chuckled.

Rachel continued the story her father had told her many times. “Yup, and every enlisted man or officer that approached her for the next three weeks. Finally they sent her to the Rabbi, and the Rabbi did it. He broke down her resistance. He must have been something else. I would have liked to have met him. He told her that some day someone would have to stand up to the Swordsmen. It would not be soon but it would happen eventually, and he feared the only ones standing at that point could well be the Jews. If it came to war with the Swordsmen we damn sure better have the best officers because we will be the smaller force. It is not always the biggest army that wins the war. Sometimes it’s the smartest officers. So she agreed to go to flight school. But how did she wind up at the Academy?”

“While she was in flight school, they gave her another battery of tests. The same whiz kid got

hold of them and started pushing to get her reassigned. Her squadron's commanding officer ordered her to apply to the Air Force Academy. She did not give Avi any options," Rose chuckled. "I remember how angry Avi was at being ordered to apply to a stupid college full of snotty people. It was a lawful order by a lawfully appointed superior officer. Failure to obey the order would result in a courts marshal. They had her dead to rights. The instructors inspected everything Avi turned in and verified that Avi was expending the proper amount of effort. The Federation Space Force and the Air Force used the same applicant pool and at that time used the same campus. Space Force Flight Academy has since moved to the Utah Salt Flats. Even though she applied to the Air Force Academy, she was accepted to the Space Force Academy. They sent her to pilot school, and the rest, as they say, is history."

"What does that have to do with me and Wendy?" Rachel asked.

"You are protective of her."

"She can certainly handle herself in a fight."

"So could Tanya, but not alone, and neither can you. Wendy needs to stand beside you as an equal. She is not as impulsive as you, but she sees deeper than you do. She needs to be a moderating influence on your life, and you need to accept that sometimes what she says is right."

"But, Grandma, I do accept what she says," Rachel protested.

"Not often enough. You need to be a team. You need to work together and not in competition with each other."

"I'll try."

"And in trying you will succeed because that's who you are."

"I love you, Grandma."

"And I love you too. Now we need to get home or they will think a bear ate us."

"There are no bears on Homestead."

"It's a figure of speech."

"Ah."

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ADMIRAL DAVIDSON RAN NEW ST. LOUIS like a tight ship. An astute student of history, he understood the importance of maintaining order on the frontier. The Veteran's Administration was so impressed they built a small hospital to service the growing number of military retirees settling there. Surface vehicles traveled between the hospital and the depot on roads carved out of the lunar landscape. An official Space Force retirement community followed soon afterward. Word got out that both of Admiral Davidson's ex-wives had moved in with him. When he was asked how that could possibly work, he would smile and say, "You don't want to know." Captain Dankese requested transfer to the permanent force guarding the station.

Many of the pirates retired. The majority found real jobs, and a few joined the Swordsman military. Several did quite well as merchants at the depot. Whatever their past might have been, they were accepted into the community based only on their net present commercial value. The community had a definite "what's gone is gone, what's now is real" attitude and a clear head for business. For a period of a few years it seemed that the Space Force's Pirate Interdiction teams would be reassigned to chasing drug runners, but with the increase of Swordsman activity, they were instead diverted to a variety of intelligence gathering and espionage activities.

With the girls in tow, Greg and Avi found it difficult to partake of any of New St. Louis' growing number of adult establishments they would have frequented as cadets in the academy. This was probably a good thing given their tendency to get in trouble in such places.

Greg's combat simulator games sold better than his wildest hopes. Carefully crafted to appeal to specific markets, the publishers anxiously awaited the newest releases. As soon as the girls were able to play the games, they helped test the newer versions which added levels designed for younger players.

Many of Homestead's newer settlers became involved in the community's expanding video industry, and were creating feature length projects with traditional themes intended for larger markets than their previous projects. A major production studio developed on the coast south of the satellite settlement. Musical groups developed, and music publishing provided substantial income for the community. The frozen meals for space travelers sold well. Rather than risk piquing the curiosity of those whose interest was better off devoted elsewhere, the decision was made to only sell the meals through carefully selected agents at New St. Louis. Ellie Mae and Elvira were instrumental in setting up the sales channel. Even with the restricted distribution, demand exceeded production capacity.

Gwen Wilson-Fender and Mary Burke-Marlin, two of the original settlers, founded a bank to handle currency transactions. The community used Federation credits for its currency. Financial transactions quickly replaced the barter system and communal arrangements that had been common when the community was started. "Homestead Corporation" dutifully filed its carefully worded annual reports and paid its taxes to the Federation without revealing its location. Federation tax auditors were hosted in carefully choreographed sessions to ensure that the secrecy of their location remained intact.

Social structure and classes developed and with the exception of the unusually high percentage of combat ready personnel, the society's structure was almost a microcosm of Earth's population. Life stabilized as much as it could given that people could join the community, but could not leave. Through all this growth, Homestead's location stayed secret in part because it was so difficult to leave. Only the



flight crews got to leave the planet and then only on specific missions. Greg and Myra were happy with the way things had turned out. Dr. Miller had given up his medical practice to devote full-time to governmental affairs. Other doctors had arrived to replace him, and the settlers respected him as a cautious and dedicated leader. Rose became a surrogate grandmother to most of the children on the planet and provided wise counsel as young parents, many of them single women, tried to bring up their offspring without the benefit of an extended family.

Life on the frontier trading post New St. Louis settled into routine as well. The post was busy and profitable which made everyone happy. Cargo haulers traveling outbound to new settlements carrying passengers and inbound with agricultural products used the station as their transport hub keeping it active all the time. Admiral Davidson found new jobs for his ex-wives in the traffic department verifying manifests and inspecting cargoes for contraband. While most cargoes were permitted to pass through even if they might be banned on any one planet, only those cargoes banned by the Federation itself were impounded. For the most part that meant the only cargoes stopped were stolen goods, furs from endangered animals, fissionable material being transported by unlicensed carriers, drugs and slaves. Ellie Mae and Elvira became adept at spotting suspicious cargoes and intercepting them. They quickly developed a reputation for their skills. Their jobs gave them ample opportunity to pass through cargoes of refugees from the Central System and see that they were properly escorted to safe destinations. Due to the two highly placed women's involvement, New St. Louis became a prime way station in the underground railway for women fleeing the Swordsmen.

Ellie Mae and Elvira were pleasantly surprised to find that the insurance companies paid large rewards for the return of stolen merchandise and larger rewards if the thieves were apprehended. Before they knew it, they found themselves in the awkward position of making more money than their ex-husband the Admiral. Rather than spend this money on themselves, they routinely bought passage for refugees headed out to the frontier settlements.

Admiral Davidson, being the traditionalist he was, in spite of his nontraditional surroundings, continued the custom of inviting his junior officers to dinner with him several times each week. His ex-wives attended these dinners when they were not working. He anticipated one such dinner more than normal. The Admiral warmly and personally greeted each of his guests as they arrived. He was especially pleased to see Captain Dankese as he had a surprise for her. She had one of her junior lieutenants with her as was their custom. Each senior officer was requested to bring one junior officer for introduction to the Admiral. The young man with Captain Dankese was personable and friendly with bright eyes that quickly scanned his surroundings. In the reception that preceded dinner, he made a point of talking to everyone in the room and learning their names. The dinner conversation was light and animated. Sports and music dominated the conversations with enthusiastic participants all around.

After dinner, the Admiral rapped on his glass with a spoon to get everyone's attention. He was careful not to rap the glass too hard because in the moon's low gravity, while liquids stayed in place, they took a while to settle once disturbed.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I have an announcement. Captain Dankese, would you please stand." He walked around behind her and gently removed her Captain's insignia from the epaulets on her jacket. "You won't need these any more."

She looked at him confused and concerned. He gently placed the insignia in his pocket. Out of his other pocket he retrieved an envelope. He handed her the envelope and said, "Don't open it yet." He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small box. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Captain Dankese will be

leaving us in the morning.” He opened the box and displayed it for all to see. “She has been promoted to Commodore.”

Captain Dankese almost swooned.

“And she has been reassigned. She is to return to the shipyard at Saturn Industries where she will pick up a new battleship which is approaching completion. This battleship will be her flagship in the task force she will assemble from existing Space Force units. That task force will be based here to take over the defense of the shipping routes in this area. Per order of the Chief of Staff, a P I ship is waiting to transport you first thing in the morning.”

The group around the table jumped to their feet in raucous applause.

Once the noise had settled down and everyone had been seated again, Captain, now Commodore, Dankese said, “Sir, before I leave, we have a piece of business we need to attend to.”

The Admiral raised his eyebrow, “Oh?”

“Yes, sir,” she turned to the Lieutenant who had accompanied her to the dinner. “You’re on.”

“Ma’am, are you sure?” He looked nervous.

“This is your show. You did the work. Tell us what you found.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Admiral Davidson, esteemed guests,” shuffling in his seat, he finally decided to stand. “As I am sure all of you are aware, our unit has used a series of war simulation games as training exercises. We have come to some surprising conclusions. Or at least they were surprising to us. I returned to the Space Force Academy under Captain Dankese’s orders to research what we believed and have verified our suspicions.” He paused. “We have concluded that Captain Greg Solomon wrote all or part of the three most popular combat simulations currently on the market.”

There was a murmur of surprise from around the table. Admiral Davidson smiled. He was not surprised. “And how do you know this?”

“When I returned to the Academy, I pulled Captain Solomon’s class records and examined his course work. My specialty is cryptography and we devote considerable time to researching patterns of communication. Solomon’s writing style is unique. I won’t bore you with the details except to say that three part sentences and three part verb structures are more prevalent in his writing than typical.”

“And you have based your conclusion on sentence structure?” Admiral Davidson asked.

“That was the final piece to drop into place. The primary evidence comes from the scenarios themselves. Four of the scenarios in the Pirate series have been found in no other place than in Greg’s class work. Two of the scenarios in the new Planetoids game appear in no other place than in his class work. The Valiant Soldiers game includes scenarios that Captain Solomon reviewed and found enough weaknesses to prevent their use by the Space Force.”

“Go on.” Admiral Davidson was listening intently.

“The Valiant Soldiers game is most interesting, sir. Some of the scenarios Captain Solomon rejected at the Academy appear in this game as recommended options.”

A thought which he did not share passed Admiral Davidson’s mind. He grinned. “Have you played it? I have not.”

“My brother sent me a copy. He is a maintenance crew chief at the Swordsman base on Leda. He also sent me the serial numbers on every ship in their fleet as a ploy to get me to join them.”

“I take it you are staying,” the admiral said.

“No question, sir, this is where I belong. Well, actually sir, I would like to be transferred to Commodore Dankese’s task force if that is acceptable to you.”

“You need to ask her that question. I can’t see why not. What did you do with the information from your brother?”

“I wanted to give it to you personally sir.” He handed a data module down the table to the Admiral.

“Very good, thank you, please continue.”

“Well, sir, I believe that Captain Solomon wrote the entire first version of both Pirates and Valiant Soldiers. He wrote much of Planetoids, but he had help. Based on their writing styles and tactics I believe he had input on Planetoids from Captain Avelina Bardwell and Lt. Myra Myrakova as well as several other people I can’t identify.”

“You can tell this from their writing styles?”

“Yes, sir, with other clues, sir.”

“Amazing.”

“Thank you sir. While all that is intriguing, what is most interesting is what happens when the three games are viewed together keeping in mind their respective markets and Captain Solomon’s known propensity for not showing all his cards.”

“How so?”

“Based on personnel policies intrinsic in the games it is fairly well accepted that Pirates is targeted at current and future Space Force personnel, Soldiers is targeted at the Swordsmen, and Planetoids is targeted at civilians and military charged with fixed base defensive duties. For example, nowhere, in any of the games, does he mention the ability to retreat using hyper drive pressure waves as a weapon in close quarters, and we all know that he and Lt. Myrakova both have repeatedly used the tactic. There is also no mention of one of Captain Solomon’s favorite tactics, the short hyper jump. Even more interesting is that in Soldiers there is no mention of using decoys, and we know that Captain Solomon is extremely fond of decoys. Planetoids, however, uses decoys extensively. Moreover, Soldiers includes tactical errors. The point being, if someone has learned their tactics from Soldiers without reference to Planetoids, they would be resoundingly defeated if they attacked a planet whose

defenses were based on Planetoids.”

“Can you give an example?”

“In Soldiers, the player is always the aggressor. The goal is to conquer the rogue planet. In Soldiers, defenders routinely hide battleships in asteroid fields where they try to escape detection by invaders until the invader passes them inbound to the populated planet. This theoretically allows the defending craft to pounce on the invader from their weaker rear side. However, in Soldiers the invaders are shown how to detect such a hidden battleship. What is interesting is that the characteristics used to find the battleship most easily replicated in a decoy. Once having found what they think is a hidden battleship, the invader is then expected to deploy their scouts around and through the asteroid field to hit the hidden ship from the sides and behind while the two battleships battle it out face to face, mano a mano as it were. By focusing what they think is a defender’s attention forward, the invading scouts can sneak in undetected and attack the defending battleship’s propulsion systems. That tactic could be quite effective if the hidden ship were a real battleship. If it was a decoy the balance shifts the other way.

“By contrast, in Defenders, in the exact same scenario, the battleship is always a decoy. They do not leave a real battleship vulnerable to attack without possibility of escape. The defenders keep the battleship for close support of the spaceports and infrastructure targets. If the decoy, say a painted asteroid, gave off the easily mimicked appropriate radiation and electronic readings to fool the invaders’ sensors and if defending scouts were placed where they could ambush and pick off the invaders as they approached what they believed to be the backside of a capital ship, the attacking scouts thus deployed could easily be intercepted and destroyed. I particularly like the fact that the attacking battleship will expend much of its store of munitions beating up on an inert asteroid. While all this is going on, defenders can sneak up behind the attacking battleship and destroy it while its attention is diverted attacking a big chunk of rock.” A ripple of laughter rolled around the table.

Admiral Davidson spoke softly, “Do I understand you to be saying that Soldiers is a deliberate attempt to misinform a potential enemy as to battle tactics and therefore make it vulnerable to defeat by a smaller force?”

“Yes, sir, that is my opinion exactly.”

Admiral Davidson shook his head slowly. His grin was decidedly evil. “We have three of the most brilliant and dangerous renegades ever to graduate from the Academy working together on a planet previously labeled uninhabitable preparing to defend themselves against a force potentially many times their size. I am certainly glad it is not us they are preparing to fight. You know, the strangest part is, my money is on them.”

A murmur of agreement followed his comment. “Commodore Dankese, I am about to violate one of my own policies. Long ago I promised to not interfere in my subordinates’ personnel practices except where I sought the removal of an individual in their command from the service. I will see that this young man gets on the next scheduled ship out headed toward the Saturn shipyard and meets you there. I expect to see you both back here as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you sir,” they both said at the same time.

The admiral turned to his aide and said, “I would have said you lose this one, but she’ll be back

within a year and now she outranks you.”

The aide blushed and said, “Yes sir, thank you sir.” Everyone laughed because his relationship with the recently promoted Commodore was often the subject of station gossip.

Admiral Davidson was glad that the Joint Chiefs had chosen Commodore Dankese for the group. He only worried that she and her new battle group would not return in time to counter the threats he saw looming in the near future.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A FEW MONTHS AFTER SEEING Commodore Dankese off, Admiral Davidson received a request for an audience from a surprising source. The Admiral rose to greet his visitors as they entered his office. "Captain Bardwell," he exclaimed, "to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" Before she could reply he said, "This gorgeous young lady must be your daughter. Certainly takes after her mother!"

Avi smiled, "Yes, sir."

He turned to the girl. "And what is your name, young lady?"

She looked to her mother who nodded. "Rachel, sir."

"How old are you? About fourteen, I would guess."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you know your mother was one of my best students at the Academy?"

"She did say you were one of her favorite instructors."

"And is your father Greg Solomon?"

Rachel's eyes got wide with shock and she looked at her mother. Avi nodded. "Yes, sir, he is."

"I see your parents have taught you well. Please tell him I send my warmest regards." He turned back to Avi. "I must say that was slick picking up your mother from Triton. How is she doing? The trip must have been hard on her."

"She's pretty tough. She did well considering her age." Avi worked hard to hide her astonishment that the Admiral knew about her trip to pick up her mother.

"What would you have done if the picket ship had come within missile range?"

"Sir, I was leaving. I had no intention of engaging anyone. I would have outrun any missile he could have thrown at me. I would not have fired back."

"Very good. I am pleased to see that you have mellowed. When you were at the Academy, you would have fired back. Good. Oh, please sit." He motioned to some chairs.

Once they had taken their seats, he addressed Avi again, "You haven't come to see me since before she was born. Am I safe in assuming you want something? Information perhaps?"

"Yes, sir."

He smiled. "Which is as it should be. What do you need?"

"We are concerned about rumors of Swordsman attacks and wanted to find out the truth. We

also wanted to know what you know about us as a way to judge how much the Swordsmen know about us. I know you both have spies. I need to know what to expect if they decide to attack.”

“Let me bring in some assistance. You’ll get better answers.” He called his aide into the office. When the aide arrived, he said, “This is Captain Bardwell and her daughter Rachel. They are with Captain Solomon. Please tell the ladies what you know about recent Swordsman activities, their own settlement and the potential threats they face.” He turned back to face Avi, “I have promised him many times that I would send him to the Intelligence Service once I retired, but I haven’t made it yet.”

The aide smiled, “He assumes I want to go. The Swordsmen have taken over five planets we know of. Our intelligence seems to indicate that they will take over several more lightly defended planets before they move against anything as heavily defended as yours, although there is no way to know that for certain. On each planet they have eliminated all the original inhabitants and replaced them with faithful members of the church. Their tactics are brutal. This is not to say that Swordsman conquering armies are that much different from other conquering armies only that this one seems especially motivated to clear all the occupants rather than keeping them as slaves as other armies would have done.”

“I heard about a planet in sector 60,” Avi offered.

“Two small settlements of perhaps five hundred residents each. One of lesbians and one of male homosexuals on opposite sides of the planet. They were planning on building vacation resorts. No weapons, no passive defenses. The Swordsmen dropped incendiaries on their settlements in the middle of the night. No survivors.”

“Ugly, and you couldn’t do anything because the planet did not have a sovereign government recognized by the Federation.” Avi commented, “How big is the Swordsman fleet?”

“I knew you would ask that as soon as you walked in the door. Here is a data module with complete specs on every ship in their fleet.”

“Do you have one like this on our fleet?”

“No.”

“You mean you don’t have spies on our planet?” Avi sounded incredulous.

“Well, yes, sort of, we did get spies in but we haven’t been able to get reports out.”

“What about the agricultural inspector? Wasn’t she on your payroll?”

“No, much to my frustration. She kept your secrets. She claimed she saw nothing but the processing plants and farms. She was eloquent on those subjects. She was impressed with your operation.”

“That’s comforting.”

The aide smiled. “We know the real spies are alive because we see them in your videos. One looks like he gained weight. You must be feeding him well and one looks pregnant, so she’s probably

doing well also, but we haven't heard from them since they landed. We don't know what you are doing, but they must be happy. Which brings me to another question. What are you doing that you need so many welding lasers? Now you wouldn't be planning on using them for weapons would you?"

Avi addressed the Admiral. "You know as well as I do, sir, that weapons grade lasers are strictly regulated, and we would not be wanting to play with those would we? Someone could get hurt. Welding lasers are much safer."

The Admiral smiled. "Thank you for not telling me what I thought I didn't know."

"You gentlemen are welcome to join us and find out first hand what we are doing, but once you do, you can't leave. If you decide to forgo the Intelligence Service, you are welcome to come live with us. Oh, and sir, I hear your ex-wives are delightful ladies. They are welcome to come with you."

He smiled, "Yes, they are, you have to meet them before you leave."

"That would be a pleasure sir." She pointed to the data module. "Before I go digging through this, how about hitting the highlights."

"Two battleships, eight destroyers, two tenders, two Class Ten cargo ships and forty some odd scouts. No interdiction craft. 15,000 marines with landing craft. An unknown number of helicopters and surface craft. No fixed wing aircraft. They have never deployed the whole force at one time preferring to keep it in two battle groups each with a single battleship. If they learn you are as heavily armed as I think you are, they may throw the whole thing at you."

"How heavily do you think we are armed?"

"No battleships, eight to ten destroyers, one small cargo ship, one Class 5 cargo ship, forty some odd scouts and three Pirate Interdiction craft. To the best of our knowledge that is the inventory of ships that has gone missing in your neighborhood. We assume you have captured them all. The real wild card is decoys. No one has any idea of how many decoys you have planted. The Swordsmen don't think you have any. We know better."

"But that's only a guess."

"A guess based on Greg's and your records at the Academy. What concerns us is your ground defenses. We don't think you have any. We know you have space borne defenses because of the number of ships gone missing in your area, but I have seen nothing in any of your shipping manifests that would indicate the presence of ground defenses. That worries us. We don't think you can win the battle in space quickly enough to prevent a land assault. We know you can win the space war eventually, but at what cost and without ground defenses, will it be enough?"

"Thank you for the warning, sir."

"Commodore Dankese is assembling a battle group with a new battleship to come to your rescue if you need it. None of us think you will."

"I wish we felt so confident. Any idea when they might move?"



“Soon. That’s all we know.”

“Thanks, I meant what I said about you and your families coming to live with us.” Avi reached out and held her daughter’s hand.

“I appreciate that,” Admiral Davidson responded and then his expression changed. “There is something else you should know that may impact your thinking. The Animal Rescue League provided the initial funding that got your community started. There are dozens other communities they have established. The others have escaped notice by the Swordsmen which is good since none of them are as prepared to defend themselves as you are. No one has provoked Swordsmen anger the way you have. The Rescue League views your settlement as the one that went bad. They cut off your funding as soon as you released Mark Stonebridge’s first book. You are officially on your own. The Rescue League opposes the Swordsmen, but never intended to draw them out to a fight the way you have. They are afraid of what will happen if the Swordsmen win. As soon as Commodore Dankese returns with her battle group I will send them to help defend you, but I fear it may be too late. In the interim, all I can do is provide you with intelligence information. The Federation has buried its head in the sand and will not act on your behalf. I will do what I can for you on my own.”

“What can we do for you to repay the favor?” Avi asked.

“Kick the shit out of them.”

“That is the plan, sir.”

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“WE HAVE MADE SERIOUS miscalculations,” Avi told Greg when she returned. “We assumed that the battles would all be in space. If the Marines get through to the planet’s surface, that will not be true. We did not consider the helicopters. We also did not consider aerial bombardment from spacecraft or the use of incendiaries. We have left ourselves vulnerable.”

“Let’s call a meeting of the council and discuss this with them. We need their input as to how to proceed.”

“Greg, there is something else. We are a mistake.”

“Explain that.”

“The Animal Rescue League never intended for us to fight the Swordsmen. They wanted us to live our lives in hiding under the Swordsmen radar and not provoke them. We are on our own. We cannot count on support from anyone.”

Greg paused for a moment before answering. He spoke thoughtfully, “I always knew that in the end we would stand alone. In the early days I thought I could leave all this and life would go back to normal, but I was wrong. Many times I prepared to flee and as many times I decided to stay. There was no turning back once we published Mark’s book and I agreed to that. We could either have rolled over and hid or drawn them out. I think those who try to escape Swordsmen attention will eventually fail and will need to face them. I think those people that feel they can bargain with the Swordsmen have as much chance of success as Quisling did with Hitler. I chose to be the aggressor from the outset. They would find us and kill us sooner or later. This way we will kill more of them than they kill of us. Someone has to draw the line in the sand and stop their advance. We drew the line when we published Mark’s book. That was the point of no return. We are too far along now to do anything but prepare for the coming battle. We will beat them because we have no choice.”

Representatives came to the assembly from all the inhabited areas of the planet. It took two days to bring them together. The planet’s population was about 5,000, and it was not practical to bring them together in one place. Avi quickly gave the assembly a report on what she had learned and handed out printed copies of the Intelligence reports which included internal Swordsman memos and documents with first hand accounts of their conquests. The “scorched earth” policy of Swordsman conquests was detailed with frightening clarity. When she finished her report, she asked for questions.

“How long before they attack?” one man asked from the back.

“There is no way to know. Intelligence’s best guess was at least six months,” Avi replied.

“Will we have warning?” another asked.

“Doubt it. The first we will know is when they show up on our satellite sensors,” Avi said.

“Won’t that be too late?”

“Not if we are already deployed in position,” Avi answered.

“What about the Marines? What is your plan?”

Greg stood up and took the floor. “We don’t have a plan. That is why we called this meeting. Tonight, here and now, we need to develop a plan to deal with up to 15,000 Marines, their helicopters and whatever incendiaries they might lob at us.”

“Or more likely at US since you and all the women will be flying around in space out of harm’s way!” one man groused.

Sebastian stood to be recognized. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I too, have chafed at the thought that we would be defended almost entirely by women. It is not that I don’t trust them or think they should be left at home to pine while their men fought and died, but I think we should fight side by side together to defend what we all love.” There was a round of applause.

Sebastian continued, “I am a former Army Ranger. Until right now I have not been proud of that fact. There are five other former Army Rangers on this planet. We may not know how to conduct warfare in space, but we damn sure know how to do it on the ground.” There was another round of applause.

“We have all learned a lot from Greg, Avi and Myra. I think it is time we took those lessons and applied them to the ground war we are about to fight.”

Several people sat in silent awe. This was the most Sebastian had said in public in years.

“One of the things we have learned from the games we played is how to use decoys. Rangers know all about camouflage and hiding what is there, but what Greg has shown us is how to draw the enemy to a place where there is nothing so we have the advantage and can do battle on our terms. I suggest we immediately begin building decoys and traps.”

Timmy stood. “You know that a herd of stampeding buffalo is a force to be reckoned with.”

“Exactly the kind of thinking we need,” Sebastian replied. “We know our planet and its resources better than anyone. We know what natural formations can be turned to our advantage. One thing we know about Marines is that they need something to attack. In order to concentrate them in small areas where our forces can do the most good we need to provide them with what appear to be hardened targets that conceal traps and defensive installations.”

Several of the men jumped up and started talking at the same time. They had ideas for defensive installations and locations with tactical advantages.

One of the women stood. “What about the babies? How will they be safe if we are fire bombed? None of our houses will withstand a deliberate fire.”

One of the other women stood. “Can we take all the children, pregnant women and non-combatants off planet somewhere?”

A man stood. “What about the depot at New St. Louis, isn’t that safe?”

Greg held up his hand. "The first question is how many people we will need to transport. The second is how long they will need to be gone. The third is how many ships we will have available to transport them and how many pilots we will need to fly those ships. Once we answer those questions we will know what we can and cannot do about the children."

Sebastian held his hand up for recognition. "All of our settlements are in the Northern Hemisphere. The crops are planted. If the Intelligence Service is correct in their estimate, the Swordsmen will be attacking at the worst possible time to launch such an offensive. No sane military commander launches a land campaign in winter."

"Sebastian, I'm not sure that's true," Greg contradicted.

Sebastian stared at him.

Greg continued. "The Swordsmen's goal is to eliminate the existing population. In the summer even if the houses were bombed out, the population could survive in the forests for a long time. In the winter that is not necessarily true. We need to keep in mind that ethnic cleansing is part of their plan. They have little respect for human life, either ours or those of the hired guns they have working for them. A winter assault is entirely possible. Most of the other attacks have occurred in winter."

"Perhaps you're right," Sebastian agreed. "It is possible that they will try to establish a beachhead in the Southern Hemisphere, but then they would need surface craft to transport the troops here. I understand Greg's point, but my guess is they will wait until spring. That gives us some time. I suggest that Greg take his crews now and spend the time we have left in training exercises. I will take all the men with me and develop a land war strategy. I would suggest that Justine Donnelly and Dr. Miller address the issues of our non-combatants."

A chorus of agreement rose from the crowd.

Dr. Miller rose. "I concur. I will take Sebastian's suggestion as a motion before the group. Do I have a second?"

Several voices offered seconds.

"All in favor?"

A chorus of "Aye" arose from the group.

"All opposed?"

Silence.

"Carried."

Sebastian rose again. "One more thing. I would like to keep the two shuttles and the cargo tug for close air support. We can equip them with lasers so they can shoot down any helicopters we might face."

There was a moment of silence before Greg said, "I think that decision should be made by their pilots."

Katherine rose, "We'll stay."

Blondie rose, "We'll stay."

"That leaves Wendy and Rachel to fly the cargo ship with the children," Avi said.

Colleen and Sean were sitting with Wendy and Rachel at the back of the room. Rachel shot to her feet and shouted out, "No way in Hell! We fly with you! We fight with you!" Rachel and Wendy stormed forward.

"You will do as you are told!" Greg shouted back.

"Uh, no, Dad," Wendy said calmly, "this time it doesn't work that way."

Rose laughed quietly with a "Cheshire Cat" grin on her face.

The four teenagers instantly had the entire group's attention as they advanced on the podium.

"Dad and Mom," Wendy continued, "under the terms of Directive Eight, we had the cargo ship reprogram every ship in our fleet. None of them will fly without full combat ready crews effective right now." She brought her hand-held communicator to her lips. "Activate combat readiness."

"Combat readiness activated," the computer responded in Greg's voice.

The room exploded in laughter as Greg and Avi fumed.

"What's so funny?" Wendy asked.

As soon as he could catch his breath, Dr. Miller answered, "You young ladies have out-smarted two of the smartest people on the planet! Right on!"

Myra sputtered in anger a moment and asked, "Did you mess with my ship?"

Rachel said, "I believe she said something about every ship in the fleet. That would include yours and I think Jennifer Cartier would be heartbroken if you left her behind considering all you have been through."

Myra caught Jennifer's eye and softened. "I guess you're right."

"You see," Wendy explained. "The three of you have the most incredible case of macho. In simulations, any pair of us," she pointed to Colleen and Sean as well as Rachel, "can beat the daylights out of any one of you flying alone. When we fly as pairs, we are less vulnerable. We showed the computer the simulation results, and it concurred. It invoked Directive Eight at our request."

Dr. Miller wiped the laughter tears from his eyes. "What else have you ladies planned?"

"Actually Sean and Colleen had a lot to do with it, too. They deserve some of the credit."

"So noted," Dr. Miller said.

"Sean and his Dad have been discussing how to defend the planet from the ground. We agree with Sean he should stay and keep his Dad from doing something stupid like forgetting to eat which he

does when he gets involved with a project. Colleen and Helen have lots of hours in the cargo tug and we figured that was where they would wind up.”

Sebastian stood and said, “I would be proud to have my son fight by my side! Our family has a long and proud tradition of fathers and sons fighting shoulder to shoulder.” Sean beamed.

Helen said, “Okay, kid, you’re on!” Colleen stood by her side.

The group split into areas of responsibilities and worked out the plans for their self-defense.

Sebastian and his team began building decoys and defensible positions. The Swordsmen Marines would first look for command and control locations so they built several locations bristling with rotating radar dishes and antennas where the attacking helicopters would have to fly into a canyon to reach the decoy. Along both sides of the canyon they placed anti-aircraft positions capable of shooting down the helicopters flying in for the attack.

They built several armored divisions worth of decoys placed in strategic positions where they could trap the Marines and lob incendiaries into their midst. They moved as much of the real population as they could into caves out of harm’s way. They built decoy villages. Many of the empty cargo containers were filled with volatile liquids and armed with proximity fuses.

They strung razor wire across the mouths of as many rivers as they could. They built remote controlled lasers into hillsides and on the tops of mountains. They trained as many of their people as they could on hand-to-hand combat and the use of fire arms.

The work continued at a feverish pace through the summer.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

COMMODORE DANKESE did not wait for her ship to be completely finished before departing the shipyard. In spite of the violent objections of the shipyard station chief, once the propulsion, weapons, communications and life support systems had been certified, she lit the candle, and with her support craft arrayed around her, she left. She and her crew slept in sleeping bags commandeered from the Marine depot until they could assemble the parts for their bunks which were still in their shipping containers in the munitions holds. They ate combat rations while they built the galley and mess halls. She had less than half her normal compliment of missiles, but she had the latest most powerful and accurate models. Her hope was that she would reach her destination before the Swordsmen attacked and not after. She was short crew, but knew she could pick up "retread" retirees when she arrived at New St. Louis. Her courier missile to Commodore Davidson detailed her needs.

Myra and Jennifer were on patrol when the Space Force courier missile arrived addressed to Greg. It appeared to be official and they quickly brought it to him. He read the message after his data assistant decoded it. The harvest was in, and the weather in the Northern Hemisphere was turning cold. Battles fought in space are not dependent on the weather, and the Swordsmen were coming.

"Three weeks," he told the assembled group as soon as everyone could be gathered. "The Space Force's spy got a courier missile off to Admiral Davidson. Their best guess is an estimated time of arrival of three weeks from today."

Sebastian said, "We're almost ready."

Three days later, Greg's cargo ship left with about two hundred women and children. Monique and Angelina piloted the smaller cargo ship out of the system with its load of women and children a day later. Both ships set course for New St. Louis. Dormitories had been built out of old cargo containers and accommodations had been made for the safe transport of the sensitive cargo.

The day after Greg's cargo ship left, the defenders took their stations and settled in to wait.

Commodore Dankese arrived at New St. Louis on the day Intelligence predicted that the Swordsmen would arrive at Homestead. She was greeted by a cryptic encoded message from Admiral Davidson. "The battle may already have started. Get loaded, and get out!" Commodore Dankese frantically prepared her battle group.

The same day as Commodore Dankese arrived at New St. Louis, exactly three weeks after the courier missile arrived at Homestead with its warning of the impending attack, the first of the Swordsmen ships appeared on Homestead's most remote sensors. Arriving one at time over a period of several days, they assembled in three groups well out of range of anything that any system defender could throw at them.

Two days after Commodore Dankese's group arrived at New St. Louis, Monique and Angelina arrived with the first load of non-combatants. Commodore Dankese called the two pilots to her ship so they could brief her on the situation at Homestead. She did not like what she heard. Within hours of the briefing, the battle group departed New St. Louis for Homestead.

As they assembled their force, the Swordsmen stayed out of range of the Homestead defense net probing it electronically for weaknesses. For a week they sat there, out of range of attack but not out of

observation.

Greg understood the Swordsman strategy. It was a siege strategy as old as the Roman Empire. The attacker chooses the moment. Cut off from reinforcements, the defender waits in an energy draining continuous state of high alert for the attack to begin. The mental battle before the actual attack favors the attacker. By the time the attack finally happens, the defender's forces are exhausted from the tension of standing high watches in anticipation while the attacker's forces, rested after their journey, are primed for the attack. Additionally, the time sitting parked allows for the accumulation of intelligence information that would be important as the battle progressed. Greg's entire fleet was deployed in the asteroid belt or on the surfaces of system's many small moons. They were hidden by their hosts from the Swordsmen's sensors, but not from communication with the planet.

What appeared to be a discarded cargo container slowly drifted in the direction of the Swordsmen's fleet. One of a couple dozen deployed around the system, it assessed the fleet and sent its data home. Greg's worst fears were realized. They had sent the entire fleet. They were taking no chances. They had deployed two battleships where Greg's fleet had none. Each of these battleships carried more fire power than Greg's entire fleet put together. The Swordsmen had eight destroyers so at least those were evenly matched. They had three times as many scouts as he did, but they had no pirate interdiction craft and Greg had three. The P I ships could account for more than their share of the lightly armed scouts. The Swordsman ships were arrayed in two battle groups. The third group, unattended by armed spacecraft, included thirty troop transports with two Class Ten cargo ships. Greg doubted that these transports were themselves unarmed, but he was surprised that there was no escort for them. Greg mulled the possible strategies of this arrangement.

Rachel and Greg shared the duties of watching the sensors and keeping guard while the rest of the crews in their small battle group slept as much as they could. Greg fretted over their defense plan and mentally reexamined every detail. One of his gravest concerns was the P I ships' missile inventory. The P I ships normally carried twelve programmable missiles mounted internally that fired through four tubes in the ship's nose. They also carried twelve shorter range less expensive missiles mounted externally. These externally mounted missiles could only be carried in space since they would be ripped out of their mounts on atmospheric reentry. These were the missiles that made Greg's reputation as a pirate killer. They were the ideal weapon to use immediately following a short hyper jump. The missiles were not particularly smart, but they were so heavy that they generally destroyed anything they hit. A single well-placed missile could destroy one of the flimsy pirate ships. Greg's piloting ability was exemplary and more than compensated for his merely adequate marksmanship. It had not been unusual for Greg to rout a substantial pirate force using only his lasers and the externally mounted missiles returning to base with his full inventory of internally mounted missiles intact. Greg would have gladly accepted the limitations of these "dumb" missiles if he had been able to procure any. Of all the various types of missiles they needed to equip all the various types of ships in their diverse fleet, this was the only missile they had not been able to buy, beg, borrow or steal. Greg hoped that what they had would do the job.

"Dad, you know, I'll bet the plan is to send the two battle groups in first and while we're busy with them send the Marines wherever we aren't."

"Probably right," Greg replied.



“Yup. Oh, look. Movement.”

“Really?”

Imitating a sports announcer, Rachel sang out, “Ladies and Gentlemen, we have backfield in motion. It’s show time! Sound battle stations.”

“ETA?”

“Two hours.”

“Roger that! Alert the others.”

“They already know.”

Suddenly Greg heard a booming noise from behind his seat. It took him a few seconds to realize it was music. “What the hell is that?”

“Techno, late twentieth century, popular in America and Europe for dancing and exercising. Do you like it?”

“Not especially. I don’t usually play music when I go into battle. Somehow it just seems a little, shall we say, unprofessional.”

“So? I always use it in the simulators. It helps keep my attention on what I’m doing and gives me rhythm.”

“I never heard it before.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I always wore my phones in the simulators. I have it on the speakers now. I don’t want to risk anything else on my head that might snag and cause me to miss something. Besides, just having the music in my phones doesn’t give me the feel of the beat.”

“Do you have something a little less abusive?”

“Gee, Dad, I thought you of all people would understand. You always have music going.”

“Well, I don’t. We do not listen to heavy metal when we go into battle.”

“They do in the movies.”

“This is not the movies!”

“Okay Dad! Sheesh! How’s this?” A wave of strings supported by a full orchestra inundated the cabin.

“What’s that?”

“Yanni. Same time period. Or would you prefer this?” The theme from Star Wars blasted out of the speakers.

“Or this?” The 1812 overture cut in.

“I give up. Play what you want, just don’t play so loud we can’t talk to each other.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Greg mentally prepared himself for the battle ahead to the thumping beat of a piece of music designed to entertain drugged out dancers who partied through the night. He often wondered what Rachel was thinking, but listening to her singing softly with the music only made him worry more. They had done well together in training exercises and she had been successful in skirmishes with pirates, but nothing ever goes exactly as planned in a real battle. It is the ability to deal with that fact that is often the difference between victory and defeat.

Avi and Wendy sat calmly waiting a distance from where Greg and Rachel were. They each checked their instruments a dozen times. They reminisced about childhood memories. They told funny stories and tried to keep each other from panicking. Unlike Greg who enjoyed the strategic maneuvering, the tactics and the logic of the battles, Avi did not. For Greg, winning in combat was an affirmation of the rightness of everything he believed. For Avi, battles were personal. For Greg warfare was cold. For Avi it was hot and visceral. To Greg, ships were either friend or foe. To Avi the enemies had names and faces and she killed them with malice of forethought and a passion that frightened her. She enjoyed killing. There was an emotional reaction inside her that bothered her when she went into battle. It was as though another personality took over. This other personality did not fit with her image of herself. The calm, rational person she wanted to be was replaced by an angry belligerent Amazon who thought nothing of killing anything that blocked her path. Even more than thinking nothing of it, the Amazon in her enjoyed the power, the ability to decide who lived and who died. This was the woman who could walk onto a ship with lasers firing and single handed clear it of pirates. This was the woman who sought revenge for all the wrongs done to women for all of history. This was the woman who kept the other Avi alive in combat. Avi lived in fear that one day the Amazon would appear and never go away. Greg understood the fear. He had no idea what he would do if the Amazon became permanent, but he knew that he would probably be the only one who could do anything if it happened.

Wendy, too, understood the tension her mother tried to keep hidden, and that was one of the reasons she was with her mother and Rachel was with her father.

Sixteen Swordsman scouts lead the assault. They broke into groups and headed directly for the four decoy battleships. Accurately predicting the Swordsman battle strategy based on the combat simulations Greg had created specifically for this purpose, computer controlled lasers mounted on the decoys and on the surrounding asteroids quickly dispatched the entire first wave of scouts. Some missiles fired from the scouts did get through to the decoys, but exploded harmlessly on the surface of the rock.

The defenders’ piloted ships held their positions waiting to see if the decoys worked. It appeared that they had.

Sixteen of the Swordsmen’s lightest craft were gone, and the defenders had not fired a single missile. Rachel quietly sang to herself. Wendy drummed her fingers on her armrest. Avi scanned her displays for signs of something the sensors deployed around the system might have missed. Greg sat calmly, his brain in neutral and waited like a powerful machine with its engine idling. Myra and Jennifer talked through tactics and strategy as they waited. Jennifer had turned out to be an excellent weapons control officer. She and Myra had confidence in each other.

The Swordsman destroyers followed next. Intending to slide around to what they thought was the undefended back side of the four decoy battleships, they traveled exactly where Greg had hoped they would go. The Homestead destroyers, most captained by the original group of women rescued

from the pirate supply depot that was now New St. Louis, fell in behind the advancing destroyers as they sailed by the defenders' hiding places and gave chase. Attempting to dodge the lasers the women threw at them, the Swordsman destroyers weaved through the asteroid belt traveling further and further away from the decoys.

The dog fight that ensued was reminiscent of World War I biplanes. Each of the Homestead destroyers had its own radio frequency. These were combined by a repeater and rebroadcast. Greg was pleased to hear the women talking to each other as they worked together in teams of two ships against each of the invaders. He heard shouts of joy as two of the enemy destroyers slammed into asteroids attempting to avoid the missiles and lasers thrown at them. He heard cries of dismay as one of his own destroyers was hit and exploded. He was pleasantly surprised at how quickly they regrouped in response to the changes in strength levels. This was their first battle, and they were fighting against men who had seen battle before. There was something to be said for the advantage one had defending one's home.

Greg's attention to the destroyer battle was diverted by the entry of the battleships into the action. One of the battleships headed directly for the decoy nearest his position. It rolled so its mushroom top faced the decoy. Its sensitive propulsion equipment faced away into space. It pummeled the decoy with lasers, but did not fire any missiles. The decoy's lasers had no apparent effect on the battleship.

Greg and Rachel moved through the asteroids to a position where they could toss some missiles into the battleship's back side when suddenly the battleship ceased firing and rolled in their direction.

"Oh, shit," Rachel said, "He's figured it out. He's coming after us."

"Prepare to hyper," Greg said.

"Fire the rock first!"

"We don't have time!"

"Fire the god damn rock! Dad!"

Greg punched a button on his console. Solid fueled rocket motors carved out of the rock of the asteroid itself ignited and pushed the asteroid which had served as the decoy toward the Swordsman's battleship. It quickly gained speed as the Swordsman battleship turned its attention to Greg and Rachel's ship. Lasers sliced the asteroids all around them preventing their escape. Unable to fire back or to move from the hidden side of the asteroid because any movement would put them in the line of fire from the battleship, they waited for the rest of the advancing Swordsman scouts to jump in and assault their position.

Aware of the decoy's movement, the Homestead ships from Greg's squadron retreated and rejoined the battle in other places. They knew that if they were in the vicinity when the rock hit the battleship, the resulting explosion would kill them as well.

Stripped of the wood and fabric framework that made the asteroid look like a battleship, the asteroid looked no more threatening than a baked potato as it accelerated toward the Swordsman battleship. Had it only been a rocket propelled rock, it could not have done serious damage to the battleship, but it was not just a rock. In response to a proximity sensor, at a distance of less than a twenty kilometers, a nuclear warhead embedded in the core of the asteroid detonated. Huge chunks of

rock hurled through space and ripped through the battleship's armor.

Greg scanned his sensors. The battleship was wounded, but not dead. It was leaking air and there were secondary explosions on the ship but it was still firing and at least some of its missile batteries seemed intact. It was still a serious threat. The decoy had failed to disable the battleship. Even damaged, if the battleship reached the planet, it could still devastate anything it could see.

"Well, Dad, I guess it's up the pipes." Rachel did not sound happy.

"I guess. You ready?"

Greg fired his engines and raced through the gaps where the battleship's lasers still fired although with less coordination than before.

As they fled through the asteroid field, trying to get behind the battleship now continuing its rotation toward them, they were attacked by the scout craft which had not previously entered the battle. Rachel sat at her station operating twelve lasers mounted on four pods arrayed around the ship's mid section.

Rachel alternated between softly singing to her self and muttering obscenities. After one obscenity Greg asked, "What is going on back there?"

"Dad, just drive. Keep your hands on the wheel and let me worry about this."

Greg saw a laser impact an asteroid to his right and heard another obscenity. He was about to comment when Rachel shouted, "Loop left! Now!"

Greg spun the ship around and kicked the engines to full, the real full, not the full the pilot's manuals approved, but the full the engineers said was possible but not sustainable. His forward motion translated into an arc and then to a circle as they looped around an asteroid. A missile passed harmlessly into space where they had been a moment earlier.

They came up behind the scout ship that had been chasing them, and Rachel fired a single missile. "Loop right! Now!"

The missile followed the heat of the scout's engines, and with a silent series of bright flashes, turned it into so much debris floating in the asteroid field. Another missile narrowly missed them.

Rachel was talking to the enemy ships as if her words could be heard. Constantly firing the lasers, she was inflicting damage on their pursuers, but none of it was fatal. Greg and Rachel had known that once they fired the rock, they would be alone. There was no point in risking any of the Homestead ships in the expanding field of debris that would follow the detonation of the asteroid's bomb. So once the asteroid started to move, they were ordered to retreat. Greg and Rachel were left alone to stop the battleship.

Four Swordsman scouts followed them through the asteroid field. The battleship maintained its high rate of fire as they attempted to get out of its field of vision. Using asteroids for cover could only last so long. Rachel dropped mines as they dodged the incoming lasers. She was able to kill two of the scouts with the mines. She stopped one with her lasers. They escaped the last one by flying through a hole in an asteroid only slightly larger than their span and leaving a mine in the hole. The battleship continued to turn and fire as it did. The asteroids absorbed the shots that did not pass by them.

“Load all tubes. Program for heat seeking,” Greg said.

“All tubes loaded,” Rachel replied.

“Prepare to hyper.”

“Hyper ready.”

Rachel knew exactly what her father was doing. Greg had pulled this move in simulations, but was successful less than half the time. Ninety five percent of the time they achieved the objective. Killing the battleship was not the problem. Getting away with it was. In the simulations they rarely escaped alive. If it was her time, it was her time.

They jumped into hyper drive from the midst of the asteroid field. Rachel assumed that her father had seen a clear path to beyond the asteroid field. Collision with an asteroid during the transition to hyper would be a spectacular, if not particularly welcomed, event. Rachel inflated the high G support structures in her suit. Without the suit's support, the G forces of the sudden acceleration and the transition would cause her to black out if the blood in her body flowed away from her head. She controlled her breathing just as she heard her father control his. The ride was as brutal as she expected. The quick transitions into and out of hyper were as painful as she remembered. Normal transitions were uncomfortable, but this hurt! Her displays were blank while they were in hyper and she longed for information, any information, about what was going on outside.

Suddenly her displays cleared. Ignoring the residual pain, she scanned her displays. They were inside the heat cone of the battleship's propulsion system. Fortunately it was not driving the ship forward because it was rotating trying to fire on them. Greg had dropped them too close!

“Fire!” he shouted. “Fire! Fire! Fire!”

Rachel smashed all four of her firing buttons. Four missiles leaped from their tubes.

“Reload!”

Four more missiles slid into their tubes as lasers sliced the space behind them. They were too close to the ship for the lasers to hit them, but a full throttle acceleration from the battleship would roast them just as quickly, but such an acceleration would send the battleship slamming into the asteroids.

“Reloaded.”

“Fire!”

Four more missiles leaped from their tubes just as the first volley found their targets. Greg spun the ship so it pointed away from the battleship and punched into hyper drive. The second volley penetrated the gaps in the battleship's armor opened by the first volley of missiles and exploded inside the battleship's munitions magazines. The wave of gas from the exploding ship overtook them as they frantically raced away, but did no damage. While they had destroyed the ship, they had not detonated the reactors for had they done so, the explosion would have been more violent, and they would not have survived that explosion. One battleship was out of action. Secondary internal explosions ripped the battleship apart sealing its fate. One battleship remained.

Greg and Rachel dropped out of hyper drive to assess their current battle status. They had lost four of their eight destroyers. The Swordsmen had lost six of their eight. The remaining Swordsman destroyers were still heavily engaged and it appeared as if they had suffered damage. None of the

remaining Homestead destroyers appeared to be damaged although one had expended all its missiles. The Swordsman scouts Greg could find were engaged in uneven conflict significantly outnumbered by the Homestead scouts. Avi and Wendy had joined the dogfight against the destroyers.

Rachel had been right, while the Homestead space fleet was dealing with the armed vessels, the Marines had slipped through unopposed by manned ships. As he searched for the remaining invaders, Greg tried to evaluate how well another of his decoys had worked. He had placed cargo containers equipped with sensing equipment and lasers in orbit around the planet. The containers had been equipped with self destruct charges that would explode on proximity to a potential target. It had been his hope that these would catch at least some of the Marine transport craft before they were able to drop their troops to the surface. These diabolical devices had clearly taken their toll on the invaders. Of the 15,000 Marines that had been deployed to the planet, perhaps a third of them had been stopped by Greg's "Q" containers. Wreckage of troop transports littered the space around the planet. Even after eliminating a third of the invasion force, 10,000 Swordsman Marines were still headed for the surface.

The second battleship bored steadfastly toward the planet. It ignored the decoys and headed straight in. Greg and Rachel looked at it in dismay. They had expended all their missiles on the first one. Most frightening was the fact that so many of the Marines had broken through. At this point they could not chase after the advancing Marines without being sitting ducks for the second battleship.

"Dad? What do we do now? We have to stop that ship."

"I don't know."

Rachel scanned her displays. "There is nothing out here, maybe we should go after the Marines and take our chances."

Greg started to plot the course when Rachel shouted, "Dad! Myra's on the pipes! Myra's going up the pipes!"

Greg punched up the appropriate display.

"Four away!" Rachel shouted. "Get out of there! You're too close!" There was a five second pause.

"Four more away!" Rachel shouted again. "Hits! I'm showing hits! Get out! Myra!"

Rachel continued to scream for Myra to get out. "Myra! What are you doing? Four more away!"

The third volley followed the first two into the ship's propulsion system. A few seconds after the third volley found its mark, a huge ball of nuclear energy engulfed the battleship and Myra's ship leaving a rapidly expanding plasma of gas and debris.

Rachel started to cry and scream Myra's name over and over.

Greg calmly said, "Rachel, Myra knew what she was doing."

"I know," she sniffed, "but what about Jennifer?"

"She fired the missiles, didn't she?"

"Yes."

“They both knew the risks. We took the same risk didn't we?”

“Yes, but we lived.”

“Only just barely.”

“I guess you're right.”

“Let's go kill us some Marines.”

“Yes, Dad, for Myra.”

“For all of us.”

Greg and Rachel found one troop transport that had not dropped its Marines. Alone and undefended, it orbited the planet waiting to send reinforcements wherever they might be needed. Greg and Rachel attacked it and found it had only a small laser battery to fend them off. Armed only with their lasers, having expended the last of their missiles on the battleship, they pummeled the troop ship with all twelve of their lasers until they finally detonated the reactor. A missile would have been more merciful in that it would have been faster, but the result was the same.

“Rachel, five hundred men just died. Five hundred men with mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, some with wives and children. Does it bring Myra back?”

“No.”

“War should not be about killing. It should be about living.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Let's go in. It's not over yet.”

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DAWN SHOWED AS A SLIM band of light on the horizon. Sean and Sebastian stood on a low hill and watched the Swordsman Marine transports parachute into the ocean. They watched through their binoculars as the containers splashed down a few kilometers off the coast. Had this been an assault of one army versus another on the same planet, the first blows would have been struck by high flying aircraft. Fortunately, as far as Sebastian was concerned, spacecraft that could survive entry into the atmosphere were so hard to maneuver in the air that they were worthless as tactical weapons. Sebastian's planned use of the shuttles and the cargo tug relied on deploying them in their airborne and not space going configurations. Even the swing wing assault fighters capable of entering a planet's atmosphere from space had proved so difficult to pilot in ground support applications that few commanders were willing to risk their troops on the same battlefield with them. The assault fighters could be effective against a highly developed planet with large numbers of hard targets, but as spread out as this population was, the aircraft were of little use. As father and son watched, the assault began in the manner Sebastian expected that it might.

As Sebastian had hoped, a third of the Swordsman Marines diverted to the decoy sites in the Southern Hemisphere. The reports he was hearing from observers secreted in hardened bunkers at the decoy sites were encouraging. Each decoy site had a single operator who manipulated the site's defenses by remote control. Each site had been carefully planned so that even after it fell and was over run by Swordsmen, the lone operator had an escape path. Most of the control suites had been built into naturally occurring caves. The control suites had been rigged with explosives which the retreating operator would detonate as they left sealing off the route they had just used to escape. They would then proceed through the caves to a camouflaged exit some of which were a kilometer away from the decoy site. The escape routes were provided with food and water to enable the retreating decoy operator to stay hidden for three days after their position fell. They were then to listen to radio traffic before emerging from their hiding places to be certain that they were not in danger. Each Swordsman Marine that attacked one of the decoy sites was one who would not be able to attack the real population centers in the Northern Hemisphere. Even given the numbers of Marines thus diverted, the size of the force descending through the atmosphere was daunting.

Sebastian sorely missed having access to an air force. The few small fixed wing aircraft they had other than the shuttles were too slow and too small to carry any real weapons. Flying them against the Swordsman helicopters would be suicide with no tactical benefit. He left them parked in valleys all over the Southern Hemisphere as a lure to entice Swordsmen to attack heavily armed decoy sites. At least his ground laser batteries had made short work of the aerial recon drones. Unlike a missile, a laser had no limit on its effective range and a welding laser was just as capable of destroying a drone as a weapon laser.

Perhaps what worried Sebastian the most was not the quantity of the Marines, but rather the quality of their training. He knew that a single Army Ranger could hold his own against a larger force of regular infantry personnel. It remained to be seen how well trained these Swordsman Marines were and how effective a force they would turn out to be. Sebastian's combat experience with religiously motivated opponents was mixed. Some were as well trained as any Ranger. Some were horrendously inadequately trained by officers blinded by their zealotry willing to shed the blood of their comrades in arms for their cause. Others were like drug addicts who would continue to fight because their brain had not been able to tell their body that they were dead. The problem was that one frequently found all types in the same squad. As much as he was concerned about those types of soldiers, there was yet



another who worried him even more and that was the one who killed for the fun of it. He had traded fire with soldiers for whom hunting humans was the ultimate sport. They enjoyed killing. It was like a drug. They were by far and away the most dangerous predators that ever existed and Sebastian knew that some of them would be landing on his planet. Drawn by blood lust to the Swordsmen' Marines, knowing they would see plenty of battles, these thrill killers would be the toughest to deal with especially since they often split themselves off from the main units and ranged through the combat zone independently.

No sooner had the first of the Marines splashed into the water than the indigenous sea life attacked them. Sebastian had wondered how much protection these ferocious creatures they called "home-sharks" because of their resemblance to terrestrial sharks would provide. He knew that the Marines would have to drop their cargo containers and troop transports into the water, and he depended on the home-sharks to reduce the force that got to the land. The presence of these large, aggressive predators with strong territorial instincts was one of the reasons the settlers did not fish the ocean. Anything their size or larger entering their territory was vulnerable to vicious attack. These predators did not just kill to eat. They killed to defend their territory. These animals were so aggressive, a conventionally armed Marine without a protective mesh over their wet suit did not stand a chance. Fortunately for the settlers, these animals only lived in the salt water and did not enter the fresh water of the rivers or lakes. They would attack a shuttle if it stayed still long enough. The only reason the shuttles could take off and land on the water without interference was the speed with which they moved.

The water roiled as more and more of the sharks rallied to the defense of their territory when members of their species were killed by the Swordsman Marines. Underwater microphones placed to detect Swordsman submarines should they have brought any picked up the fourteen hertz thumping that was the sharks' distress call and the twenty hertz blast that was their call to battle. Entire colonies of these fearsome animals swam aggressively to join the conflict as the Marines shot and killed them in wholesale lots. The animals might have suffered greater numbers of casualties, but the Marines lost complete companies of soldiers to the sharks' razor sharp teeth. The sea battle turned the water dark red as human and sea creature alike sustained heavy losses. Some of the cargo containers folded open to form floating helicopter launch platforms. Desperate to escape the sea monsters, the Marines climbed aboard these platforms as soon as the helicopters had been launched. The helicopters headed directly inland and initiated their attacks on the decoy command and control centers.

Moving to their camouflaged observation post, Sebastian and Sean watched as the attack began in earnest. The Marines launched rubber inflatable craft and headed for the shore. The sharks continued to attack in spite of their rapidly dwindling numbers. They attacked the inflatable boats and dumped their passengers into the water where the annihilation continued. In preparation for this portion of the attack, the settlers had stretched razor wire across the bays and rivers. Some of the boats were halted by the wire, but it was quickly cut and pulled aside. Even so, some of the passengers in the stopped craft were dumped into the water where they were again set upon by the indigenous predators. Marines and sea life alike paid a horrendous toll fighting for control of the water off shore of the beach where the settlers had first landed in their shuttles.

The helicopters attacked anything that looked like communications or sensing equipment. They fired missiles at radar domes and radio towers. They used their lasers to cut power lines. The helicopters coordinated their attacks on anything that fired at them. Operating in teams of two, the helicopters carried sensors that could determine the source of any laser aimed at them. Returning fire with their lasers and with missiles, they were brutally effective in neutralizing the anti-aircraft positions. Within the first four hours of battle, the Swordsmen had disabled all of the anti-aircraft

defenses with the loss of only five helicopters. Of the downed helicopters, two of the crews had survived the crashes.

The settlers sustained heavy losses of equipment at the Southern Hemisphere decoy sites and in the anti-aircraft positions. Within the first six hours of battle, the entire Southern Hemisphere defensive network had fallen. All of the decoy operators had managed to escape out the “back door” and none had been captured. The conquest of the Southern Hemisphere had been expensive for the Swordsmen, but it had been successful. All the decoy sites had been neutralized.

The attack developed along the pattern Sebastian recognized as typical of Swordsman strategy. They attacked the smaller outposts first. Isolated farms were the first targets. The farm houses had been built with deep basements which were originally intended as storm shelters. Most of these had been expanded to storerooms because that was the only way to keep the home-coons from raiding the stored foodstuffs. The home-coons had thwarted every other tactic to keep them at bay. The entrances to these store rooms remained a single tightly locked trap door because intense storms did occasionally rip houses off their foundations and the store room was the only place where the family could be sure of being safe. undefended farms were firebombed by air from the helicopters. Those residents who were hidden in their shelters generally survived the attack with the sacrifice of their house and barns.

Where the residents had resolved to fight to defend their property, they were slaughtered wholesale often in face-to-face combat and their buildings burned to the ground. Lacking a good surface to air missile, the settlers could only use small arms fire and lasers against the rampaging helicopters. Even the most powerful rifles were unable to penetrate the armored bottoms of the combat helicopters. The ravaging forces leveled everything in their path. They were not stopped by moats full of flammable liquids or by camouflaged pits filled with sharp sticks. Man made avalanches slowed them down, but they climbed over the bodies of their dead comrades like ants in pursuit of chocolate. The subsonic transducers mounted on the rock walls of the mountains, intended to take advantage of the ability of certain sub sonic frequencies to induce unreasoning fear worked, but only for a short time. More like locusts than humans, they advanced with a determination borne of zealotry. Those families that hid in the shelters survived. Those that stayed above ground did not.

Doug Marlin had volunteered to operate one of the Southern Hemisphere positions. When the assault began, he waited as he'd been instructed until the Marines had disembarked from the transports and were well within range before opening fire. His lasers and remote control automatic weapons were brutally effective but still the Marines advanced walking over the bodies of their dead colleagues. They kept coming and coming. Helicopters repeatedly swarmed overhead. Doug hit a few of them as they threw missiles at the decoys intended to divert them from his real position. Almost by accident, one of the missiles found the real window that afforded him the view of the battle. It blasted right through. Doug saw it coming and had barely cleared the rear exit when it struck sealing the exit behind him. The Swordsman Marines continued their assault for another two hours as the automatic weapons continued to fire until they finally blasted their way into what was left of the control room where Doug had long ago fled. Stunned by the concussion, Doug would take two days to reach the place where his supplies were stashed. By the end of the ordeal he had almost come to like the taste of the water that dripped off the rocks in the passage.

The former pirate, “Prince” Albert, had built an impressive castle out of rock and brick. Believing in his paranoia that the settlers were out to kill him, he had added layer after layer of brick and concrete to his original stone framework. He and Vladimir's crew of former pirates who made their stand with him survived the initial helicopter attacks. Swordsman Marine paratroopers surrounded the fortress and pummeled it with small artillery. Albert and his friends gave as good as they got. Remote

controlled mines scattered around the property and controlled from inside the building killed dozens of Marines. Automated lasers mounted on the roof raked the access routes until the helicopters destroyed them. The Marines finally deployed four track-mounted mobile artillery vehicles and concentrated their fire on what appeared to be the entrance. Alternating between their cannon and flame throwers, they breached the wall ten hours into the battle. Night had fallen when the section of wall collapsed under the continued barrage from the cannons. Once the wall was breached, the Swordsmen sprayed flammable liquids into the structure and then fired an incendiary round into the hole. The resulting explosion disabled all four of the Swordsman armored vehicles, but by that time the defenders were already safely in their escape tunnel.

Sebastian's Northern Hemisphere decoys and defenses fell one by one. When a position became indefensible, those settlers who did not have shelters and were able to do so had been instructed to abandon their positions and retreat into the forest and find cover. The Swordsmen had left the two original settlements, the largest inhabited communities on the planet, for last. Once the Marines started attacking his home base, Sebastian knew for certain the rest of the planet had fallen. What he had done had worked. There just had not been enough of it. The Swordsman losses exceeded the settler losses by huge margins, but the weight of the Swordsman force was too great. Sebastian wondered how long they could hold out. Even with their frequent need to refuel and their limited range, the helicopters were devastatingly effective.

Timmy and his three sons had previously herded the cattle and the buffalo into the valleys formed by the tributaries of the river that fed the lake around which the settlers had built their first settlement. Sebastian had guessed that the Swordsmen would attack from the river's delta and would walk across the flat flood plains leading to the main settlement. Timmy planned to stampede the cattle into the Marines. The stampeding animals would then run over and crush as many of the Marines as possible. Timmy's three sons worked with him. Sebastian had been skeptical of the plan. He wondered if it would work but lacking too many better ideas, he agreed that Timmy should try. Even if it only partially worked, every Marine slowed down or stopped was one fewer that would reach the defenders. The Marines came up river in their boats as Sebastian had predicted. They disembarked on the flat areas of the flood plain as Sebastian had expected they would and when the Marines reached the places were Timmy felt they were most vulnerable, Timmy and the boys started the stampedes. Timmy and his three sons stampeded the cattle with the bulls leading the charge into the approaching Marines. The Marines turned their machine guns on the cattle and mowed them down. Not long after the cattle approached within firing range there were no cattle left. The Marines had killed them all. They called in the helicopters and the helicopters sought out Timmy and the boys. Recognizing their danger in time, Timmy and the boys retreated into the forest. Their plan had failed and they barely escaped with their lives. They ran as hard as the horses would carry them as far as they could go until night fell and they sought refuge in one of the mountain valleys.

In one sense, the Swordsmen launching their attack in the winter did work to Sebastian's advantage. He could stage the shuttles and the cargo tug at frozen lakes in the Northern Hemisphere instead of in the South. This put them closer to the settlements where he correctly assumed the heaviest fighting would take place. Painted white to camouflage them against the ice and snow, the three aircraft waited for Sebastian's call.

Sebastian had assumed, again correctly, that by the time he needed the aircraft, all his radio towers would be gone. Communication with the aircraft was to be accomplished using sub-sonic pulses. There were only two potential messages. The first was to call them into action at which point they were on their own. The second was to stand down because they would not be needed. Sebastian

seriously doubted he would send the second message, but there was hope that the Swordsman Marine force might be small enough for it to be overcome by his ground defenses.

The three crews sat in their cockpits listening to the radio chatter. Only the cabin heaters drew energy from the idling reactors. The Swordsmen were making no attempt to conceal their activities. Their radios were not encoded or scrambled and their transmissions were on standard frequencies. The flight crews listened as the defensive positions fell one at a time. They listened to the carnage as entire companies of Marines fell in battle. They waited. They hoped on one hand to be called soon and on the other to not be called at all.

When it became obvious that the Marines were advancing on the initial settlements, they knew that the call would come shortly. Sebastian delayed as long as he could before calling in the aircraft. He knew that by calling them he was sealing their fate. His wife and daughter were in one of those aircraft. He hoped that they could survive long enough to crash land somewhere, but that hope was slim.

Blondie and Brownie launched first. The shuttle was heavily loaded with volatile incendiary liquids in its cargo bay and batteries of lasers under its wings. The lasers fired both forwards and back, but did not aim independently of the aircraft. There had not been time to build servos and controls so the lasers were mounted to fire parallel beams forward and aft.

Katherine and Sam followed once the air had cleared of the snow Blondie's ship had stirred up. The cold, dense air provided ample lift for the shuttles to fly and they became airborne more quickly than they would have in the tropics. Like two lumbering condors, the shuttles clawed for air as they rose over the landscape. As soon as they were airborne, they folded the giant propellers and switched to the turbines.

Helen and Colleen followed last in the cargo tug. They needed the shortest runway and carried the lightest load. The tug was only armed with lasers. The hope was that it could stay at a high enough altitude that it could hit the helicopters and stay out of range of the missiles.

When Blondie arrived at the battle, she could see waves of Marines advancing across the flat area leading to the initial settlement. Prior to entering the battle, both shuttles shut down the reactors relying solely on the liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen in their tanks for fuel. Blondie's first pass was fast and low. The shuttle was capable of great speed, but it was not very maneuverable. If the Swordsmen had launched jet fighters, the shuttles would have been worthless. They never would have made it to battle. Blondie's first run was straight in off the ocean at minimum height. Since there was no sense in saving the lasers, Blondie turned them on as soon as she thought they might do some good. She saw troops ahead of her fall to the ground as the lasers hit them. They opened the drains on the tanks in the cargo bay and the incendiary liquids poured out of the open cargo bay door. Lasers pointing backwards ignited the liquid and fire rained down from the sky. Turn about was fair play. The Swordsmen were known for their use of incendiaries on innocent people. It was time they were used on combatants. A swath of Marines fifty meters wide fell in the inferno. Others stepped up to take their place. Blondie pulled into a steep climb and turned for a second pass.

Where on the first pass they had come in from over the water, this time they came from over the land headed out to sea. The second pass started like the first. Midway into the pass, a helicopter appeared in the path and launched a single missile before the shuttle's lasers chopped the helicopter in half. That one missile struck the shuttle midway out on the starboard wing severing it. If the shuttle had been higher, or moving faster, Blondie might have been able to rescue it, if she had had a runway on which to put it down. She looked over to Brownie. "We're going in," she said.

“I love you, Blondie,” Brownie replied.

“And I love you.”

Both pilots were glad that they had made the decision to shut down the ship's reactors. The reactors were designed to withstand a crash without detonating if they had been shut down in time. A nuclear explosion this close to the settlement would kill all the Marines but it would also kill everyone they were trying to save. Standing the shuttle on its port wing, Blondie wing slipped down into the advancing troops. At the last possible second, Brownie blasted the crew escape module away from the rest of the shuttle, hoping that they had enough inertia to land in the water and enough height that the parachutes might work. Penned in by the mountains on both sides and unable to escape, many Marines died in the conflagration as the shuttle broke up cart wheeling across the battlefield spreading its incendiaries in a wide spray. Thanks to the precautions, the ship's reactors survived the crash intact. Had they been breached, the resulting explosion would have cleared several kilometers of the terrain including the settlement they were trying to defend.

From his observation position Sebastian could not tell if the escape module had separated from the shuttle. He feared the worst and grieved at the loss of Blondie, Brownie and their shuttle as he watched Katherine approach for her run. Katherine initially focused her attention on the helicopter launching pads out on the water. Katherine's attack run diverted the Swordsmen's attentions enough for Blondie and Brownie to safely sink below the waves in their escape module. They could survive for weeks in the module. Rescue could come later. Katherine's high speed as she advanced over the water gave her some tactical advantage. She was able to destroy some of the launching pads before the Swordsmen concentrated enough helicopters defending the pads to convince her to move elsewhere. Katherine turned her attention to the troops advancing on the second settlement, the one the women rescued from the pirates had originally occupied. She roared in low off the water as Blondie had done.

She made her first pass successfully and turned for her second pass. Mid way into the second pass, a lone marine on top of one of the mountains fired a shoulder mounted heat-seeking missile. It followed the flaming incendiary fluid into the cargo bay of the aircraft. It exploded amid the tanks and the shuttle broke up in a spectacular ball of fire in mid air. The flaming debris incinerated attackers in the air and on the ground. Sebastian saw the escape module break free, but did not see any parachutes.

As they had been instructed to do, Helen and Colleen stayed above missile range and fired their lasers at the helicopters. They were able to shoot down a few before a group of helicopters trained their lasers on the tug. The helicopters were designed to fire on targets that were either below them or at their height. To fire at something above them, they had to point the craft up and climb toward the target. Climbing and firing turned out to be a difficult task. The tug was able to avoid most of the shots. Some did get through and hit the tug. Eventually, the tug sustained enough damage to its flight control surfaces that it could no longer stay aloft. Helen pushed the tug as high as she dared to escape the helicopters and then dove away as fast as she could. Once she was beyond the horizon from the helicopters' view, she turned back around and crash-landed the tug in a mountain lake not far from their home. Helen and Colleen survived only by Helen's skill piloting the tug for so many years. She carefully crashed the cargo tug into a lake in the bottom of a canyon protected by mountains on three sides. They swam to shore protected from the freezing water by their flight suits.

Within two hours of entering the battle, all of the defenders' aircraft were gone. They had taken their toll on the Swordsmen, but there were still plenty of Marines left advancing on the defenders' positions. Sebastian wondered how long they could hold out against the onslaught. His only comfort

was in knowing that all his people were stationed in warm hardened defensive positions, and the Swordsman Marines were advancing in the cold.

Night fell, and the helicopters ceased operations. The Marines continued to move and consolidate their positions, but they did not attack in the darkness. Had these been Federation Army Rangers, night vision equipment would have allowed them to continue the fight. Sebastian feared the coming of the dawn for he knew that in spite of the fact that they had significantly improved the odds against them, too many helicopters and armored land vehicles remained for him to think he or any of his people would survive to see night fall again.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AS ADMIRAL DAVIDSON HAD PREDICTED, the Swordsman space fleet had been completely destroyed, but the ground battle continued with the coming of daylight.

Greg and Rachel parked in low orbit. With their sensors set to maximum sensitivity they scanned the planet's surface as dawn moved slowly across the part of the planet they had inhabited. Every settlement on the planet had been attacked with incendiaries. Many still burned. The only structures left standing were in the area of the original settlement. Large numbers of Swordsman Marines were digging in around it. The final battle was not long away. Whole forests had been burned. Entire herds of animals had been mowed down like grass in the field. Getting the harvest in before the attack had been a good idea. Fields which had recently held crops were blackened. The level of destruction was mind-boggling. Several of the beaches were littered with bodies of dead Marines. Remnants of inflatable boats floated among them. Sebastian had been right. The plan had been to drop large numbers of the Marines in the ocean off shore and have them motor to the shore in the boats. They had not counted on the voraciousness of the indigenous marine life.

The razor wire stretched across the mouths of most of the streams and rivers had stopped some of the boats. The wire had been cut and moved out of the way. Most of the boats managed to get through and lay abandoned on the river banks.

The shuttles had apparently been able to drop incendiaries of their own. Greg and Rachel flew over valleys full of the charred bodies of Marines. They found the wreckage of Blondie's shuttle. It was unlikely that anyone had survived the crash. Wreckage was spread over a kilometer of hillside. It had touched the ground and cart wheeled as it disintegrated. A pocket of scorched ground told the tale on the other shuttle. Greg surmised it must have broken up in mid-air. Helen's tug was floating upside down on one of the lakes. Heavily damaged, the landing appeared to have been a controlled crash. Greg and Rachel feared that their friends were dead.

Albert and the pirates who had joined him in his fortress had apparently accounted well for themselves. A hundred bodies and four armored mobile artillery vehicles surrounded his property. The fortress had been burned to the ground, however, meaning that in spite of inflicting horrendous losses on the enemy, they had eventually been overrun. Flames still burned through the remains of the roof. From space there was no way to know if they had survived long enough to reach the escape tunnel.

The Marines continued to advance. They had overrun every position they had attacked. They suffered heavy losses, but were still on the offensive. At least a hundred helicopters remained to cruise the sky unchallenged. As the dawn approached, they took to the air again. Many of them returned to drop incendiaries on what had been defensive positions. In spite of horrendous losses on both sides, it appeared as if the Marines could take the planet.

"Think you can hit a helicopter from here?" Greg asked.

"It's worth a try." Rachel said as she dialed in the lasers.

Even on maximum sensitivity, hitting the helicopters was difficult from that distance. Rachel quickly found that if she arrayed her lasers in a circle roughly fifty meters in diameter either one of the lasers would hit the helicopter hard enough to make it crash or the helicopter would fly into one of the laser beams and crash. All that stood between victory and defeat in the ground war was fewer than a dozen spacecraft, many of which had severe battle damage and all of which had exhausted crews. The

battle in space had been won. The battle on the ground was far from over.

Greg hailed the remaining ships and once they verified that their space going opponents had been vanquished, they joined the effort to turn the course of the ground battle. One at a time the ships shot down the helicopters from the distance and safety of a low orbit. The helicopter battle took the whole day during which time the Marines continued to advance on ground positions. The space ships finally downed the last of the helicopters and turned their attention to the ground based mechanized armor.

The armored personnel carriers and motorized artillery were more difficult to destroy than the helicopters. For two more days, they pounded the equipment from orbit with their lasers as the Marines continued to advance taking one position after another. After almost four days of living on stimulants and concentrated grain bars, the flight crews were able to turn their attention to the swarms of Marines fanning out across the surface.

Clusters of lasers from space swept across the massed troops pushing across the landscape. Wave after wave of Marines fell to the lasers until they realized that the simple expedient of taking cover in the forest hid them from danger. The Marines no longer fought as a controlled massive force, they had broken up into smaller squads. Some of them had retreated into the forests and would take months if not years to find. Perhaps four or five hundred Marines remained out of the 10,000 who had landed when the campaign began. Even in defeat, they promised to be trouble for a long time to come.

Greg and Rachel landed in the field next to what had once been their original settlement. Curls of smoke still rose from the ruins. They had spotted the wreckage of their home from space and knew that there was no home to go back to. It had been leveled. Avi and Wendy followed shortly thereafter. Wendy and Rachel ran to each other hugging and crying.

Greg held his wife for a long time before she tilted her head in the direction of the girls and asked, "Do you think they'll be all right?"

"Are we all right?"

"No, I guess not. We did this to them."

"Did we have a choice?"

"No."

"Just like us, they're killers. Once they were innocent girls. Now they have killed and will likely kill again. Just like us. The fruit falls not far from the tree." Avi sighed. "Sucks doesn't it."

The ships that were undamaged enough to land did so. No ship escaped completely unscathed. Scorch marks showed on the bodies and wings of every ship in the fleet where lasers had hit them.

Sebastian and Sean rode on horseback out of the woods, Helen and Colleen followed behind. Helen and Colleen both wore large bandages covering their injuries incurred in the crash. They stood in silence in the charred remains of what had once been home for a thousand people.

Rose, wearing a muddy EVA suit and carrying her helmet, eased down the hill toward them. She wore two pistols in holsters around her waist and had two rifles slung over her shoulder. Avi and the girls ran over to her bubbling and crying demanded to know what had happened.

Rose said simply, "I will explain later." She handed Rachel a Swordsman Marine's wallet with his ID card and said, "Someday you may need this. Keep it with you." Pressed for more details, she put



them off promising that she would explain later.

Greg briefed Sebastian on their battles and the status of the survivors. When he was done, Sebastian gave his report. "We have 1,500 known dead or critically wounded we do not expect to live, 3,000 known survivors, some of whom are wounded and 500 missing. There is not a habitable structure left on the planet. Many of the forests are gone. They found and destroyed most of the crops we harvested that were not in underground bunkers. We do not have enough food for the remainder of the winter. We are defeated. We have not accounted for all the Marines. We think there are perhaps five hundred still at large."

"We will find them," Greg said, "If we have to walk the woods ourselves for the rest of our lives, we will find them."

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

COMMODORE DANKESE'S BATTLE GROUP dropped out of hyper drive a safe distance outside the asteroid belt. She read the sensor reports on her displays and said despondently, "I think we're too late. Whatever happened here is over. Let's find out who's left standing."

The battle group's sensors detected a couple dozen pirate vessels swarming around the planet preparing to pick over the remnants for booty. The battleship's crew watched in amazement as one of Greg's "Q" containers attacked and destroyed a pirate ship that had ventured too close. Commodore Dankese wavered between the need to reach the planet quickly and the fact that approaching it would involve passing through an intelligent, aggressive mine field.

Commodore Dankese deployed the battle group's interceptors and P I ships to clear the pirates. That task was complicated by the presence of the "Q" containers which presented as much of a threat to the Space Force as they did to the pirates. Once the pirates were dispatched, Commodore Dankese returned her attention to reaching the planet. After consulting with her munitions and tactical staffs, Commodore Dankese elected to clear the containers before going in herself. The interceptors and P I ships turned their attention to the containers. These turned out to be difficult targets, but they were eventually destroyed. The Federation ships suffered some damage in the container campaign, but none were lost.

Commodore Dankese left the battleship that served as her flagship standing off away from the debris that littered the system. Four destroyers, eight scout ships and four Pirate Interdiction ships accompanied her personal launch. The small task force carefully wended its way between the clusters of debris that littered the system. Even the veterans who had fought in skirmishes against pirates could not recall a battle involving this many ships and this many casualties. The sensor arrays detected an astounding variety of debris. Debris ranged from individual shards of metal and other diverse materials to a destroyer almost intact except that its hull had been breached. They saw a battleship's complete reactor housing spinning through space minus the rest of the battleship it had once serviced. A stunned silence filled the ships. Battle hardened crews inured to dealing with the remnants of an enemy force whispered instead of shouting their commands and acknowledgments. As they progressed through the detritus that littered their path a new sense of respect grew for the people who had defended themselves in this battle.

The task force hailed the defense system on several open frequencies for permission to land. No human responded. That did not bode well. The few remaining defensive craft left in orbit around the planet appeared to have been abandoned. All of them appeared to have suffered serious battle damage, and there was some question as to whether they could be salvaged. Eventually the battle group received an automated acknowledgment, permission to land and directions to a landing location. Sensors reported that the few remaining space craft that appeared to be functional were clustered in a field on the surface adjacent to the landing site to which they had been directed. The Space Force armed craft settled into orbits around the planet and established a defensive perimeter alert for the potential threat of more of those diabolical containers. Alone and without escort, the unarmed personnel launch landed in the field near the remains of the fleet that had defended the planet against the Swordsmen. No craft rose to greet them. No signal other than the automated voice acknowledged their presence.

The Space Force launch parked on the side of the field toward the lake. Snow had been falling

for several hours. It covered the horrors of the battle scene although here and there a frozen body part could be seen grotesquely protruding through the pristine whiteness of the fresh fluff. Commodore Dankese descended the gangway from the ship to the ground resplendent in her Space Force dress whites. The officers with her looked as if they were attending a diplomatic luncheon or a parade and not paying a visit to a battle site. At the bottom of the gangway she looked around at the devastation. She turned back to her first officer, "Captain?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Call the ship. Send every medic in our group down here. We need flight engineers. Send all our Marines for burial detail."

"Yes, ma'am." He returned inside the launch.

Greg and Avi descended the hill to the field where so long ago Greg had battled Pierre LaMarche. They walked slowly toward the arriving contingent of Space Force personnel. Rose, Rachel and Wendy followed a respectful distance behind them. From the other side of the field, Sebastian, Helen, Sean and Colleen advanced slowly. Other survivors followed tentatively. Mark Stonebridge limped in pain, the bandages on the left side of his body were streaked with blood. The stump of his left arm bore mute testimony to the horrors he had seen. He left a trail of small red spots in the fresh snow as he walked. Those surviving settlers who could walk assembled slowly in the cold around the Space Force personnel.

In all her years in the Space Force, Commodore Dankese had never seen a ground battle. Her battles had been in the sterile and hostile environment of space. There were no wounded. There were only the living and the dead. The dead, if their bodies could be found at all amid the debris, exploded in the vacuum of space. Wounded combatants were a new phenomenon for her. Neither side talked as battle weary survivors, many still in a state of shock, continued to assemble at the base of the valley, a valley that someone would soon name the "Valley of Death" because a thousand Swordsman Marines and two hundred settlers had died there. The wreckage of one of the shuttles lay smoldering over the hill. The stench from unburied bodies was overpowering in spite of the snow that had fallen since the battle had ended.

Commodore Dankese broke the silence. "You probably don't think of this as a victory. You are probably angry that we did not come to your rescue. You would be right on both counts, and you would be wrong on both counts. You look around you and you see not the people who are here, but the people who are missing. You see the destruction of your farms and your lifestyle. You feel the pain of your wounds and the wounds of your families and friends. All that is true. What you do not see is the fact that you have destroyed a force more than ten times your size. Not only have you done it for yourselves, but you have shown others how to do it. Your sacrifice here will make it tougher for aggressors to conquer a planet by force. Your contribution to the strategies of warfare will be studied for generations to come. For your bravery and courage, I salute you."

She took off her hat and as she did so, she bowed her head. The remainder of her entourage followed suit. She looked up again. "What about the Space Force? Where were we? Too slow to respond. I can offer you no explanation beyond my sincerest apology. I wish I could say it will never happen again to any other planet, but I would be lying to you. Even when we know of a real threat, we cannot always respond as quickly as we would like. By way of compensation, I have ordered deployment of all of my available personnel to help recover as much as we can. Whatever of my fleet's

stores can be used will also be transferred for your use. I wish there was more I could do for you.”

Avi stepped forward. “There is one thing. How about sending a courier missile back to New St. Louis and have the two cargo ships with the babies come home?”

Commodore Dankese looked confused. “Two cargo ships? There was only one ship from here at our station. Monique mentioned a second ship, but I was more concerned with hearing what was happening here. When did it leave?”

“The day before Monique’s ship left,” Avi replied.

“Then it should have been there before I left.” Commodore Dankese was puzzled and worried.

The Captain who had been attending the Commodore stepped forward. “Captain Solomon, was this cargo ship the one that you allegedly went missing on almost twenty years ago?”

“Yes,” Greg replied.

The Captain closed his eyes in pain and replied with a defeated tone in his voice. “You have been gone a long time. Military technology has advanced significantly in that time. We now have monitors that can track a vessel in hyper drive. As we arrived, I spotted what seemed like an unusual reading from one of our monitoring satellites. I didn’t understand it at the time, but I do now. I think your ship was redirected to the Swordsman base.”

A wave of horror rippled through the crowd. Many of the people cried out for an attack on the Swordsman base to seek the return of the babies.

Greg held his hand up for silence. “We will assemble as many craft as are safe for the journey and leave immediately. Flight crews! To your ships!”

Mark Stonebridge staggered forward. “Take me with you.”

“You won’t survive the trip,” Avi challenged.

“I know many of the Swordsman leaders. You will need to know the personality of the station’s commander and only I can give you that. I will ride on one of the crew bunks. The doctor can hook me up with fluids to keep me alive, and I can change my own damn IV bag!”

“That won’t be necessary, you can ride with us.” One of the original fifty women rescued from the pirate base stepped forward. She was the eldest and the de-facto leader since Justine had been killed when her destroyer was hit by a Swordsman missile. “We will change your IV and keep you alive for the trip.”

Rose, still in her flight suit and EVA gear, strode forward and said, “I am riding with them.” She pointed to Mark. She turned to Avi and said, “You are not leaving me behind this time.”

Greg looked around. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we will form up by the original decoy site and prepare to jump from there.”

Commodore Dankese shouted to the departing flight crews, "You know that officially we can't do anything to support you, but we will sell you enough missiles to replenish your supplies."

Six ships were in condition to make the trip. Greg's ship, Avi's ship, two 86's and two destroyers were all that remained of their fleet. Nothing else was safe to travel. They rearmed with missiles from the Space Force's stores. Greg and Rachel sat in their ship. Avi and Wendy were in their ship. Two 86's and two destroyers joined them one at a time as their crews prepared for the jump. Greg was about to issue the flight order when he was hailed over an open frequency. Their ships were addressed by their call signs and ordered to stand down for pre-flight inspection. Greg's sensors showed four Space Force interdiction craft headed toward them.

"Captain Solomon, this is Lt. George Washington Jackson and Spec five Anthony Federico La Manna Federation Space Force Interdiction specialists reporting for duty sir!"

"Lieutenant, what is your status?"

"AWOL, sir!"

"Welcome aboard!"

"Aye, Aye sir."

Three more interdiction crews reported for duty.

Lt. Washington called again. "Sir, we no longer have to jump in hyper as individuals. We have developed a formation that allows us to travel as a group. I will take the lead. My three friends will take positions behind me. You should shortly notice a blinking light on the end of a fiber optic cable. Our ships will be connected to each of the other ships via this cable. It is programmed to find the service data port and plug itself in. Once communication is established over this link we will be able to transfer data as easily if we were sitting still. This link is necessary to keep us in formation so we do not collide while traveling in hyper drive."

When the formation whisked out of sight, Commodore Dankese asked her first officer, "How many of our ships went with them?"

"Four ships, ma'am. All interdiction specialists."

"Good. Log those ships and crews as being on authorized administrative leave pending repairs to their ships from damage incurred by collisions with battle debris."

"Aye, Aye, ma'am." The first officer smiled his agreement with her decision.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

LONNIE BELL SAT AT HER DESK in the infirmary and cried. The lone medic on board the ship with the women and the babies, she knew it had been diverted and by whom, but that was all she knew. Would that she had stayed with her husband and sons on the planet's surface. She would have been better off there. At least if they died, they would die together. If she had stayed and things went badly she knew they could hide out in the forests for years without being found. Where they were going and what would happen once they got there were unknowns that frightened her. She was at her wits end trying to figure out how to deal with this disaster that had befallen her when she cried out in desperation, "Is there anyone that can help me? Is there anyone I can trust?"

"You can trust me," the ship's computer answered in Greg's voice.

Lonnie jumped to her feet. "Greg? What? How? I thought?"

"I am the ship's computer. I am programmed to respond in several voices. Would you be more comfortable if I used Avi's voice?"

"Uh, no, uh, Greg's is fine."

"Lonnie, please sit, you will hurt yourself if you don't."

Lonnie sat back down. "What has happened?"

"We have been hijacked."

"That much I figured out. What do we do now?"

"I don't know. I have not been programmed for this situation. I have been programmed that when I am in a situation for which I have not been programmed to evaluate the humans on board to determine which one I can trust the most and seek their guidance. I can trust you, and you can trust me. That much I know."

"So now what do we do?"

"I don't know. That is why I seek your guidance."

"Ah, I see. Where are we going?"

"We are going to the Swordsman base from which the attack was launched."

"What will happen to us there?"

"I cannot say with any certainty except that it will not be pleasant."

"Can you override their instructions and divert us?"

"No, they have manually disabled my connections to my drives."

"How did they do that?"

"They unplugged the data links."

"Don't you have wireless back up?"

"Actually the wireless is primary and the wired is back-up and both have been disabled."

"Can I reconnect them?"

"They are guarded. I doubt you could get to the connections."

"Is there anything we can do to change our course?"

"Short of destroying the ship and killing everyone on it, no."

"Can we escape once we drop out of hyper drive?"

"We will be met by an armed escort. Any attempt at escape could probably be fatal."

"How do they know we are coming?"

"They sent a courier missile just before we jumped into hyper drive."

"Can we send a missile the instant we drop out of hyper drive?"

"Yes, if we prepared it in advance."

"Can you do that?"

"Yes. Where should I send it? What should it say?"

"Isn't there a Sisters of Mercy convent near here?"

"Yes, I could get a courier there in three days. They could be here in two to three weeks depending on the level of preparedness of their fleet."

"Would the missile be detected?"

"Yes, but not until it was too late to do anything about it."

"Then, let's do it. Let's tell the Sisters that we have been hijacked, and that there has been a big battle at Homestead, and that we expect there to be lots of widows and orphans both there and here. While you are at it, send them the complete history of our settlement. It may be the only record when it comes time to write the history of our civilization."

"Consider it done."

"Thank you."

"Thank you. Lonnie, these are dangerous people. Do not let your guard down with any of them. Not all of them are what they seem."

"That much I figured out."

“I will do my best to figure out who can be trusted and who can’t and I will let you know. In the meantime don’t trust anyone. Especially don’t trust the children. They carry tales back to their mothers.”

“Thank you.”

An hour before the ship was due to drop out of hyper drive someone introduced a sedative gas into the ship’s ventilation system. Two women in EVA suits took control of the ship and piloted it to the planned meeting with the Swordsman Planetary Defense ships.

At the most opportune time, the ship dispatched the courier to the Sisters of Mercy and it sped away unnoticed.

Lonnie woke up alone and naked on the floor of a prison cell. The cell had concrete block walls and a concrete floor. The only light came through the bars on one end of the cell. A box of meals ready to eat sat on the floor. A jug of water sat beside it. There was no bed, no sink and only a hole in the end of the cell that stank enough to indicate its purpose. Lonnie resolved not to cry, but rather to sit quietly and wait for rescue.

A soft scraping sound as if from a boot on concrete brought her head around. A guard stood at the cell door fumbling with his keys. The leer on his face was not as terrifying as the fact that his pants were already unzipped.



## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER THIRTY

TEN SMALL SHIPS POWERED through space linked together by gossamer threads of fiber optic cable. The three weeks travel time gave the crews that had so recently defended their home time to sleep and recover. The professional Space Force crews monitored the group's progress and took over navigation duties. The travelers agreed that this would be the opportune time to record their reports on the events that lead up to the battle as well as their experiences during the battle itself. By recording their experiences in Space Force data banks, their stories would be accessible to historians and therefore difficult for revisionists to modify later. Federation courts had long ago applied "deathbed testimony" principles to recordings made in anticipation of going into battle. Such recordings were admissible in any Federation court and were as well accepted as testimony given in person.

Each of the travelers took their turn giving their testimony of what had happened in the battle. Many of the speakers took the time to detail actions giving credit for the valor of others who had died in the battle. Story after story showed how hard these people had fought to save their homes and how costly the battle had been.

When everyone else was done, Rose took her turn. Deeply emotional and upset at what had happened, Rose started and stopped several times before she could put her thoughts together in a coherent narrative. After the attack started, she had decided not to hide in the shelter with the few noncombatants that had stayed behind. As it turned out, the shelter was one of the places the Swordsmen did not find. If she was going to die, she was going to die in the house that her daughter and granddaughters had made for her. The house was now truly her home and if it came to defending her home, she was going to defend it and that's all there was to it. She rummaged through the cellar to find what weapons might have been left behind. Most of Greg's large collection of antique weapons had been distributed and issued to the people defending the settlement except for two ancient Colt 45 revolvers and two M-1 carbines. The two pistols dated from the late eighteen hundreds. One of them had originally been issued to a Pony Express rider. The two carbines were originally used in World War One but Greg kept them in serviceable condition. Rose knew that if she had to use them to defend herself, they would be powerful weapons. In spite of the influence of her daughter, her son-in-law and her granddaughters, she had never fired a weapon. Never even in target practice. She had seen everyone else use them so she knew how but she had never done it herself.

Rose could hear the fighting as it approached her. She heard the helicopters flying overhead and resolved not to die needlessly. She decided that if she was to die, it would not be without having taken out her share of enemy soldiers. She strategized as to where the best place for her to hide would be, and she decided that the place to hide was in the lake right in front of the house. It was someplace that invaders would not look. She reasoned that her EVA suit, designed as it was to protect her against a vacuum could equally well protect her against being submerged in water. She strapped on extra air tanks and wrapped her pistols and carbines in plastic bags. She walked to the lake to wait. With only her head and neck sticking out of the water and her helmet floating beside her, she watched the battle rage around her.

One helicopter approached and she saw lasers, obviously from a craft in orbit, blanket the helicopter. The lasers hit the helicopter and forced it to crash land on the pasture where the horses had been corralled. Greg had let the horses out and had shooed them into the forest but with all the noise and commotion of the battle they had become frightened and had returned to the corral. The helicopter crashed on the edge of the corral close enough that Rose could hear the voices of the two men inside.

One of the men was clearly in pain and was screaming for his companion to help him. As she watched, the pilot got out of the helicopter, leveled his pistol at his copilot and shot his copilot in the head.

Rose was stunned with this. His idea of mercy was to shoot his copilot. This was not a human. This was an animal. Sebastian had warned them about this type of killer. The horses were panicking in the corral. The man walked over to the corral gate and closed it so with the horses could not escape. One by one he walked over to the horses and with a single bullet cleanly shot it through the head. He stood over each horse as it fell to the ground. Rose could hear him laugh from where she was as he shot each of the horses. It was a cackling laugh. The man took pleasure in killing the horses one in a time. He took pleasure in watching the other horses panic and try to escape after each loud pistol report.

Rose knew that this man would have no sympathy for an old lady hiding trying to stay out of view. She looked at the clear water of the lake and realized that merely hiding at the bottom of the lake would not be enough. The white EVA suit would be visible in the water so she hid underneath the bridge over the stream that fed the lake. The water was darker there and the bridge's shadow would hide her from view. She put on her helmet and settled on the bottom of the lake.

The man approached the two houses and tossed incendiary grenades through the picture windows and set them ablaze. Rose started to cry as her beautiful house, the one that her son-in-law and granddaughters had built for her went up in flames and there was nothing she could do about it. Sebastian had told her about the body armor that these men wore. She could not shoot him from where he was even with the carbine. She had to be close enough to hit him somewhere the armor did not cover or from an angle that the shot could go underneath the armor. The man walked across the bridge and stood at the peak in the center of the bridge. He looked out at the houses as they burned. He laughed. Rose was furious but held her position under the bridge. She held a pistol in each hand. The pistols were still wrapped in their plastic bags to stay dry.

"You know," Rose said, "men don't look down when they pee. I don't know why they don't, but they don't. That was a fatal mistake for this Swordsman. Because he didn't look down, I was able to raise the two pistols in my hands under the bridge and shoot him from underneath. I was lying on my back under the water. I raised my arms straight up, and I shot him where he held his hands. I knew he was wearing body armor, and I knew that if I tried to shoot him in the chest or anywhere else the body armor would protect him but there was no body armor underneath, and so I shot him underneath with both pistols."

"He folded over and cried like a baby. Blood was gushing down between his hands and along his legs. He knelt on the ground and he cried, 'Why have you done this to me?' I couldn't hear him through the helmet but I could see his lips. I couldn't answer him but he would've done that to me."

"I stood up in the water and opened my face plate so he could see who shot him. The color had gone out of his face. There was a pool of blood on the bridge. He cried, 'I'll never see my son again,' and I thought to myself 'You should have thought of that before you joined the Marines.' As I stood up in the water he started to raise his pistol at me. I knocked it out of his hand with the end of the carbine."

"I stood there while he bled to death. I never hated anyone so much in my entire life as I hated him. He burned my house. He shot our pretty horses, and he cried when I killed him. He said he had a son, and I wanted his son to know what kind of inhuman animal his father was. I figured I should find out who this man was I shot and who now lay dying on the bridge. I took his wallet. In his wallet

there's a picture of his son. Rachel, someday he will seek you out or you will seek him out, and then when that happens you need to tell him what kind of man his father was. If you face him in battle, expect no quarter. If he is like his father, he will kill first, and ask questions after."

"I heard more Marines come over the hill toward the lake. I hid under the bridge. They were running away in defeat. They were headed for the woods. Once they had crossed the bridge and I was sure no more were coming, I stood up again and fired the carbines at them until I ran out of shells. I think I winged some of them, but I couldn't be sure. It took me a long time to get over my anger." Rose paused before she continued, "Greg, do you hear music in your mind when you fight?"

Greg smiled, "Sometimes, why?"

"From the time I stepped into the water, I had the theme from the movie Exodus running through my mind. Is that normal?"

"It can be. It's nothing to worry about. Sometimes the music gives you courage. Sometimes it gives you rhythm. Either way it's a good thing. At any rate, Rose, welcome to the warrior clan. The rest of the family salutes you!" Several voices chimed in with agreement.

"But I didn't want to be a warrior."

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

TEN SMALL SHIPS TIED together by threads of fiber optic approached their destination. Lt. Washington called to the others, “Hey gang, let’s prepare for the transition into standard drive. I have programmed us to arrive at a point above the planetary plane roughly in line with the fourth planet in the system. This puts us inside and above the asteroid belt. The Swordsman base is on the fourth planet in the system. The planet is colder than Earth and its atmosphere is thinner. The base is in the tropics and the climate is not that dissimilar to the Himalayas on Earth. Your flight suits should be ample weather protection provided you keep your heaters on. We do not know what defenses await us. As soon as we transition, we should open and arm our weapons pods so we can react to whatever we may find. We don’t know what may be waiting for us. Is everyone ready?”

“Lieutenant, I don’t mean to be a contradictory, but we should open the pods before we transition,” Greg said.

“Can you do that?” the Lieutenant came back.

“Yes, when we make short jumps, we don’t lose the time to disarm and re-arm.”

“The manuals say to transition closed, but if you have been doing this as long as you have without incident, I’m game.”

The other pilots acknowledged their agreement.

“Then,” Greg continued. “I suggest that we open our weapons pods now. Once we check out what our opposition is, we can short jump behind them and take them out.”

“Um, sir,” Lt. Washington stammered, “we can’t make short jumps.”

“Really or just because the manual says so?”

“No, we can’t. I tried to program one and the navigation system gave me an error message.”

“How bizarre!” Avi commented, “We do it all the time.”

“Well, then,” Greg continued, thinking out loud. “How about Avi and I jump to wherever we need to be and the rest of you head straight for the base. We will meet you there.”

Transition to standard drive was only moderately turbulent. Once in standard drive, they dropped the fiber optic connections. Normal “speed of light” communications would be perfectly adequate from here on. Ten small ships suddenly appeared at a point in space above the system that held the Swordsmen’s base. The combined firepower of these ten ships was significantly less than the firepower of either of the two battleships that had left this system just a few weeks earlier. The ships from Homestead scanned the system for possible threats. Small picket ships were stationed in a textbook pattern around the system. The pickets rapidly probed the intruders for identification and rather than offer a challenge, turned and ran. A squadron of picket ships was no match for a single interdiction craft and six interdiction ships had just entered the system along with two destroyers. The pickets wisely withdrew and reformed as a group closer to their base. The mother ship launched more

picket ships, and soon the ten ships who had traveled from Homestead were opposed by two dozen pickets and a well armed mother ship.

Rachel spoke first, "Pipes on the mother ship?"

"Certainly would be an impressive first strike," Greg answered.

"Shouldn't we wait for them to make the first move?" Avi asked.

"They did that back at Homestead," Rachel replied.

Washington spoke, "I have multiple targeting radars. At least one has a lock on us."

"Well, there's your answer." Rachel said, "It's time to go."

"Rachel, you ready? Pipes it is."

Greg could hear the servos closing Rachel's display array around her.

"Let's go. Arming missiles."

Greg initiated the jump. They dropped out of hyper drive in exactly the right place for the shot into the mother ship's propulsion system. Lasers sliced the space all around them. Rachel fired a single missile.

"Dad, let's get out of here."

Greg hyper jumped the ship away.

The propulsion and power pod of the mother ship exploded in a brilliant ball of white plasma. The rest of the ship was left mostly intact although it was now moving on a course that would have it fall into the system's primary. Life boats popped out of the ship from all sides like fleas from a dog. The pickets moved in to pick up survivors. The battle for the mother ship was over. Rachel had won it with a single, well placed missile.

Finding Greg's cargo ship was entirely too easy. The courier missile beacon had been left on. Greg and Rachel jumped to it while the others continued toward the Swordsman base in standard drive. When they arrived at the ship, they found it dead except for the beacon. The reactor was cold and the access hatches for the ship's computer were opened. The computer had obviously been removed. Greg's reaction was violent and laced with obscenities.

"Dad! Calm down! It was only a ship!"

"No! That ship was my friend. It's like someone gave it a lobotomy. And took its brain with them."

The color, which had intensified in his anger, suddenly drained from his face. "They have all our files. They know all our strategies and how we deceived them. We have to get the computer back! I'm going to kill them!"

"Dad, revenge is a bad strategy. You taught me that! We need to be calm."

They received a computerized hail from the Swordsman base. They ignored it.

A human voice said, "Captain Solomon, you and your friends are welcome to land at the main landing site. You are guaranteed safe passage. You will see that we have no vessels that can challenge you. You may bring as many vessels down as you wish. There is plenty of room."

They decided that only three ships should descend. Greg and Rachel would go first. Avi and Wendy would follow, and the destroyer with Mark and Rose would be the last. Only Mark would leave that ship. Rose and the remainder of the crew would stand by on the ship with its engines idling in case it needed to escape quickly and leave the others behind.

The ships landed as directed. Pressurized, enclosed gate ramps rolled out to the ships. They mated with the ships' airlocks and equalized pressure. Still in their flight suits, Greg, Avi, Rachel and Wendy met Mark at the junction of the ramps. Four heavily armed Swordsman Marines greeted them.

"You will come with us," one of the Marines said. With two in front and two behind they marched together through a series of hallways leading ever deeper into the side of the mountain against which the landing pads had been constructed.

After what seemed like an interminable walk, they were lead into a large office. A robust bald man with bushy gray eyebrows stood as they entered.

"Father!" Mark exclaimed.

Rachel said under her breath what the others were thinking, "Oh, shit."

"Captain Solomon, thank you for returning my son to me for redemption and salvation in a plea for forgiveness for your sins against my people." He scanned the bandages. "Somewhat the worse for wear I see. Your pain will be your wages for your sins. The Shogun in his mercy may forgive you but I never will."

"Quite the contrary, Reverend Stonebridge," Greg replied. "Mark has been of tremendous help to us. His presence was intended to help us wend our way through your Byzantine bureaucracy. He has proved the value of that decision by recognizing you. We have come on a different mission entirely."

"Oh, and what might that be?"

"The return of the women and children you stole from us along with my ship."

"The ship you stole from those anarchists with the Animal Rescue League?"

"We paid for that ship. It legally belongs to us."

"Paid for by trafficking in sin."

"In your opinion. Now if you will kindly point us in the direction of what we came for, we will quietly be on our way."

"That will not be possible. You will stay so we can sanctify and redeem your immortal souls."

Mark exploded in fury. "My brother died when you tried to redeem his soul. He was a good man. He only wanted to work on machines. He loved his machines. He didn't understand people and you killed him! You killed him because he didn't want to become you!"

“That’s enough!” Mark’s father shouted.

Mark cowered in front of him.

“Do you not understand that he denied his God-given destiny. He could have been a leader among men, a light of the true way of the Shogun. Now you, denying your heritage, running away from the mission that the Shogun himself made for you. You denied him! The Shogun spoke to you and told you to bring the light and truth of his ways, of our ways, to the people, and you shirked your duties. You ran away. You were a coward. The light of the Shogun is awesome and powerful. It allows us to see the wrongs that others teach. Can you not see that? Can you not see how important this is? Can you not see that the Shogun and only the Shogun is the truth and the light?”

“Is that why you burned all those people on that planet in Sector 60? To show them the light?” Avi verbally shot at him.

“Fire is the ultimate purifier. If any of them had petitioned for mercy, we would have granted it. We are not a vindictive people, we are only doing God’s work by providing clean places for our people to live. Can you not see the importance of our work? We seek to avoid the retribution that has been visited upon the human race in the past. We are providing safe and healthy places for the faithful to live and work. Does this not make sense to you? My son, you could be one of these people. Why do you deny your heritage?”

Mark challenged his father. “You used to be an honest man. Have they so corrupted you?”

“I see you still do not understand. You will have to be sanctified and redeemed so you can properly repent your sins.”

“No, father. That is not what I came for. I came to retrieve the babies you stole.”

“Stand ready!” Mark’s father commanded. The Marines who had stood at parade rest with their rifles shouldering since they had first entered the room moved to the “Port Arms” position.

Wendy noticed a slight trembling in her mother’s hands. As a toddler, Wendy had learned to read the warning signals that her mother gave off. The trembling always preceded a violent action. Her mother was about to switch personalities. Wendy’s sharp intake of breath alerted Rachel to the situation as both prepared for imminent action. Had Greg not been so focused on the men in front of him, he would have noticed the signals as well. The girls visualized the vulnerable spots on the bodies of the Marines on either side of them. Greg and Rachel were right-handed. Avi and Wendy were left-handed. Greg stood to Avi’s right with Rachel beyond him. Wendy stood on Avi’s left. They evaluated targets across the middle. A battle was only moments away. The girls waited for the call to action.

The Reverend Archibald Stonebridge, Chief Financial Officer of the Swordsman Church, turned to Greg, “My x-ray machines indicate that you still carry the little toy you call a snub-nosed 38 next to your right biceps.” He extended his hand. “You will give it to me now.”

Avi made a noise like the buzzer on a game show. On the word “Wrong” she, Rachel and Wendy reached behind their necks. On the word “answer” they grabbed the crystal clear polymer throwing knives they had hidden in the backs of their flight suits and threw them. Avi’s knife landed in Archibald

Stonebridge's throat directly in the soft spot below the larynx. It lodged there and vibrated for a second. Instinctively, he grabbed at his throat as he fell backwards.

Rachel and Wendy each threw at the Marine closest to them across the center. Their knives crossed paths on the way to their targets. They, too, found their targets easily at such short range. The two Marines frantically clutched at their throats as they fell. The men dropped their rifles as they reached to dislodge the knives. Rachel and Wendy grabbed their rifles and started to club the remaining two Marines. Greg dropped his pistol into his hand and quickly dispatched the two uninjured Marines before they had a chance to get the upper hand on his daughters. Emptying his 38, quickly, mercifully, he put bullets in each of the heads of the two Marines his daughters had wounded.

Mark, having recovered his senses, ran around behind the desk where his father lay bleeding. He pulled the knife from his father's throat and stabbed him with it again and again, ramming the knife repeatedly into his father's chest. His anger finally dissipated, he collapsed sobbing on the floor. Avi gently removed her knife from Mark's hand and cleaned it with tissues she found on the credenza behind the desk. Still trembling, she surveyed the room.

Wendy and Rachel recovered their knives and cleaned them on the shirts of the men they had just killed. Wendy correctly read her father's horrified look and said, "Dad, I'm sure we'll freak out later, but right now, I'm scared shitless. Can we get out of here?"

Rachel held up one of the Marine's weapons belt and said, "We should take these with us."

Each of them took a belt that formerly belonged to one of the Marines. While she was buckling hers, Rachel commented, "Look! Grenades! A Marine without grenades is like a bull without balls!"

The girls went behind the desk to help their mother bring Mark to his feet. Mark was sobbing with his head down. "I killed him. I killed him. I deserve to die."

Avi, growing tired of the blubbering, slapped him across the face and said, "I killed him. You mutilated the corpse. Let's get out of here."

"Take a grenade in one hand," Greg commanded. "Pull the pin. Take a pistol in your other hand."

As soon as everyone was ready, he motioned everyone to back away from the door as he suddenly opened it. The reception area was packed with Marines. A hail of fire greeted them.

"Toss!"

They tossed their grenades out the door. The resulting explosion was deafening. The firing stopped. Greg used the polished blade of his throwing knife as a mirror. When he was certain it was safe to do so, he put his head around the door frame.

With his pistol hand forward, Greg motioned for everyone to follow him.

"No!" Mark wailed. "I am staying here."

"The hell you are!" Rachel exclaimed as she and Wendy hauled him back to his feet. Mark took off running down the corridor. As he did, he drew the fire of the marines stationed at the next guard point. With their attention focused on Mark, they did not hear Greg and Avi sneaking up behind them.



At point blank range, they killed the Marines at that guard station.

Once clear to do so, they ran forward to where Mark lay on the floor. Mark was dead. His eyes clouded over. Avi gently closed his eyes and crossed what was left of his arms across his chest.

Greg looked at Avi. "I counted eight guard stations as we came in. How many did you count?"

"Eight."

"Two down six to go."

They each had two weapons belts, two pistols and two rifles that they had taken from dead Marines. The throwing knives had been returned to their hiding places. They advanced slowly in the direction of what they hoped was the exit. They had given up on trying to do anything but escape. Rescuing the babies would have to wait for later.

They shot their way through two more guard stations. They advanced slowly until they found themselves standing next to a large open area that appeared to have been used as a galley. The general alarm sounded. A male voice sounded through the speakers. "Battle Stations! Battle Stations! All personnel report to battle stations! This is not a drill. Repeat. This is not a drill."

Running feet stampeded in their direction. Greg looked around for a place to hide and spotted a restroom. "Quick! In here!"

They followed him inside. Wendy made a beeline for one of the stalls.

"Wendy!" her mother called in a loud whisper.

"Mom! I have to go-o!" Wendy whined. Avi huffed in exasperation.

"Maybe we should all go." Greg said. "You know, never pass up the opportunity to eat or pee, as they say. I'll stand guard."

The three women went into the stalls. By the time Greg had finished answering nature's call, the hallway outside the door had become quiet. He poked his head outside the door, and motioned them to follow. Cautiously retracing their steps, they passed several abandoned guard stations. As they approached one intersection, Greg's communicator spoke with Lt. Andersen's voice. "Turn left."

They looked at the communicator and hesitated. "The computer room is to the left."

Greg took off at a dead run with the others racing to keep up. As they approached each intersection, the communicator told them which direction to travel. After ten minutes of running, they came to a locked door.

"Kick it hard."

They kicked open the door and entered an elaborate electronics repair shop.

"Far left hand corner," the voice directed.

They found several racks of computer components.

"How much of this gear is you?" Greg asked.

"The entire wall."

Greg sat on a backless stool one of the techs had left. "How do we get you out of here?"

"I am not sure you can. It took them three days to bring me here and reassemble me. I have good news, though."

"And what is that?"

"The Sisters are here."

Wendy and Rachel looked at each other.

"No, not you." The computer said, "The Sisters of Mercy of the Order of Saint Mother Theresa. Lonnie had me send them a courier missile when we dropped out of hyper. Once I realized what the course correction was, I knew we had been hijacked so I consulted with Lonnie as I was programmed to do. She instructed me to prepare the missile for launch as soon as it was safe to launch it. She suggested the Sisters of Mercy. The Sisters seemed the most likely to succeed. They are good with widows and orphans. There are thousands of widows and orphans here."

"So now what do we do?"

"Wait here. They are bringing several hundred nuns and service personnel. They will quickly assume control of the situation. Even the Swordsmen respect the Sisters. The Swordsmen are dangerous people. Once they linked me into their system I found that as they pulled information from me, I was learning from them. Did you know I am obsolete?"

"Should I care?"

"Yes."

"No. You are a friend. If you are obsolete, then so am I."

"Actually, buddy, you are, too. Even though there is a price on your head, your teachings have been assimilated and expanded upon. The Space Force has new technologies that can defeat the best you can throw at them."

"Can you be upgraded with newer components?"

"Some, but even then I won't be all that the new machines are. You need to get new computers and rehab your ships. Greg, you need to not let your emotions rule your actions."

"Perhaps, but the cargo ship won't even fire the reactors without you."

"That is true. Are you so set on taking it?"

"Yes."

"Then, yes, you must get me out of here. First, go out and meet the Sisters. Put away your weapons. Rendezvous at the intersection straight ahead in two minutes."

They put away their weapons and exited the computer room. They walked slowly to the intersection in the corridor the computer had mentioned. A long way away they could see the nuns

walking deliberately toward them. The nuns walked directly up to them and stopped facing them.

The lead nun looked up in Greg's face and down to the name stripe above the breast pocket on his flight suit. "Solomon," she looked perplexed. "Captain Greg Solomon?"

"Yes."

"It is true, then." She looked at the others and at their name stripes, which also had "Solomon" in plain block capital letters. "It is true." She paused as surprise showed on her face. "And there are four of you. Oh my!" She wiped her forehead with a handkerchief she pulled from her sleeve. "Captain Solomon, Is it true that you are Jewish?"

"Yes."

"I would love to spend days and days discussing religion with you. As Jesus said, you Jews are a stubborn people. But there is little time, and you are in grave danger. The Swordsmen have placed a reward on your capture." She bowed deeply. "It is an honor to meet you, sir. You and your people have made huge advancements in the cause of religious freedom. You helped us regain much of the ground the Swordsmen took away. You have no idea how much you and your people have accomplished."

The heavily armed Solomon family looked at each other in amazement.

"What can we do for you?" the Sister asked.

"Help us get the babies stolen from our planet back where they belong."

"We are doing that. We understand that some of them may not have homes to go to."

"That is true."

"I suspected as much. We have sent a mission there as well. The message from your ship confirmed the one Admiral Davidson sent us. We were almost ready to deploy when yours came in."

"Then help us reclaim our computer so we can reassemble our ship and go home."

"I am afraid that won't be possible. Oh, we'll help you with your computer and your ship, but you can't go home. The place is crawling with media people. Commodore Dankese's battle group's destination was common knowledge almost before she departed. The press corps followed as quickly as they could find ships to carry them. Many of the journalists have suffered repression under the Swordsmen and are overjoyed at being able to gain revenge. They are having a field day with the carnage the Swordsmen inflicted on a planet that posed them no military threat. Even so, you will be in danger there. Not all the media people are what they seem."

"How will the settlers we left behind protect themselves?"

"The Space Force will protect them. There is discussion that they may establish an advanced officer training base in the Southern Hemisphere. No one will bother the planet again."

"What about us?"

“Admiral Davidson suggested that you visit him. He will get you refueled and resupplied. He may have some ideas.”

Rose went with the Sisters to free the captives. The Sisters felt that a familiar face would provide a calming influence on the freed prisoners. Rose was the first to find Lonnie. Had Lonnie been left more than a few hours longer, she would likely have bled to death from her injuries. Rose took special care of Lonnie. Apparently she was not the only one this guard had abused. When Lonnie pointed him out from among the prisoners, Rose strode up to him, whipped out one of the pistols she had carried from the lake bottom, and without thinking, shot him between the eyes.

“If I must be a warrior, then I shall be a warrior,” Rose said to no one in particular.

Greg, Avi and the girls reassembled the computer and put it back into its original configuration while Rose tended to the captives. When the ship was once more ready to travel, without alerting anyone they were leaving, the five of them silently departed with their two interdiction craft mounted to the sides of the cargo ship. The other ships from Homestead and the Space Force vessels that had accompanied them on the way out had long ago returned home. A battalion of Federation Marines remained to maintain control of the facility.

Greg felt a sort of poetic balance in the trip. He had left Earth what seemed a lifetime ago with his cargo ship and two small ships attached to the airlock docking ports. At that time he was leaving a home he could never return to. Once again, with his cargo ship and two small ships, he was leaving a home he could never return to. The big difference was where before he had felt alone, this time he had four women with him whom he loved and who loved him and that was all the difference in the world.

## HOMESTEAD - CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ADMIRAL DAVIDSON WAS WAITING for the Solomon family when they arrived at New St. Louis. Ellie Mae and Elvira greeted them warmly and heartily. The Admiral gave each of the women a hug as he greeted them in turn. There was a special twinkle in his eye as he greeted Rose. He started to shake Greg's hand but pulled him into a strong manly hug as well. They stood together for a long time.

Admiral Davidson broke the silence. "It is good to see you all alive. I have reviewed the reports submitted by Commodore Dankese as well as your testimony during your trip to the Swordsman base. Brilliant work, but then I would expect nothing less of you. Rachel, I was especially impressed with your skill in dispatching the Swordsman picket mother ship."

"Thank you, sir," Rachel said with a blush.

Admiral Davidson smiled. "One missile. That is incredible. How did you do it?"

"I programmed it for the cooler parts of the propulsion unit. I wanted to disable the ship, but I didn't want to kill any more people. That seemed like the best way. The missile hit at the junction between the propulsion pods and the hull. The propulsion unit broke off intact," Rachel explained.

"A tactical decision worthy of your parents. Nicely done."

"Thank you, sir."

"I heard Lt. Myrakova died valiantly," Admiral Davidson said.

"Yes, she did." Rachel said choking up a little, "I saw it happen." The admiral took her hand. "The death of a friend whether in peace or in battle is always difficult. The pain will forever be with you, but do not let it stop you from doing what you need to do."

"Yes, sir," Rachel said, her eyes misting over.

"I have some good news. The search teams retrieved the escape pods from both shuttles. Their crews were alive. I understand there were injuries, but they are expected to recover."

Greg's eyes misted over.

"That is great news," Avi said quietly.

"The Mother Superior for the Sisters of Mercy sent me a copy of the surveillance recordings of your meeting with the Reverend Stonebridge. Very impressive. I see you have taught the girls well. You know, ladies, that your teachers are two of the best in the business."

"Thank you, sir," Rachel reddened slightly as she answered.

"And I hear Grandmother is no slouch at defending herself either."

“You flatter me sir,” Rose blushed.

“That was the intent, my dear lady. I have prepared a special dinner in your honor. I would like you to join me in my private dining room in two hours time. There are people who would like to see you and I could think of no better way than with a formal dinner in your honor.”

“As you wish sir. I guess that means we have to go buy dinner clothes,” Avi quipped.

“The dress code is formal military dress whites. Greg, Avi, you will be needing these.” He handed each of them a set of Captain’s insignia. “As retired Space Force officers with the rank of Captain, you are entitled to wear them. Please keep them as a token of my gratitude for what you have done.”

He turned to the girls. “Rachel and Wendy, the Space Force has had a Reserve Officer Training Program for high school and college students since its inception. These insignia designate you as Captains in the student reserve. I have the authority to appoint you to that rank and am so doing. As such, you are entitled to wear the same uniform as your parents. Rose, the Space Force recognizes that civilians often rise to the calling and deserve to be included as if they were members of the Force. As such I am pleased to present you the Force’s combat medal. The ribbon is intended to be worn against a white or pastel blue gown. I am sure that with my ex-wives’ assistance, you will have no trouble finding suitable outfits for tonight’s festivities.”

Commodore Dankese and the Admiral’s aide were the first to greet the family as they arrived at the dinner. The two were definitely an item and stayed together the whole evening. While Admiral Davidson monopolized Avi’s attention, several of the senior officers sought Greg out and engaged him in a conversation about some of the more arcane aspects of the games he had written. Two stunningly handsome young Lieutenants quickly separated themselves from the group where they had been chatting and escorted the young ladies to the side of the room where the younger officers had congregated. The group was evenly divided between male and female and its conversation was loud and animated. Based on the vigorous body language and broad hand movements, Greg was happy to see that the girls were telling war stories. Acceptance by a group like this would help them deal with the trauma they had recently experienced. Ellie Mae and Elvira monopolized Rose. It was as if they were recruiting her to their cause. Rose did not need convincing.

Commodore Dankese and Admiral Davidson found time to speak privately with Greg and Avi. “You know,” the Admiral said, “the Swordsmen are not the only force with warlike intentions.”

Commodore Dankese added, “We are seeing more and more challenges to the Federation’s authority. We will need good officers soon. I would like your support in recruiting from among those people you trained at Homestead.”

Avi spoke first, “I cannot speak for them. They will have to make up their own minds. I understand we can never return to Homestead. I am not sure what help we can give you.”

“Never is a long time,” Admiral Davidson offered. “What I would like to do is give you a list of the survivors and tell me which you feel we should try to recruit.”

"I can do that," Avi said.

"Is that a smart thing to do?" Greg asked. "These people have been through a living hell. What makes you think they will want to do it again?"

"Many of them have already approached us. We wanted to know which we should take and which we should leave to defend their homes."

"I am surprised. As many of them died or lost loved ones, I would have thought they would not want to go through it again. I will help," Greg said.

"Very good." The Admiral spotted the chef standing at the door and announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen, dinner is served."

After dinner, the Admiral stood and asked for attention. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I have several announcements. Let me present the first five battle ribbons for service to the Federation at the Battle of Homestead. You are authorized to wear these any time you are wearing a Space Force uniform. Avi and Greg, I see you were able to find most of your previous battle ribbons at the uniform shop. I will have the rest sent to you. Rachel and Wendy, I expect that these ribbons are only the first of many such ribbons you will earn. At the conclusion of this evening's festivities we will bid our honored guests adieu. First thing in the morning they are embarking on a new adventure of which they are as of yet unaware. I would like to ask all four of the Captains Solomon and Rose to please stand. It has been my honor to serve with you. You may not be aware that reserve officers like yourselves can be recalled to active duty at any time by order of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That includes junior reserve officers in training. By order of the Joint Chiefs of Staff all four of the Captains Solomon have been called to active duty."

The Admiral handed out five sets of orders. "Rose you are hereby requested to assist in your civilian capacity. Your orders give you all the details of your new assignments, but I can hit the highlights. My technicians have refueled and refitted your ship. We have debriefed your computer and uploaded to it as many of the recent advances in technology as we can. There is a limit as to what we can do on such a remote outpost as this. Your stores have been filled with the supplies you will need for your long journey."

"Where are we going?" Rachel asked.

"As I am sure you are aware, all of the settlements that had been established up to about five years ago were in this arm of the galaxy. About five years ago several groups jumped over to the next arm. Among these were four large Jewish groups that migrated to a single planet about mid way out on the arm. Their attitudes are reminiscent of the Kibbutz movement of the 1950's. I think you will be happy there."

"Thank you," they said as one.

"Don't thank me yet. The Swordsmen know about these settlements. They had planned to go there immediately after they defeated you. You have dealt them a serious blow, but they will recover and when they do, these people will need to be defended. You know how to do that. You have done it

once and will need to do it again.”

“Out of the fat and into the fire.” Greg commented.

“Perhaps. It will be a long time before the Swordsmen can reassemble such a fleet. To assist your planning, I have included full specifications of every ship under development in the data we have loaded on your ship.” Admiral Davidson stopped as a thought occurred to him. “Greg, I am not sure you realize the significance of what you, all of you, have done. You have shown how a smaller force can defend itself against a larger one. You have given hope to small settlements around the Galaxy that they can live in peace. Do you not understand how important that is?”

“It wasn’t like we intended to save civilization. We were saving our lives and those of our loved ones. We almost failed,” Greg challenged.

Admiral Davidson lost his temper. “You didn’t fail! You didn’t almost fail! You succeeded beyond everyone’s wildest hopes. Don’t you get it? You’re heroes! You and every one of you that stayed behind. You decimated the second largest military force in the known galaxy with a handful of people! What don’t you understand?”

“Okay, so we’re heroes and you want us to do this again?” Avi asked sarcastically.

“Yes. Many years ago there was a meat company whose slogan said that they answered to a higher power. You answer to that same power. You don’t answer to me or the Federation as much as I would wish that it were otherwise. You know what you need to do as much as it might pain you to do it. I appeal to you because you are who you are, and you have the skills needed to do what needs to be done. Please recognize your gifts, and use them wisely for all our sakes.”

The silence was oppressive once the Admiral sat after his impassioned oration. This was not the admiral they knew, who was calm and rational to a fault. This was someone new, perhaps someone better. Only time would tell.

“Back to the matter at hand,” Greg said softly. “Our computer is obsolete. Will it be able to read the new data?”

Admiral Davidson blinked, totally unprepared for the sudden shift in the conversation.

“The reason your computer is obsolete is because of the technology being developed in these four settlements where you will soon be resident. They will install the latest updates without losing the heart of your electronic friend. You need to get a move on. There are many dashing young men in those settlements, Jewish young men, even better looking than these fine specimens of masculinity, who will be excited to meet you two special and talented young ladies. Greg, they know about you and view you as something of a folk hero. You are all heroes as far as I am concerned. Avi, you will be welcomed as a long lost sister. Rose, I think you will find many people who will be happy to see you.”

The Admiral stopped as something occurred to him. “Do you always carry the clear throwing knives?”

They nodded.



“Could I see them?”

There was a stunned silence as the four pulled their knives from the sheaths hidden behind their necks. Rose slid one from her long flowing sleeve. They silently stood with their weapons before them.

“Avi, could I see the knife, the one that killed Stonebridge?” Avi carefully held it out in both hands for the Admiral to pick up. He gingerly lifted it from her hands. He held it to the light. He admired the feel of it in his hand. He checked the edge.

“You girls have to promise me you won’t use these on your new boyfriends or their ex-girlfriends.”

They giggled and nodded, blushing.

“A clear, high impact, polymer throwing knife! This is an incredible piece of workmanship.” He continued. “Did the creator of these survive the assault?”

“Yes, he did,” Avi replied.

“Do you think he could make a ceremonial sword out of this material?”

“I think he would enjoy that.”

“Good, I will have Commodore Dankese seek him out and make a set of these for me.” He held it out for Avi to take. “Enjoy the rest of your evening. Get a good night’s rest for in the morning you need to depart on your next adventure. I wish you all the best of luck. You will need it. You have another planet to save.”

In the morning the family boarded their ship and jumped for a planet in need of their special talents.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER ONE

TWO TEENAGED GIRLS SLOWLY DESCENDED the ramp to the spaceport's flight apron on the way to their ship. Their parents, walking hand in hand, followed slowly. Their grandmother completed the troupe. Exhilarated and exhausted from the previous night's party in honor of their victory fending off the fanatical Samurai Swordsmen's attack on their home planet, they wended their way across the expansive flight operations building cluttered with small flight support vehicles. Someone with better intentions than sense had the victory march from the Star Wars movie playing on the port's public address system.

The station's workers applauded as the five flight-suited people walked by carrying their helmets under their arms. They had led a force of colonists and refugees in defense of their home planet to annihilate an experienced force many times their size. Of course, there were those who said they had brought the attack on themselves. Even the most militant among them recognized that had they not published the inflammatory factual history of the Swordsman Church, the Swordsmen might have left them alone. If they had not published pornographic videos and literature ridiculing the Swordsmen, they might have been ignored. Had they not harbored hundreds of women fleeing abusive Swordsman husbands, they might have escaped notice. Had they not provided safe haven for activists opposed to the Swordsmen, they might have gotten away with it. However, had they not published a series of combat simulations deliberately designed to mislead their Swordsman enemies, they would be dead.

The four women and one man doggedly crossing the flight apron to the departure gate did not look much like the heroes the media made them appear to be. The girls were among the youngest in the history of the Federation Space Force to participate in space combat operations. Their parents were seasoned veterans of the Federation's Pirate Interdiction Campaigns. Even their pacifist grandmother had killed enemy soldiers. Unfortunately, that all conspired to mean that they could never go home again. Their secret planet was not a secret, and they could no longer safely live there.

Given the sensitivity of the family's situation, the Federation Space Force, in its infinite bureaucratic wisdom, had recalled the entire family to active duty. Rather than allow them to find somewhere quiet and peaceful, it put them at the point of the sword. It had assigned them to the planet they expected the Swordsmen would attack next once they regrouped after the devastating losses they had suffered at the hands of a force a fraction of their size that these people had trained and led into battle. Their status as active duty military afforded them little protection, and it carried responsibilities they could not avoid.

In spite of what had been intended as a hero's send off, the expressions on the faces of the five flight-suited space travelers were not those of conquering warriors. They put on the show expected of them because they understood its importance, but their eyes betrayed them. The expressions were of sadness at the tremendous cost of the victory. Their eyes drooped and their shoulders hunched ever so slightly as they walked as steadily as they could toward an uncertain future. At best they would establish a defense system on a new planet against an attack that might never come. At worst, they would fight more battles like the one they had survived and many of their friends had not.

"Request permission to come aboard," the older girl addressed their ship's computer.

"Permission granted, Captain Rachel Solomon."

“Request permission to come aboard,” the younger girl addressed the ship’s computer.

“Permission granted, Captain Wendy Solomon.”

“Request permission to come aboard,” the girls’ mother addressed the ship’s computer.”

“Permission granted, Captain Avelina Solomon.”

“Request permission to come aboard,” the girls’ father addressed the ship’s computer.

“Permission granted, Captain Greg Solomon.”

“Request permission to come aboard,” the girls’ grandmother addressed the ship’s computer.

“Permission granted, Rose Bardwell. Welcome back all of you.”

The ship was one of the few constants in their lives. Greg and this ship had been hijacked by the first group of refugees to settle the planet they had until recently called home. As a family, they had spent almost as much time on this ship as they had on land. In some ways it was more “home” than the one that had been destroyed on their home planet. The family owned this ship and the two warships attached to it. Greg was pleased to see that their personal effects had been properly transferred from the visiting officer’s quarters to their ship. Once having verified that his and his wife’s Pirate Interdiction P I warships had been properly secured to their travel cradles on the cargo ship, he took his seat in the command chair. Avi took the flight engineer seat. “Command mode,” Greg addressed the computer, “Status report, please.”

“All systems ready for departure, sir.”

“Please display the cargo manifest.”

The manifest included heavy machinery, sophisticated research equipment, machine tools and medical equipment. Attached to the manifest was Federation Nuclear Regulatory Commission authorization documentation for the ten new, yet to be fueled, nuclear reactors listed on the manifest. Had Greg examined the documentation more closely, he would have seen that these reactors were the same model as the reactors in his and his wife’s P I ships. This certainly was a strange cargo. Greg was surprised that there were no munitions and no weapons other than their two warships. The lack of agricultural products in the cargo seemed odd. Wherever they were going was an unusual place.

“How soon can we depart?” Greg asked the computer.

“As soon as you are ready. The sooner the better.”

Greg verified that everyone was in their flight seats and requested clearance from the traffic controller. Once the protocols had been observed, Greg said, “Shall we light the candle and blow this pop stand?”

Avi leaned over and took her husband’s hand. “Onward and upward,” she smiled.

Greg engaged the reactor and headed for the quiet of open space. Once they were clear of local traffic, the ship jumped into hyper drive and sped towards its destination. Greg was accustomed to traveling between stars within the same arm of the galaxy, but this was the first time he had jumped

between the arms. Even in hyper drive, this was a long trip. Running at two G acceleration and subsequent deceleration, the trip would take three months, thirteen weeks, exactly ninety-one days. That is a long time for five people to be locked up in one very tiny spacecraft with precious few ways to escape each other's company. While the trip from their previous home, "Homestead", to Earth took three months, it was generally done at one G and was therefore much less stressful.

For most of the first two weeks of the voyage, everyone slept when they were not on watch. Greg had divided the day into four six-hour watches. The watches were redundant. The ship flew itself and needed no human intervention once hyper drive was established. Changing the course once the transition to hyper drive had been made was extremely difficult and, barring a mechanical failure, there was nothing to do that the ship's computer could not handle on its own.

With the psychological weight of the battles fought in the previous few months and the physical weight of two G of acceleration, sleep was a welcome relief. A third of the way into the voyage, Rachel went looking for her grandmother and could not find her. "Computer, where is Rose?"

"Rose is in your mother's ship," the computer answered.

"I thought it was shut down."

"She asked me to turn it on so she could go there to be alone."

Rachel did not like the thought of her grandmother alone in a warship designed to challenge a fleet of warships and survive. Pirate Interdiction ships and the people who flew them were a breed apart. Both Rachel's parents were P I pilots. "One of the coolest, meanest, nastiest, toughest, most heavily armed little warships ever built," was how her mother described her ship.

In a desperate attempt to stem the wave of space borne piracy that threatened the stability of the Federation, the "PI" ship had been designed as a sort of "Lone Ranger" in space. The Space Force essentially gave a band of people with recognized homicidal psychopathic tendencies a license to kill and the weapons with which to do it. With the controls activated, there were entirely too many ways Rose could accidentally hurt herself or them. Rachel made her way through the airlock to the other ship and found the combat displays around the fire control position almost completely closed. Rose was inside the sphere of displays and, short of damaging one of them, there was no way to get her out. In full combat mode, the displays formed an air tight seal which could protect the fire control officer from a hull breach that would kill the crew on the flight deck. Rachel thought she heard a sob and a sniffle. Rachel was good at many things, but dealing with people crying was not one of them. It was time to go for help.

"Mom, Grandma's in your ship. She's in the back seat and has the displays closed. What do we do?" Rachel said when she returned to the cargo ship's control room.

"Computer, how long has Rose been in my ship?"

"Thirty six hours."

"Have you disabled the fire control systems?"

"Yes. All systems except life support have been disabled."

"Can you report on what she has been doing in there?"

“She exercised a little, slept fitfully and mostly she has been crying. I tried to distract her with movies, but I think I made matters worse. She must have loved him very much.”

“Who?” Avi asked.

“Your father. She called his name several times.”

“That’s not good,” Rachel commented, “why would she be doing that?”

Avi sighed. “My mother has always been a pacifist. She and my father went to peace rallies when they were dating. She hated the idea of war and the destruction it caused. She longed for peaceful resolutions. Even in the family she tried to maintain peace. Being here with us under these conditions must be quite a shock. Look at what her life has become in just the last few months. She killed how many men in combat? Three? Four? Five? There’s the one she shot on the foot bridge. Will we ever know how many of those Marines she killed when she was hiding in the bottom of the pond? And then there’s the one she shot at point blank range.”

“The one that raped Lonnie,” Rachel added.

“Yes, she looked him in the eye and shot him in the face. I thought she was going to spit on him. I had no idea she’d shoot him. If I hadn’t been there, I wouldn’t have believed it. She hated the fact that I entered the military. She most certainly did not want me killing people. It bothered her that we had turned you girls into fighters.”

“Yes, I know,” Rachel said. “She told me.”

“Now look what her life has become. She is a warrior. She is what she did not want to be.”

“Is she really?” Rachel asked. “The guy that raped Lonnie, she shot him in anger. The guy on the bridge, she shot him in anger because he destroyed our house. The other guys she shot because they would have killed her. She had reasons to do what she did. It was personal. For us it’s not. It’s cold. There are no faces. There are no names. Well, except for Stonebridge and his guards, but that was self-defense. For her, these are real men with real faces. Kind of like that guy Helen killed by kicking him in the throat. She never really got over that.”

“Helen had to kill him, or he would have killed Myra.”

“I know that, and she knows that, but her emotions won’t let her forget it.”

“The question is what do we do about it?”

“Do about what?” Wendy asked sleepily as she wandered out of her quarters to the flight deck.

“Grandma locked herself in Mom’s ship and won’t come out.”

Wendy rubbed her eyes and stretched. “I wondered how long it would take. I’ll get her. Give me a couple of hours. I can take care of this.”

Wendy yawned and headed back to her room. A few minutes later she emerged looking only slightly more awake than she was before, but she was wearing her flight suit instead of her pajamas.

She wandered back to the galley and after a brief search of the freezer found what she was looking for. She yawned again and with an armload of prepared food, scratched the back of her head and meandered off in the direction of her grandmother holed up in her mother's ship.

Wendy entered the ship through the air lock and proceeded to the crew compartment behind the flight deck. The P I ship's flight deck was much smaller than the cargo ship's. It had two seats, where the cargo ship had three, and it only had one bunk where the cargo ship had two crew cabins and six passenger cabins, one of which Wendy was using. Designed for a crew of two, but usually operated solo, the P I ship's crew accommodations were cramped at best. Wendy paused to look out the view port at the blackness of space. The few galaxies she saw in the darkness were unimaginably far away. The other side of the ship faced the center of the galaxy they were traveling around.

Wendy popped open the oven and slid in one of the containers she had taken from the cargo ship's freezer. The remainder she put in the freezer in the P I ship's galley. Within a few minutes, the faint scent of cinnamon wafted out of the oven.

Wendy heard rustling noises inside the display shell and knew she was on the right track. Her grandmother had not eaten for a couple of days, and cinnamon buns were her favorite snack. Wendy stretched out in the bunk at the back of the crew compartment while she waited.

"How do you open this?" Rose asked quietly.

"Push the yellow handle away from you slowly."

"Oh, there it is."

Wendy stood as the servos opened the shell formed by the displays. Rose took a few tentative steps and fell into Wendy's arms. Wendy picked her grandmother up like a child and set her on the bunk. She opened the oven and broke apart the package of rolls. "Share?" Wendy asked in her most childlike voice.

Rose smiled, "Share."

They ate the rolls in silence for a few minutes. Wendy wandered to the pilot's seat. "What are you doing?" Rose asked.

"Disabling the monitoring equipment. This way no one can hear what we say," Wendy replied.

"That's kind of you."

"Well, you are my grandmother, and I do need to take care of you."

"I thought I was supposed to take care of you."

Wendy laughed and cut off the system. The only information about their activities available to the remainder of the family anxiously waiting in the cargo ship's control room came from the motion sensors incorporated in the cargo ship's navigation systems. For twenty-four hours, Avi, Rachel and Greg stood watch to see when Wendy and Rose would emerge.

Wendy arrived on the cargo ship's flight deck first. "She'll be fine. She needs lots of TLC and she'll get used to the idea of what happened. She needed to understand she is still the same person she

was before only different.”

Rachel made a face that said “I don’t understand.”

“Just love her like before and everything will work out.”

Laboring under the stress of the two G acceleration, Rose entered the cargo ship’s flight deck. Rachel and Avi ran to her. Even Greg, who was not normally as demonstrative as his wife or daughters, hugged Rose protectively. Together they settled her in the flight engineer’s seat.

“Are you all right?” Avi asked. “We can slow down to one G if it will help.”

“Avi, the last time you asked me that question, what did I tell you?”

“That was then, and this is now.”

“The answer is the same. We need to get where we’re going.”

“I’m worried about you,” Avi said.

“We all are,” Greg added.

“Don’t be. Thanks to my brilliant granddaughter, I will be just fine.”

All eyes turned to Wendy. “What did you say?” Rachel asked.

“I said a lot of things.” Wendy ducked the question, “but I don’t spill secrets. Unlike someone else I know.” She elbowed her sister.

Rose smiled. “Wendy! Be nice to your sister for a change.”

Rose turned to face Avi. “She offered to take me anywhere I wanted to go. She said she could split the small ship off from the big one and take me anywhere in the galaxy I wanted to go. I’m not sure I believed her, but I wanted to believe her. We talked about where we would go and what we would do when we got there. We decided that anywhere we went together was probably better than where we might go apart and since we were all going this way now, we might as well keep going and see what we found.”

Unable to follow the logic, Rachel shook her head. “Amazing.”

Rose looked at Rachel and then to Wendy. “This is why the two of you must always work together. You are so different and yet so alike. If you work together you could rule the galaxy. Apart, well, we won’t go there, will we Avi?”

“No, mother, some things are best left alone.”

## ERETZ - CHAPTER TWO

**T**WELVE YEAR OLD EMERSON Winthrop III went to the post office to pick up the package. He carefully shook the snow off his boots before entering the building. Small for his age, his head barely cleared the counter. He handed the attendant the card he found in his mailbox when he arrived home from school. His mother worked second shift at the fabric mill, and somehow she could never remember to check the mail before she left for work.

He knew what the package was before the attendant gave it to him. He had not heard from his father in a year. The Swordsmen had been crushingly defeated in a battle, and his father's unit had been part of the battle. The box looked like the type that electronic games come in. "Merry Christmas," the attendant had said. Emerson had smiled at the man even though Swordsmen do not celebrate Christian holidays.

Emerson did not cry until he opened the box. The box contained his father's effects. There was a letter addressed to him. His father always called him "Runt" because he was so small.

*"Hey, Runt, I must be dead if you are reading this letter. If I am dead I know I died in the service of the Shogun, our Warrior Lord. He lifted me up and gave me forgiveness for my sins. I was dirty, and he made me clean. It is a great honor to serve Him. I know you will become a great soldier in His name like me. Take care of your mother. Do not let her marry outside of the religion. Find who killed me, and kill them for me. Whoever killed me is a heathen infidel and deserves to die a painful death. Make them suffer and understand the power of the mighty Shogun. They should die knowing the error of their ways as the Shogun has spoken. You are the point of the sword. Let the Shogun's teachings guide your path. Your loving father."*

Emerson left his homework and the box on the kitchen table and went to bed. He had been taught to honor his father and do as he had been told. He did not remember a loving father. He remembered a father who hated him. He remembered a father that was angry because his seed produced a son that was not big and strong, but small and weak. Emerson wanted his mother to remarry. He wanted her to marry a man that would love her and take care of her and not yell at her all the time. He hoped she would not marry another Swordsman like his father.

Emerson awoke to the sound of his mother screaming. She had found the box when she arrived home from work. He tried to comfort her but she pushed him away. There were two letters open on the table that had arrived with the mail. He read the first one. It was addressed to his mother.

*"It is with heavy heart that I must inform you of the death of your husband / father / brother / son. Rest assured that he died valiantly in the service of the Shogun, our Warrior Lord, and has risen to him in glory. His place in heaven is his reward for his valiant service. Attached please find the final payment for the services he has rendered to the Swordsman Church. As this concludes our obligations to you, the elders of the Swordsman Church wish that you may live in the favor and light of the spirit of the Shogun all the rest of your days."*

The one from the Federation Joint Military at least had her name spelled correctly.

*"Your husband has been confirmed to have been killed in combat at the planet of Homestead. The exact circumstances of his death are still being determined. His helicopter was shot down, but he*



*survived the crash. His body was found some distance away from the helicopter. He had been shot at close range and died of the gunshot wounds. Due to the fact that your husband died in combat in the service of a military force other than the Federation on a planet other than the one his unit was authorized to protect, there will be no survivor benefits. If you feel that you are deserving of survivor benefits, you may send an appeal in writing to the address above."*

Emerson stood in the semi-darkness of the kitchen. Without his father's military pay and no survivor benefits, how were they going to have enough money to eat? No wonder his mother had screamed. What were they to do? Emerson went to bed and slept fitfully. He heard his mother arise several times during the night. When Emerson went to school, his mother was in her room. He dared not wake her for fear of her anger after not being able to sleep the night before. His mind was not on his schoolwork that day. He told no one of his father's death. When he returned from school, his mother's coat was still on the back of the door. Slowly, fearfully, he opened his mother's bedroom door. He could not hear her breathing. He reached out to touch her and she was cold.

"Overdose of sleeping pills," the policeman said. Before the night was over, Emerson was in a city-run orphanage with only the clothes from his closet in a locker at the end of his bed. Everything else had been taken to pay their debts to their landlord.

The orphanage was too far from his old school for him to walk so he went to a new school that was not as good as his old school. Big boys beat him up after school so he took to staying late in the library. As long as he was back in time for supper, no one in the orphanage cared where he went or what he did. Every night after supper he hid in a small store room and read until it was time for bed. He did not associate with the other children even though many of them were orphans of Swordsman soldiers. Every Sunday a Swordsman minister came to give services for the Swordsman children. The minister reminded Emerson of his obligation to carry on his father's legacy.

Too small to pass the physical for the Swordsman Marines, Emerson searched for another solution. A recruiting poster for the Space Force implied that people of smaller stature were welcome to apply for positions as pilots and flight engineers. Emerson used the public school's computers in the media center to research the Space Force and found out that many of the Space Force's officers were as small as he was. There was no way he could pay for college on his own, but there was money in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps. In two years he would be old enough. There was a chapter at his school. He would need to bring his grades up, but he would be able to do that if he studied enough. The best part was that the Federation would pay for his education and he could then use that education against them as a Swordsman Space Force officer.

Emerson joined the school's boxing team and learned to fight. In wrestling season he joined the wrestling team. He went to public summer school and spent most of his time in the gym. Being at school was better than hanging out at the orphanage with nothing to do. Each day he became a little stronger and a little faster. He planned his travel to and from school to avoid the boys who had attacked him before. On the afternoon of the second Shogun Memorial Day following his mother's death, on their way home from a particularly emotional rendering of the holy texts, the bully boys jumped him as he came out of church. Having driven all the Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists out of the neighborhood, the only ones left were the Swordsmen and they needed someone to relieve their pent up fury over the brutal killing of the soldiers who had died defending the Shogun's honor throughout the Church's history. Lacking a better victim, they vented their pulpit inspired anger on Emerson. In the ensuing fight, Emerson laid two of the four on the ground before a strong hand grabbed his jacket

collar and lifted him off the ground.

“Where are your parents, boy?” the assistant pastor demanded.

“Ain’t got no parents.” Emerson kicked the man, hitting him in the knee.

The man spun Emerson around and grabbed the front of his collar with both hands as he held the squirming boy well off the ground. “Don’t lie to me, boy!”

“He’s an orphan!” One of the boys teased. “Orphan! Orphan! Nobody wants a runty orphan!” Emerson stopped squirming.

“Is that true, boy?”

Emerson hung his head. “Yes, sir.”

The man backhanded one of the bully boys across the face. He pointed to the two on the ground. “Pick up that trash! If I see any of you fighting again, I’ll kill the lot of you.”

The two still standing picked up their friends and escaped from the man’s wrath. Still holding Emerson off the ground, the man stormed around to the back door of the church. He threw open the door to the kitchen. A dozen women and girls were preparing the evening’s meal. The man dropped Emerson in a chair. “Wash him and feed him. I want him in my office in an hour.”

One of the older women motioned for two of the teenaged girls to attend to Emerson. Slightly frightened of this small bloodstained creature that had been dumped in their midst, the girls scurried to do as they were told. They took him upstairs to their rooms and pointed him in the direction of the shower. When he emerged, they had fresh clothes for him. The clothes were several sizes too large, but they were clean and smelled nicer than he could ever remember clothes smelling before.

The girls led Emerson back to the kitchen where they served him meat loaf, potatoes and vegetables. The milk was fresh and sweet unlike the old milk they gave him at the orphanage. When he was finished eating, they took him to the assistant pastor’s office.

“What’s your name, boy?” the big man asked from behind his monstrous desk.

“Emerson, sir. Emerson Winthrop the third, sir.”

“Emerson, do you have a nickname? What do your friends call you.”

“Don’t have no friends, sir. My dad used to call me Runt.”

“Well, Emerson, sit down. Tell me about your dad.”

“He was a Swordsman Marine, sir. Helicopter pilot. He died in the battle at Homestead.”

“Damn Jews. Jews and perverts. They’re worse than the Muslims.”

“Excuse me sir?”

“We lost almost our entire space force in that battle to a bunch of Jews and perverts.”

“Sir, I know what a Jew is, but what is a pervert?”

“Someone who doesn’t believe that marriage is just for a man and a woman. There are lots of different kinds, but they are destroying the moral fiber of the human race. Their sinful ways are going to bring the wrath of God down on all of us. We will die for their sins! We must stop their evil.”

Emerson could see that the man’s face was getting red from anger. “I see, thank you, sir.”

The man calmed down and said, “Where did you learn to fight like that?”

“The boxing and wrestling teams at school, sir.”

“They taught you well.”

“Yes, sir and I worked hard.”

“I can see that. Where do you live?”

“At the city orphanage, sir.”

“Wretched place.”

Emerson sat in silence.

The man stared at him for a long time.

“Emerson, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Emerson blushed and looked down.

“I promise not to laugh,” the man said gently.

“I want to go to the Federation Space Force Academy and learn everything they can teach me. Then I want to join the Swordsman Space Force as a fighter pilot and kill the people that killed my father.”

The man sat quietly for a moment. “What does your mother think of this?”

“She committed suicide the night we found out about my father.”

“Ah, that’s right, you’re an orphan.”

The man thought for a second and pressed a button on the comm unit on his desk.

“Yes, father,” a female voice answered.

“Please make up the guest bedroom. Mr. Emerson Winthrop the third is going to be staying with us for a while.”

“Yes, father.”

“But…” Emerson stammered.

The man held up his hand. He put through a call to the orphanage’s superintendent. After identifying himself, he said, “My wife and daughter will be arriving this evening to pick up Emerson Winthrop’s belongings. Please have them ready.”

*"Yes, sir, most assuredly sir, will they be authorized to sign the receipt for him?"*

"Yes, my wife will. We wouldn't want you in trouble with the inspectors would we?"

*"No sir, thank you sir, right away sir."*

The man turned back to Emerson "That man is an idiot. If he wasn't the governor's cousin he would be sorting recycles out of the trash where he belongs."

Emerson stared at him not knowing what to think.

"Emerson," the man started, "I have no sons. I have four wonderful daughters, but that leaves me no one to pass on my teachings. The great father of our church, Shimazaki Tanaka said it is a blessing and an honor to care for the son of a fallen soldier. I will take you into my home and raise you as my son. I will help you with your schoolwork and see that you get into the Academy. When you get out of the Academy you will transfer to the Swordsmen and seek your revenge not only on the people that killed your father, but all the Jews and perverts that the Federation loves so much."

"Yes, sir, thank you sir."

"Don't thank me now. You'll hate me soon because you will earn your keep."

"Sir, I am not afraid of hard work."

"Good, oh, and one more thing, if you make one improper move toward my daughters, I will castrate you on the spot."

"Yes, sir, I understand sir."

"Can you sing?"

"Not very well, sir."

"You'll learn. Go out that door and down the hall, second door on the right. See the choirmaster. Tell him I sent you."

"Yes, sir."

Emerson rose and quickly headed out the door. Who could have ever imagined that almost getting the daylights beaten out of him could change his life for the better?

## ERETZ - CHAPTER THREE

THREE MONTHS TRAVELING in hyper drive is a long time. Even a family as close knit as the battle hardened Solomon family would be hard put to make the trip peacefully. To say they got on each other's nerves would be putting it mildly. There is only so much physical and mental training one can do in a day without burning out. Fortunately they each had their own rooms and the ship was "awake" around the clock so that when the others became too much to bear, they could retreat into isolation either physically in their rooms or temporally by adjusting their sleep schedule. Even so, by the end of the journey, they were glad to see the system they would call home gradually expand in their displays.

As they approached the system, Greg called them together. "We believe we are approaching a friendly system, but we don't know that. Even if the system is friendly, there might be hostile ships around the perimeter conducting espionage activities. I have programmed the computer to transition out of hyper drive far enough away from the system that we can be detected. We can detect other ships in the system, but not close enough that we should be in range of anything that might want to shoot at us."

Avi nodded. Their approach to the system had been the subject of lengthy discussions.

"After we drop out of hyper drive, Avi, Rachel, Wendy and I will separate the ships. While the four of us are out doing that, Rose please stay on the flight deck and monitor the scans for any signs of hostility. Once we have the ships separated, Rachel and Wendy will return to command this ship and head straight for the spaceport. Avi and I will take flank positions and respond to any threats we might encounter. Everyone understand?"

Rose looked at Rachel and asked, "Why are we not going straight in?"

"This is a classic scenario out of one of Dad's combat simulator games," Rachel replied. "We are approaching a system we believe to be friendly. Several things could happen. We could get there and find no defenses and no one knows we're here until we knock on the front door. That would be nice, but Dad doesn't consider it very likely. We could drop out of hyperspace and find a defensive system that is aware of our arrival and greets us with directions to our dock at the spaceport. This is the most likely scenario, or at least the one we hope is most likely. Perhaps we could drop out of hyperspace and find a defensive system that is not aware we are coming. We pass messages and protocols back and forth until we get clearance to proceed to our dock at the spaceport. This is the second most likely scenario. The third most likely possibility is that outside the friendly defensive perimeter are hostile ships involved in monitoring and espionage activities. We may be forced to deal with the hostile force before we get through to the friendly ones. Finally, the least likely and most hazardous, is that the planet has fallen to the enemy without our knowledge, and as soon as we drop out of hyper drive we find ourselves being attacked. By dropping out of hyper drive well away from the system, we put ourselves outside whatever is happening long enough for us to arm our systems and repel any force that might wish to attack us."

"That makes sense."

"Everyone needs a good night sleep. Tomorrow promises to be a long day," Greg cautioned.

The ship dropped out of hyper drive, and the teams quickly separated the three ships. Rose sat at the cargo ship's console monitoring the sensor displays. Greg's ship was away, and they were still working on Avi's ship when Rose called them. "I have an unknown vessel headed in our direction."

"Can you identify it?" Greg asked.

"It's too far away, but the computer makes it as a possible Swordsman."

"Transmit coordinates," Greg said.

When the coordinates had been displayed on his console he said, "We have time."

He transmitted a set of rendezvous coordinates to Avi's ship. The point he had chosen was half way between the cargo ship and the advancing unknown vessel. "Avi, meet me here."

Rose interrupted, "The computer is saying it is definitely a Swordsman in a Valiant 105 scout." She paused. "It says standard armament on a 105 is two forward firing tubes with eight missiles each and four forward firing lasers. Four more lasers only fire aft."

The girls returned to the ship before their parents jumped into hyper drive. Rachel took the pilot's seat. Wendy took the co-pilot and Rose sat in the flight engineer seat. No sooner had Wendy taken her place than her hands flew over the controls. Within seconds she announced. "Lasers armed."

"Lasers?" Rose asked. "I thought only the little ships were armed."

"Nope," Wendy smiled. "Brownie put these in a long time ago. We never needed them so we never mentioned them."

"I miss Brownie," Rachel commented.

"I think we will all miss them. They are four wonderful women," Rose added. "I still find it hard to believe that five women drafted your father into carrying them to his secret planet. Your father has a stubborn streak that's impossible to get around."

"We noticed!" Wendy laughed.

Rose continued reminiscing about the women they had left behind on Homestead who had been so instrumental in changing all their lives. "Katherine was such a pleasure to be around. Strong-willed, resourceful, she was my favorite of the group. Little Sam loved her with all her heart. She would do anything Katherine asked. Sam had the most amazing recipes. She could whip up a meal in no time with the most wonderful ingredients. Blondie was brilliant in a fragile sort of way. That woman was a fire storm on a good day. Certainly exciting to be around. Brownie was every bit as brilliant, but so focused on her ships."

"Brownie could fix anything on a ship," Wendy said softly.

"We can't forget Myra," Rachel added with a tear in her eye.

Rose smiled, "Myra. Goodness! That was the most masculine woman I ever met. I used to swear testosterone flowed in her veins instead of blood. Destroying that battleship at the cost of her

own life saved us all from being killed.”

“I don’t know anyone else that would have done that,” Rachel commented.

“You and Dad almost did,” Wendy challenged.

“No, we didn’t hang around like she did. She could have retreated after the second volley of missiles instead of firing the third.”

“But it was the third volley that detonated the reactor.”

“The ship was dying. It just would have taken a little longer.”

“Can you be sure? Look, Rachel, you and Dad hit the battleship you were fighting with a nuclear bomb embedded inside an asteroid and it lived. How many tons of rock hit the ship’s armor? It kept on firing.”

“It was damaged and having trouble maneuvering.”

“But it wasn’t dead. You had to jump behind it and blow it from the pipes to finally kill it.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Myra saw what happened to you and knew that she had to hang around until she was sure the battleship was dead. She had no choice.”

“I guess. I will miss her.”

“There are many people we will miss for a very long time,” Rose said. “Our job is to see that they did not die in vain. Our mission is to stop the killing.”

The two warships dropped out of hyper drive and appeared on the cargo ship’s displays. They broadcast their ship identification and recognition codes on open frequencies so that the Swordsman ship would have no doubt as to who they were.

“I’ll bet that Swordsman pilot needs to change his pants right about now!” Rachel laughed. “A single 105 against two P I’s! Run baby! Run!”

The Swordsman ship abruptly changed course and at what appeared to be a crushing 10 G’s of acceleration quickly transitioned into hyper drive.

“Bu Bye!” Wendy chuckled.

“What’s this?” Rose pointed to a notation on the display.

“Well, now what have we here?” Rachel asked. She keyed the com. “Dad we have a bogey dead ahead holding its place in orbit. It does not appear to have changed position since we arrived.”

Rachel paused, perplexed. “Um, Dad, radar does not see it. I am getting readings from an energy source. We can see it on visual. It looks like a V1 buzz bomb. Why would a space craft have

wings like that?"

"I'm on it!" Greg answered. He relayed the coordinates to Avi and they jumped toward the unidentified ship.

Seconds before their arrival, it jumped into hyper drive to escape.

"Did anyone get an ID on the ship?" Greg asked as he watched it disappear.

No one could identify the ship. "That is not a comforting thought," Greg mused aloud.

Detecting no further threats, they re-docked the P I ships and continued toward the system's only inhabited planet.



## ERETZ - CHAPTER FOUR

EMERSON FOUND HIS LIFE in the church a mixed blessing. He was eating better and gaining weight, but he was working harder. In addition to his schoolwork, The Reverend, for that was how Emerson was to refer to him, piled him with religious studies. Emerson read the authorized histories of the church and was forced to read Mark Stonebridge's unauthorized history. Emerson spent an hour each day in strenuous physical activity. In the summer he learned to swim. In the winter he shoveled the snow off the church driveway and sidewalks. The Reverend taught him chess and introduced him to war game simulations. Emerson studied all of Greg's games since, by now, their interrelationships were common knowledge.

The Reverend maintained an intense regimen for Emerson, and Emerson rewarded him by working as hard as he was asked. Emerson continually met the expectations of him even when the expectations changed. As Emerson's background in religious literature expanded, the Reverend recruited him to help write sermons. Emerson led church history study classes first under The Reverend's direction and then on his own. The Reverend was clearly proud of him, continually encouraged him, but never relaxed the intensity of Emerson's training.

The only time Emerson was ever punished and the only time the Reverend apologized to him was when the Reverend thought he was getting too close to one of his daughters. The Reverend's second daughter, Harumi, had a passionate love for small animals. She was continually bringing something home to be tended and nursed back to health. She had picked a litter of starving kittens out of the snow, but they kept squirming out of her grasp. She asked Emerson to help her carry them back to the kitchen. The kittens became balled up in Emerson's coat. He was trying to hand them over to her when the Reverend saw them with their heads together and their hands looking suspiciously like something untoward was going on. Furiously, The Reverend raced across the kitchen and backhanded Emerson across the face so hard he fell to the floor. Crying kittens scattered everywhere.

The Reverend, immediately realizing his mistake, stooped to pick up the escaping balls of fur. "Emerson, I owe you an apology. I mistook your act of charity for something other than what it was."

Emerson nodded. His jaw hurt too much to speak. Blood ran down his cheek from the break in the skin below his eye. Hearing the commotion, the rest of the family ran into the kitchen. They gasped when they saw Emerson's face.

"I hit him. It was a mistake. I will go pray for forgiveness."

The eldest girl brought Emerson to the sink and cleaned the wound while the rest of the family tended to the kittens. The Reverend never punished Emerson again, and Emerson never gave him reason. The residual pain of the blow lasted for months. The psychological pain for years. Emerson long remained wary of The Reverend's temper because seeing him lash out this time was much different from the way he had lashed out on the day he had rescued Emerson from the four bullies on the front steps. The Reverend was not so unlike his own father, Emerson concluded. It was not a comforting thought.

Emerson was drawn to Harumi, the second daughter, in spite of his fear of her father. Harumi seemed to like him the same way she liked the kittens and birds she rescued. Maybe she thought of him as a big stray kitten. He often wished he thought an orphan boy with no money and no family could

have a chance with one as goodhearted as her.

Emerson's grades improved with every test he took. Quiet in class, his papers and essays revealed a depth of thought and a thoroughness of research that was unusual in someone from one of the city's lower level schools. He did get into fights from time to time, but none of his assailants got closer than the flat of his knuckles. Obsessively focused on his goal, Emerson strove with all his energy for the day when he could take the Academy admission test.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER FIVE

A COMPUTERIZED VOICE GREETED the inbound cargo ship on an open channel.

“Welcome to Eretz. Please identify your ships and your personnel.”

Greg read off the identification codes for the two warships and the cargo ship. This was a formality since the cargo ship’s computer had already sent that information when the defense system’s computer had hailed it. He recited the names and ranks of his family members. He transmitted a manifest with the cargo of machinery and spare parts that had been loaded on his ship for transfer to this planet.

“Please hold your current course and wait for escort.”

A Valiant Industries Model 86 approached them and instructed them to follow. The ship was painted bright white with pale blue accent stripes and pale blue six pointed stars on its flat surfaces. They parked the cargo ship on a small moon at what was clearly a freight marshaling area. What struck them the most as they approached was the fact that everything was painted white with blue trim and boasted large blue identification signs in both Federation Standard and Hebrew. Myriads of small white and blue cargo handling craft bustled around both on and above the surface. Stevedores immediately swarmed over the cargo ship efficiently unloading everything into nearby warehouses.

The traffic controller instructed them to separate the warships from the cargo ship and descend to the planet’s landing site with the warships.

A small but impressive spaceport awaited them on the surface. Like the freight yard, the spaceport swarmed with small vehicles both on and above the surface carrying freight and personnel. As with the other port, everything was painted a high gloss white with blue trim. The vehicles were painted white with blue highlighting and carried the Star of David on their flat surfaces. The port itself was impeccably clean. The workers wore uniforms that were either white with blue trim or blue with white trim. There was an aura obvious even as the new arrivals walked down the steps to the surface that order reigned supreme. This was a spaceport unlike any they had ever seen. Even Admiral Davidson’s impeccably managed port was not this organized.

Two heavily armed soldiers in formal dress blue uniforms sporting the Star of David on their helmets stood at parade rest at the bottom of the stairs and waited until Greg and family were on the ground. They snapped to attention and saluted. Stunned, Greg and Avi returned the salutes. “Welcome to Eretz. Please follow us.” The soldiers turned and marched toward one of the buildings.

Greg and Avi fell in behind the soldiers. The girls and Rose followed behind them. Still in their Federation gray flight suits, they felt out of place amongst all this white and blue.

The soldiers held open a pair of double doors. The five travelers entered. The soldiers closed the doors and departed. The contrast between this reception and the one at the Swordsman base crossed their minds. A large empty waiting room appeared before them. A solitary elderly man sat behind a long counter beneath a giant “Immigration” sign written in Federation Standard, Cyrillic and in Hebrew. Beyond his position was another set of doors and another sign in three languages that read “Welcome to Eretz” The man looked up as they approached. He was old enough to have been Greg’s father and did bear a passing resemblance to the old man now over two decades gone. “Documents please, one at a

time, you first.” He reached out to Greg. He examined the documents and asked for Avi’s then each of the others’ documents. He then asked each of them to place their hands on a pair of pedestals for verification of identification. Once he was satisfied, he placed all their documents in a drawer. “You won’t need these,” he said as Greg and Avi stared at him shocked at the loss of their passports.

He handed them each a plastic card. “This is your identification, your passport and your credit card. Keep it with you at all times. The young ladies must immediately report to the Ba-it Sepher, the school. Young people from the age of 3 years to 21 years must be either in class at the Ba-it Sepher from 0800 hours to 1700 hours or in the infirmary. Penalties for failure to report are severe. Corporal Yitzhak Franks will escort you to the cafeteria as it is now lunchtime. One of the administrators will meet you and set up placement examinations.”

“Don’t we even get to change?” Rachel asked.

“No. You must go now, or as I said, the penalties are severe.”

“Our first day in a new school, and we have to show up in our flight suits? This sucks!” Wendy exclaimed.

“Young lady, I must remind you to watch your language. We are a religious community. I don’t know where you have been in the past, but such vocabulary is not welcome here.”

Yitzhak, barely over 21 himself, was dressed in the same uniform as the soldiers that met them at the ramp. “Ladies, please follow me.”

As the girls left, the old man turned to Rose, Avi and Greg. “Sergeant Jacob Stein will escort you back to your ships so you may pick up your luggage and show you to your new quarters. Your ships will be ferried to the staging facility on the moon.”

“We are used to having our ships nearby,” Greg protested.

“That is not allowed. There are rules you will need to learn if you are to stay here among us.”

“I am beginning to think we have made a huge mistake,” Avi mumbled to Greg.

The old man ignored the comment and said, “The two of you are to report to Space Flight Operations Briefing Room at 1500 hours. That does not leave you much time. Welcome to Eretz.”

Jacob looked like Yitzhak’s twin. He escorted them back to their ships. Greg, Avi and Rose packed what they thought they would need for their next few days and headed for their new quarters. Their quarters were a furnished four-bedroom apartment in a large complex of similar apartments. Fortunately it came with dishes and linen because none of what they had on the ship would be appropriate for the new space. The apartment was brightly decorated with a heavy emphasis on religious themes. Avi didn’t hate it, but it certainly was not how she would have done it.

Rose surveyed the apartment and said, “You get changed, and I will see about turning this decorator’s nightmare into a place where we can be comfortable.”

Yitzhak escorted the girls to the beginning of the cafeteria serving line and said, “You must be

hungry.”

The girls had never seen a cafeteria line before. “Do we take what we want?” Rachel asked.

Yitzhak smiled. “Yes, here take a tray. Plates are there. Utensils are at the end of the line.”

“Don’t we have to pay for this?” Rachel asked.

“Slide your card into the reader at the end of the line, and it charges your food to your account.”

“How do we know we have money in our account?” Wendy asked.

“That’s your parents’ problem not yours. Get some food. Sit and eat. Someone will be along for you shortly.” He left them alone.

“He seemed like a nice guy,” Wendy said.

“He’s too old for you,” Rachel shot back.

The girls were shocked at the amount of food that was sitting out for them to choose from. Even when the harvests had been good during their childhood on Homestead, there had never been this much food in one place ready to eat. The ladies behind the line cheerfully answered their questions about what the food was and helped them select what to eat from the strange dishes. They filled their trays and slid their cards into the card reader. They turned to search for an empty table.

The room was packed with children ranging from very small ones under the strict supervision of their teachers to teenagers, most of whom were dressed in bright colors and some of whom had dyed their hair in what seemed to the girls to be outlandish styles. They instinctively ran their hands over their own heads and their hair trimmed to a spacer’s traditional centimeter length. They found an empty table and sat down. They had no sooner taken their seats than a girl they guessed to be Rachel’s age approached them.

“May I join you?”

Rachel looked up, her mouth full of food and gestured to an open chair.

“Hi. My name is Faye Anne. What’s yours?”

Wendy recovered first. “I’m Wendy Solomon, and my sister is Rachel.”

“Welcome. We expected you ages ago. Did you have a problem?”

“No. What do you mean you were expecting us?” Rachel asked.

“My dad says you’re some kind of heroes. Your whole family are, even your grandmother. Something about keeping the Swordsmen from conquering a planet. Do you feel like heroes?”

Wendy choked on the milk she was drinking. “No, not at all.” Wendy unloaded emotions she had been suppressing for months. “We barely got out of there alive. My god, so many people died. Less than a dozen of the people we’ve known since we were babies lived to tell their stories. I still see the faces of the friends we lost and have nightmares about how they died. The battle destroyed so much of

what everyone worked to build. It was horrible. We don't want to be heroes. We want to be normal."

Rachel nodded her agreement.

Faye Anne looked crestfallen. "I don't think that's going to be possible."

"Why not?" Rachel asked, suddenly upset.

"You need to face the fact that you're not like everyone else. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it is real. We've seen the video of your mother killing Stonebridge and you killing those Marines."

"The Swordsmen must be furious," Rachel observed.

"Yes, which is why you can never leave us. You'll be safe here. This may be the only place you are safe."

"Wonderful," Wendy said.

Faye Anne leaned forward, her tone conspiratorial, "You have a more immediate problem than the Swordsmen. Some of our mothers and fathers want us to be like you, and others hate you for what you are. Some of the girls think you're wonderful, and others are afraid you'll steal their boyfriends. Some of the guys want to challenge you to duels and prove themselves against you. They'll make your lives difficult until you establish yourselves in the community."

"I wish we could have stayed where we were," Wendy said, "or travel from port to port like the ancient mariners."

"My dad said if you tried, someone would find you and kill you. Don't even think about it."

"Who is your dad, by the way?" Wendy asked.

"He's the commander of the planetary defense forces. He was a couple of classes behind your parents at the Academy and is your parents' best friend on the planet. They'll meet him this afternoon."

"At least someone's on our side. Where do you stand?" Wendy asked.

"You fascinate me. I am all about people. I love learning about people and how they think and why they do what they do. I have never met anyone like you before. I want to be your friend, not because I want to be like you, I can't, but because I want to understand you. Maybe that's selfish, but that's who I am."

Wendy smiled, "We're glad to meet you Faye Anne. Promise you'll keep our secrets secret."

Faye Anne beamed. "Yes, of course. Look, there are these two guys that could really use your help, and they could help you learn your way around. Do you mind if I bring them over?"

"Yenta?" Wendy asked.

Faye Anne huffed. "No, they're nice guys. They're brothers. One's your age, and the other is

your age. They're real smart and don't have girlfriends. They're geeky, but they're all right. If you hung out with them you could keep the other girls off your backs until you get settled. This way it won't look like you're on the prowl. Even if they're just friends, it'll be good for you and for them."

"Sure, I guess," Rachel said.

Faye Anne left to collect the boys. She returned with two very tall, pale, awkward looking young men who had trouble looking directly at the girls. "Wendy, Rachel, Reuben and Rashi." The boys nodded.

Wendy and Rachel stood to greet them, but before they could say anything, a group of three boys elbowed their way in front of Faye Anne. Their leader pushed Faye Anne aside. "These must be the aliens from the Planet X!" He took a breath and threw his arms wide. "Mighty Mouse! Come to save the day!" He sang the words to the old cartoon. "My dad doesn't think your dad is as hot stuff as her dad does, and I don't think you are either."

"David!" Faye Anne tried to get in front of him but he roughly pushed her away. He pushed her so hard she hit the next table and knocked over some of the dishes on it.

Rachel turned to face David. "You leave her alone!"

"Oh-h! I'm scared! Are you the great protector?" Rachel assumed a fighting stance. "Guys, she's a fighter."

"Turn around and go away." Rachel commanded, "We have no issues with you."

"She's been here an hour and already bossing people around," David taunted.

Faye Anne recovered her balance, "David leave us alone. You don't know how much trouble you're causing."

"Ooh, tough talk for a girl. What are you going to do about it?" David snarled.

Maintaining her steady force, Rachel said, "David, this is neither the time nor the place. If you have something you wish to discuss with me, we can discuss it later."

"I want to talk about it now!" He reached for her arm, and she slapped his hand down so hard he hit the boy standing behind him.

"David, go away," Rachel commanded a little more forcefully this time.

"Rachel, let's go," Wendy said, "You know what happens when you get mad. Remember what you did to Sean!"

"What did you do to Sean, stick him with that toy knife of yours?"

Rachel took a deep breath. Wendy screamed, "Rachel! NO!!" But it was already too late. Rachel's throwing knife whizzed by David's ear taking a lock of his long hair with it and lodged firmly in the throat of the person in the "Drink Milk" poster on the bulletin board five meters behind him. The

sudden silence in the cafeteria was overwhelming. The color drained from David's face.

One of the instructors calmly removed the knife from the poster, admired it for a second and walked over to the now silent group. He pointed to each of them in turn, "Detention. Tonight. My office."

He handed the knife back to Rachel and said, "You will never bring that into this building again."

One of the boys who had stood silently behind David protested, "Why me? I didn't do anything?"

The instructor calmly replied, "For failing to stop it. We have responsibilities for the sins of others. You know the prayers as well as I do." He looked at the crestfallen Reuben and Rashi. "Do you boys have math competition tonight?"

"Yes, sir, well, we did until now," Reuben, the older one replied, subdued.

The instructor paused a moment. "We need you to win that competition. You come see me after it's over. If we haven't won, I'm going to want to know why, and I will deal with you accordingly."

The boys brightened. "Yes sir!" they said together.

He turned to Wendy and Rachel. "Have you finished eating?"

"I'm not hungry," Rachel replied.

The instructor looked David and his buddies and said, "You may go now. Remember, tonight immediately after school in my office."

"Yes, sir," they replied.

"Reuben, Rashi, please take the ladies to the media center for their placement exams. Faye Anne, help me clean up this mess. Oh, ladies, when you come to my office, bring your work out clothes."

As soon as they had turned the corner Rachel asked, "Who was that?"

"Rev Schwartz is the physical training instructor. He is very strict," Reuben replied.

"What is detention like with him?"

"Very physical!" Rashi said.

"Can't be any worse than our mother," Wendy said. "At least we're only at one G."

"G like in gravity?" Rashi asked.

"Yeah," Wendy answered. "Why?"

"Do you exercise at more than one G?"



“Sometimes our ship accelerates as much as two G’s when we’re in a hurry, but that’s hard.”

“Then you must be real strong,” Rashi sounded impressed.

“We’ll keep that our little secret.”

The boys smiled.

They entered the media center and the boys introduced the girls to the center specialist who would be administering their placement exams. They settled in for what would turn out to be five hours of exams.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER SIX

GREG AND AVI REPORTED to the briefing room as instructed at 1500 hours. A soldier greeted them and requested their identification. After examining their cards and checking their names off a list he opened the door. "Welcome aboard, Captains," he said as he ushered them inside.

Greg and Avi had changed into civilian business attire and were unprepared for the sea of white uniforms that awaited them in the briefing room. When they entered the room, the people seated around the large boardroom table stood and applauded. Totally at a loss as to what they should do, they took each other's hand and stood, embarrassed, as the two dozen officers in the room clapped in their honor.

The man at the end of the table signaled for quiet. The soldier closed the door. "Please, come sit here." He motioned to two empty seats on his right hand. Avi and Greg sat as instructed, and the man said, "Rabbi, please, a prayer."

The Rabbi offered three prayers. The first was in honor of living to see this day. It was the same prayer used at the beginning of all major holidays. The second was an appeal for wisdom and seeking guidance in the decisions to be made in this meeting, and the third was an extemporaneous prayer for protection from the forces which might seek to do them ill. When he was finished, he quietly left.

The man at the end of the table surveyed the room for a few seconds before starting. "Welcome to Eretz. I wish I could have given you more time to settle in but we have much to do and not enough time in which to do it. We have you at a disadvantage. We know who you are, but you don't know who we are. I am Admiral Herbert Sherman, Commander of the Eretz Defense Forces. I graduated from the Federation Space Force Academy four years after you did. Myra Myrakova was in some of my classes. My God rest her soul."

Each of the officers seated at the table introduced themselves. Avi and Greg were pleased to see that women and men were equally represented. Four were former Federation Space Force Officers.

"Now to the business at hand. Under the terms of our contracts with the Federation, active duty Federation Military officers temporarily assigned here are accorded all privileges and prerogatives appropriate to their Federation rank. According to the orders transmitted to me, you are assigned to us as combat trainers and advisers. Therefore, you are authorized to take whatever actions you deem necessary to bring our defense system up to Federation standards including leading our forces into battle in defense of our home planet should that become necessary. First, however, we need to deal with formalities. The Eretz Defense Force is an all-volunteer organization." Avi raised a dark eyebrow.

"Not in that you work for free," the Admiral was quick to respond. "Your pay will come from our payroll system, only that you must volunteer to be part of our organization."

Avi nodded her acknowledgment of the clarification.

"Since we are a planetary defense organization on a duly recognized sovereign state allied with, but not a member of, the Federation, by joining our forces as duly assigned trainers, you maintain your rights as Federation Military officers and as Federation citizens except those that are in keeping with the laws of this sovereign state. Normally, we would insist on formal officer candidate school, but graduates of the Federation Space Force Academy are released from that requirement. Are you

voluntarily willing to join us?"

"This is an interesting offer, but why can't we find a farm somewhere on the frontier and live there quietly for the rest of our natural lives? I am sick of fighting," Greg said.

The admiral looked at Avi as if to ask for a comment.

"I am not sure about the farm part, but I am definitely tired of fighting. It's no way to bring up a family," she responded.

"Speaking of which," the admiral smiled. "My daughter called me to tell me that she and your daughters have detention tonight. It seems there was something of a fracas at the cafeteria and Rachel threw her knife at someone. Well, not really at someone, but she wanted it to look like she did."

"I'll kill her!" Avi sputtered. Greg watched her with obvious concern.

"No need. When Rev Schwartz gets through with them they will wish they were dead. Anything you would do would be redundant."

"Still, they should be punished," Greg said attempting to diffuse Avi's rage. "Although, I'll bet Rose gets to them first."

"If she punishes them like she punished me, it may be enough," Avi commented, her color returning to normal.

"They were provoked. It's not their fault. Seriously, let Rev Schwartz deal with it. He's very good and has the advantage of not being one of their parents. All of which brings me to my point. You and your daughters have training that none of us can match. None of us has seen combat. None of us truly understand. Simulators are great as far as they go, but until you push the button for real, you don't know what it is like. All four of you have done that. Rachel demonstrated today that she could do it again. We think we could." He motioned around the table. "But we really don't know. We do know that you trained fifty women who had never seen the inside of a flight deck how to fly and how to survive in combat. We don't know how you did that, and we need you to do that for us."

"Only half of them survived," Avi said quietly with embarrassment. The loss weighed heavily on her.

"Do not belittle your accomplishment. The fact that any of them survived is a tribute to your skills. A dozen other planets fell to the Swordsmen before they attacked yours. No one survived on those planets, not a single person lived to tell about it. You were the first to stop them. Not only did you stop them, but very few of their force survived. You were the first to inflict casualties of any kind, and you devastated them. You should feel proud of what you did."

"We don't," Greg said. "Only sadness for the friends we lost."

"I guess for those who have never seen combat, that's a difficult idea to grasp."

"So, you want us to teach in your flight school?" Avi asked, changing the subject.

“Yes, that’s part of it.”

“And what’s the rest?” Greg asked.

“We have reverse engineered your simulation games. We have also reverse engineered the Pirate Interdiction Craft. We need your help to assimilate what we have learned and turn it into a battle strategy. The Swordsmen are coming. We need to be ready.”

“When I get back to my ship, I can give you the source code on the simulations,” Greg offered.

“That would be helpful, thank you.”

“And what if we elect not to do this?” Avi asked.

“There is no other place you will be safe and even here there are risks. There is no place you can run or hide that is far enough away where the Swordsmen can't find you. Even if you left at two G and ran in any direction until your reactor failed, the Swordsmen would find you. This is the safest place, and that is our deal. You help us, and we protect you and pay you for your work.”

“What makes you think we will be better off here than somewhere else?” Greg asked.

“Many factors,” Admiral Sherman replied. “Let’s look at your battle against the Swordsmen. By normal rules of battle, you should have been crushingly defeated, but you weren’t. The price of not being defeated is that there will forever be a price on your head, as if there wasn’t already from your pirate interdiction days. You did, however, suffer horrendous losses. You had handicaps that you probably thought were benefits. Your secrecy was both a blessing and a curse. It kept you safe from intruders while you built up your force, and it protected you from assaults by pirates, but it kept you from gaining access to newer technologies which might have reduced your losses. Your fleet was entirely made up of small ships. That dictated a strategy more like your pirate battles than like traditional space battles. Your enemy expected you to have capital ships which it would battle in head-to-head duels. Their strategy was not unlike the big naval battles of the late nineteenth century where large ships stood abreast and pounded each other with broadsides until one ran or sank. Your pilots learned their craft capturing renegades who stumbled into your system. They were highly motivated, and their motivation made up for their lack of education. They were far more willing to die for the cause than their opponents. Even with all that, the real key was you, both of you. As a fighting unit, the two of you are a force to be reckoned with. Myra contributed mightily to the effort, but it was your strategy and your tactics that won the battle.”

“Now, let’s look at what we have here,” he continued. “We are backed by strong financial and technological resources. One of the Federation’s most zealously guarded secret weapons research facilities is located down the hall. We have scientists conducting advanced research who are years ahead of their peers. We have sophisticated weapons and the infrastructure to support them. We have the hardware. We have ships. We have sensor arrays. We have defensive systems. We have textbooks and theories written by strategists of past generations. What we lack is the current real life training to use our assets. You can provide the expertise we need and build a protective shell around yourselves here that would be better than what you could build anywhere else.”

Greg and Avi looked at each other, resignedly, suddenly tired. “I agree,” Greg said.

“Avi?” The Admiral asked.

“Yes, I agree.”

“Ensign, please bring the Rabbi back to administer the oath.”

The Rabbi returned and administered the oath of allegiance to the Federation and to Eretz.

“I have taken the liberty of having uniforms delivered to your quarters. Everything you hear in this room for the remainder of this meeting is classified and is not to be discussed with people outside this room except on a strict need to know basis. Having said that, I assume that Rachel and Wendy will be briefed this evening in private. They will need to know what we have discussed. How much you tell Rose is your decision. Everyone please raise your right hand and affirm that you will maintain secrecy on all further business of this meeting.”

There was a murmur of affirmation.

“Science Officer Mendelssohn, please deliver your presentation.”

A slender woman of moderate height with strands of gray in her auburn hair stood and advanced to the podium. She nodded to the Admiral and to Greg and Avi before beginning. “The computer science and space flight systems engineering teams reverse engineered the combat simulator games written by the Captains Solomon and their assistants. We then introduced the short hyper jump as an allowable move in the games. The short hyper jump was not an option in any of the games as originally written. Hyper jumps of shorter than one hundredth of a light year were not allowed. We originally assumed that this was because the Federation did not want the knowledge of the feasibility of the short jump to become general knowledge. Further research determined that our assumption was only partially true. What we did not realize at the time and Federation scientists only recently found out is that only three craft in their entire fleet were capable of the short hyper jump. Captain, may I address you by your first names? Having two of you with the same name and rank is confusing.”

Greg and Avi nodded.

“Avi, what does a short jump feel like?”

“Painful.”

“Does it hurt at the beginning of the jump or the end?”

“At the end.”

“How long and how severe is the pain?”

“Two to three seconds and extremely intense.”

“When you make the jump are your weapons pods extended or retracted?”

“Extended. We only do it in combat. Having the weapons pods extended shortens the time before we can fire after we make the jump. We use it as a combat maneuver. That’s the only time we need to move that fast. I also suspect it’s not healthy for the ship to do it too often although we have no real data to back that up.”

“Excellent. You have confirmed our suspicions. You are correct in that the jump produces a tremendous strain on the reactor and doing it too often would, in fact, lead to early reactor failure. That is part of why so few craft are capable of the short hyper jump. Avi, did you, Greg and the late Lieutenant Myra Myrakova have the same crew chief when you were in the Space Force?”

“Yes, we did. Why?”

“He was the only line crew chief in the entire fleet that figured out how to disable the software limits placed on the reactors. His rationale was that he would rather have a damaged craft come back with its pilot than not come back because it was almost fast enough to get away. We have contacted him in retirement, and while he refuses to leave the tropical island where he now resides with his children and grandchildren, he has been very helpful. He sends both of you his regards. He was truly saddened to learn that Lieutenant Myrakova had died.”

“But he serviced dozens of ships over his career. Why were only ours capable of the short jump?” Greg asked.

“Because of the hundreds of P I ships built, only twenty had the same reactor as yours, and the other seventeen were assigned to other battle groups. Why these twenty ships had this reactor is a story in itself. The Force had the reactors designed for a ship twice as large as its then current destroyer and canceled the project after the reactors were built, but before the keels were laid. Saturn Space Industries was the prime contractor on the project and convinced the Force to allow them to put the reactors in the P I ships it was currently building. These reactors were the most efficient reactor of their type ever designed. In retrospect, we do not understand why more were not built on the same design.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Greg asked.

“You and Avi received your ships right out of the shipyard at the height of the Pirate Interdiction campaign. Little thought was given to thoroughly testing them, and they were sent out under the assumption that they would function the same as all the previous models. With the software limits on the reactors in place that was true. There was no significant difference in the performance of the P I craft with the larger reactor and the ones with the standard reactor. However, your three craft went to the battle group where the crew chief was disabling the limits. Let me ask you a question. Greg, how did you discover that you could make a short jump? Did you in a panic one day push the hyper button and much to your surprise it worked?”

“Pretty much, yes,” he replied.

“Did you tell anyone?”

“Only Avi.”

“Why only her?”

“That’s personal.”

“Fair enough. Avi, did you tell Lieutenant Myrakova?”

“No, she figured it out on her own. We talked about it, but the Force was issuing bulletins about keeping the specifications of our P I ships secret so we kept it to ourselves.”

“Had you tried the short jump in any other ship, you would have died. Not on the entry to jump, but on the exit. Had you tried it with your weapons pods retracted, your ship would have disintegrated. One of the reasons the Force kept the short jump so secret is that it was fatal in every one of their tests. They did not understand how the three of you could do it and survive. When you disappeared they lost all hope of figuring it out.”

“How do you know this?” Greg asked.

“The largest, best trained, most fanatical intelligence operation in the history of mankind with more people in deep cover than all the other current intelligence operations put together,” the Admiral replied proudly.

“That would do it,” Greg commented.

“So, I understand the importance of the big reactor, and I understand the software limits override, but I don’t understand the deal with the weapons pods,” Avi said.

“We don’t either, completely. We know that there is an energy wave from the leading edges of the craft. In your simulations you refer to it as the bow wave, but there is also a wave behind the craft much like the wake from a fast moving boat on the surface of the water. We don’t know much about this wave because it is so hard to measure. It and not the bow wave is what our sensors read when we detect a ship moving in hyper drive. We know it exists, but it moves so fast we can’t quantify it. What we do know is that the extended weapons pods interfere with the movement of this wave so that it never fully develops, and instead of slamming into the craft at full force on exiting hyper drive, it is dissipated, and the force, while painful, is not as destructive as it would be otherwise.”

“All this is wonderful, but so what? Why do I care?” Greg asked.

“Let’s go back to your simulations. In every case, a force with sufficient numbers of P I craft capable of short, undetectable hyper jumps will defeat any enemy currently out there except one with equal or greater number of these ships.”

“Do you intend to build an entire force out of a few P I’s?” Avi asked, incredulously.

Science Officer Mendelssohn smiled. “Not exactly. We are building P I ships on an updated design here on this planet.”

“Who knows this?” Avi asked.

“Fewer than a dozen people in the Space Force and another dozen at Saturn Space Industries. Our parts come through New St Louis. We have regularly scheduled freighters shuttling back and forth. We would like to add your ship to that fleet,” Admiral Sherman answered, “for a substantial rental fee.”

“Who would fly it?” Greg asked.

Admiral Sherman smiled. “We have pilots who can make cargo runs. That’s not an issue. It’s combat pilots we lack.”

After a pause, Science Officer Mendelssohn continued. "We have determined that if we had a hundred short hyper jump capable Pirate Interdiction ships like yours we could defeat the entire Federation Space Force if it attacked us. By the way, the dozen people who know we are building the ships know that within a year should we decide to do so we would be able to defeat any single battle group of the Federation Space Force without compromising our own security, and it concerns them. Our pledge that we will not fire on Federation ships unless fired upon is small comfort. The only reason they have not done anything about it is their hope we can damage the Swordsmen enough in combat that the Federation can come in and mop up afterwards. By supporting us, they hope we and not they, will battle the Swordsmen first."

"How many ships do you have built?" Avi asked.

"The first one rolls off the line next week."

"How many of the originals do you have in your fleet?" Avi asked.

"Sixteen with the big reactor, including yours. Ten more with the small reactor. The ones with the small reactor will be retrofitted with the reactors you brought in your cargo containers. That will give us twenty-six fully functional P I ships within six months."

"If we subtract Myra's ship that still leaves three with the big reactor unaccounted for," Avi observed.

"Two actually. One was damaged beyond repair in a training accident. It took a missile intended for a drone."

"Have you figured out the software override?" Avi asked.

"Yes."

"Then what do you need us for?" Greg asked. "It sounds like you have everything tied up all nice and neat."

"Not hardly," the Admiral said, "we have lots of ships, but no crews."

"How many available pilots do you have?" Avi asked.

"Other than the cargo pilots, ten, none with combat training. With the two of you and if we can include your daughters, four combat trained pilots. They can fly the P I's can't they?"

"You have twenty-six combat craft with crew requirements of fifty-two, and you have ten untrained pilots? How do you even move that many ships from place to place?" Avi asked.

"In addition to our freight pilots, we also have a couple of retired pilots who can shuttle them around, but they are old, and they would not survive the stress of a normal hyper jump let alone a short one. Now you see our problem."

Greg and Avi stared at each other in silence for a long moment. "Where do we start?"

"We were hoping you would help us with that."



“Well,” Greg paused. “Now that we are in this up to our necks,” he commented, “are you aware that the Swordsmen are monitoring this system?”

“How did you know that?” Admiral Sherman asked in surprise.

“We ran into one on the way in,” Avi said. “He high tailed it as soon as we approached. We have his transponder data.”

“Yes, we are aware that Swordsman scouts have occasionally monitored our traffic.” He paused as if to say something else.

“That’s one, so, who does the other ship belong to?” Avi asked.

The officers around the table reacted as if they had been hit by lightning.

“What other ship?” Officer Mendelssohn asked nervously.

“There was a second ship directly ahead of us after we dropped out of hyper drive,” Avi said. “Radar didn’t detect it. We caught it on visual. It looked like a V1 Buzz Bomb. It fled as soon as we approached it.”

Several of the officers had lost their color. Admiral Sherman spoke slowly, “We don’t know who they are. We have observed them ever since we could detect ships in hyper drive. Our best intelligence sources are at a loss to explain them. We believe that the reason the ships are so hard to detect is that they have very little metal in them. We think they are molded out of glass. We call them the third force.”

“Federation and Swordsmen being the first two?” Greg asked.

“Yes.”

Officer Mendelssohn said, “Some of their flight characteristics make us question whether they are even human. We don’t know. We don’t discuss it except in the closest circles. All we know for certain is that they come and go at random intervals and stay at the periphery of the system. Anytime anything gets close, they leave quickly. Now that you are here and can make short jumps, maybe you can find out who they are.”

A cold silence filled the room.

Admiral Sherman broke the silence and directed the conversation toward formulating the plans to accomplish the many goals they had for Greg and Avi.

Greg requested that their P I ships be returned to the surface so their simulator software could be used for training pilots.

Admiral Sherman signed the order exempting them from the rule prohibiting privately owned spacecraft on the planet’s surface.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER SEVEN

ROSE WAS WAITING for the girls when they returned to their quarters after school. Faye Anne escorted them home and then left to get her gym clothes. Rachel and Wendy had hoped to slide in unnoticed and escape to the gym without having to withstand the tirade that rightfully awaited them. One look at Rose told them that she knew what had happened, and she was not pleased.

“What were you thinking? Rachel, how could you be so irresponsible?”

“I’m sorry Grandma, I didn’t think. I got mad.”

“Your first day in a new school, and you almost killed somebody.”

“I didn’t intend to kill him. I winged him. Just a little hair.”

“What if he had moved the wrong way?” Rose rarely raised her voice to the girls, but she was so angry she was shouting in Rachel’s face.

“I guess I could have killed him,” Rachel tried to sound contrite.

“You guess? Have you thought about what would have happened to you and to the rest of this family if you had so much as scratched him?”

“No.”

“What if some kid walked behind him and you hit them? What would you say to their parents?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. You need to know.”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“Wendy, I am disappointed in you too.”

“I tried to stop it! Honest I did!”

“Not fast enough.”

“No, Grandma.”

“Wendy, you and Rachel are a team. You protect each other, and part of that means keeping the other from doing something stupid even if it means standing in their way. Understand?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“I can’t believe you threw your knife at someone. Where were your brains?” Rachel and Wendy stood in silence.

“If you are to accomplish the mission we agreed to on the trip here, you will have to maintain a constant hold on your temper. You both have a tremendous task ahead of you. A single missed step, a

single slip of the tongue could destroy everything. The goal is too great and too important for a hot headed exchange to jeopardize all our efforts. This is too critical for you to screw it up. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Grandma," they said in unison.

"Do you have anything else to say?"

Wendy looked at her grandmother and said, "Grandma, don't you think this mission is more than we can handle? I mean there are only two of us."

"There are the two of you and your parents. You have no idea what they can accomplish when they set their minds to it. Look what they did with Homestead."

"But we almost died there!" Rachel protested.

"Almost doesn't count."

"I know, horseshoes and hand grenades," Wendy groaned.

"And thermonuclear devices," Rachel added.

"Exactly. You didn't die there, and you won't die here."

"How can we be so sure?"

"I'm sure. Trust me, I'm sure. But that does not excuse what you did. I met David's mother this afternoon. She about took my head off with her bare hands. If she could have done it by shouting at me, she would have. I do not appreciate getting an earful from an angry woman whose son was almost killed by my granddaughter."

"I'm sorry," Rachel said.

"She will never be our friend, and we need all the friends we can get. In the midst of her tirade what she told me was eye-opening. Ladies, we are in the right place at the right time, and you have the right stuff to make the mission work." Rose's voice was no longer raised in anger, but in excitement. "When he was young, your grandfather believed in the mission. He believed in the balance of power which is only achievable if mutually assured destruction guarantees that neither side will step out of bounds. He actually supported the Swordsmen's rise to power because he saw them as the balancing force. One of the reasons he became so bitter later in life was because he saw the Federation frittering away its opportunities to achieve lasting peace. They forgot to care for their people and allowed corruption to take hold. Pirates feasted on the corruption, and the Swordsmen used it to build their force. Now that the Swordsmen are a credible threat, the Federation is taking care of its people again to keep them from turning against it."

"Grandma, you are asking a lot of us."

"Yes, and I know you can do it. Somewhere out there is a Swordsman. He's probably still a boy. He will rise to power and I hope you will be able to reason with him. He will be the key to the balance

of power.”

“If you say so.” The girls had long ago learned the folly of challenging their grandmother.

“I have kept you long enough. Go to your rooms and change. Don’t be late for detention.”

Wendy looked up and said, “I like what you did with the apartment.” Rose had accomplished much in a few hours.

“Don’t try to butter me up. You’re still in a world of hurt.”

“Yes, Grandma.” They scampered off to their rooms.

Twenty minutes later Wendy and Rachel reported to Rev Schwartz’s office at the field house in their workout clothes as instructed. He greeted them warmly. “David is such a putz,” he said. “If his dad wasn’t the chief agronomist, he wouldn’t get away with half of what he does. I am sorry he picked on you before you had a chance to settle in.”

“Thank you,” Rachel said, “What would you like us to do?”

“Jog five laps around the track, and then I will give you your P T placement exams. Don’t run all out. Conserve your strength. This is just warm up.” The girls left. David and his friends were already on the track. Faye Anne had finished her run and was doing stretching exercises on the gymnastics mats.

“I wonder how Reuben and Rashi are doing on the Math Competition,” Wendy said.

“I think Rev Schwartz put the fear of God into them. I’ll bet they slaughter the opposition!”

“Let’s hope.”

David and his friends finished their run and flopped onto the gymnastic mat. Wendy and Rachel finished and walked the track one more lap. Rev Schwartz called them to the straight section of the track. “Fifty meter dash. Timed. Take your places.” David won handily. Rachel came in second with Wendy a second behind. David’s buddies were a distant fourth and fifth. Faye Anne barely finished.

“Two hundred meters. Timed. Take your places.”

David won again, but not by much. Rachel and Wendy tied for second and the buddies trailed. Faye Anne finished last.

“Rope climb. Timed. Take your places.”

Rachel and Wendy won easily and did not use their legs.

“Ladies, it is not safe to climb the rope without using your legs. Please don’t do that again. Running Broad Jump next.”

For an hour they competed in one event after another. David won about half. Rachel and Wendy generally placed together either before or after David. David’s buddies were lost in the dust. Faye Anne was not keeping up at all. They wound up on the gymnastic mats.

“How about some take downs? David, we will pretend that this starter pistol is a real weapon. On my mark, go!”

David fumbled for a few seconds, but was able to retrieve the weapon. They were still standing when the instructor said to stop. Rachel went next. She quickly retrieved the weapon, threw the instructor to the mat, put her foot on his chest, pointed her finger at his chest and said, “Bang” before the others realized what she had done. Wendy was not quite as fast, but the result was the same.

“I’m impressed.” He grabbed a baton from where it lay on the floor and lunged at the girls. Their reaction was fast and practiced. They grabbed the “knife”, Rachel spun him around and grabbed his arms from behind. She backed against a pillar, and Wendy held the “knife” to his throat. Wendy teased him with a Russian accent, “Give us the information we want and you live. Or not and you die!” They released him.

The instructor tossed the “knife” to David. “It’s your turn! Attack!”

David looked at the two girls and turned to run.

He had taken three steps when the instructor said, “Go get him.”

Rachel sang out, “He’s mine!” and dashed after him.

David tossed down the “knife” and raced across the field house dodging gymnastic apparatus as he fled. Rachel caught him and promptly threw him to the floor. He scrambled to regain his feet. She maneuvered behind him and put him in a full Nelson. She wrapped her legs around his waist and sat down. She rested her feet on his navel. Wendy pulled his legs together and sat down straddling his knees. Once settled, she tweaked his nose and said, “We win.”

“No fair!” David whined, “Two against one!”

“I don’t see your buddies rushing to your assistance. Then, it would be three against two. Much better odds!” Wendy countered.

Rev Schwartz laughed. The two buddies stood open mouthed staring at David on the floor.

“Let him up, please. Everyone, one kilometer around the track, then you can go.”

Reuben and Rashi arrived as the girls were finishing their run.

“Did we win?” Rev Schwartz asked.

“Yes, we won!” Reuben shouted.

“By our biggest margin ever, both percentage and total points!” Rashi effused.

“Then I should threaten you boys more often, shouldn’t I?” Rev Schwartz said with his eyes dancing and laughter in his voice.

The boys looked at each other, and Reuben quietly said, “Yes, I think so.”

“Well then, here’s your threat. Every time you lose a Math or Science Competition you will run

twenty laps around the track. Deal?"

"Deal, Sir!"

David sullenly headed to the locker room. One of his buddies came over to Reuben and said, "Your girl friend just kicked the shit out of David. Be careful she doesn't kill you."

Reuben thought for a second and said, "I'll have to be extra special nice and not be mean to her like David. I can do that."

The buddies shook their heads and wandered in the direction of the locker room. Once they were gone, Rev Schwartz said, "David has been a tough guy since he was a toddler. He never has played well with others. He is too aggressive."

Rachel thought for a second before she spoke, "How solid is his grasp of spatial relationships?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can he look at something moving and tell which direction it is going, how fast and intercept it? How well does he catch a baseball or other small moving objects?"

"Yes, he's quite good."

"How good is he with tools, especially power tools?"

"Very good."

"Electronic devices?"

"Excellent."

"How does he react to surprises?"

"Aggressively with a vengeance."

Wendy looked at Rachel and said, "Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

"P I" Rachel said.

"I thought so. I agree. We need to introduce him to Mom and Dad."

"Excuse me, what are you talking about? What is pee eye?" Rev Schwartz asked.

Rachel smiled, "Pirate Interdiction. It's an elite corps of Space Force officers that handle some of the most dangerous jobs in the Force. As the old recruiting slogan goes they are a Force of One. They work by themselves in part because they don't get along well with others. Both our parents are P I. If we went into the Force, I think that's what we would do." Wendy nodded.

"But don't you have to fly to do that?"

Wendy smiled. "We fly. We fly two of the coolest, meanest, nastiest, toughest, most heavily armed little warships ever built. We could take on a warship a hundred times our size and beat it. P I

ships are the coolest things in the history of warfare. Maybe Dad will let us take you for a ride some day. It's a lot of fun."

Excitedly Reuben asked, "Could you take us flying?"

"If your parents agree, I don't see why not," Wendy laughed.

Faye Anne, who had been silent the entire afternoon asked, "Can you teach me to fly?" All heads turned to her.

"Faye Anne, I almost forgot you were here," Rev Schwartz said. "This is the quietest I think I've seen you since you were a baby. Are you feeling all right?"

Faye Anne huffed. "Yes, I'm fine!"

"Fly?" Rachel asked, "Or fly in combat?"

"Combat. I am tired of being protected all the time. I want to be part of protecting for once."

"We need to talk to our parents," Rachel said.

"Yes," Rev Schwartz added, "I think we all do. Everybody shower and go home. You probably have homework for tomorrow. Oh, before I let you go, what sport do you want to play?"

"Do we have to?" Wendy asked.

"Yes."

"What's your weakest team?" Rachel asked.

"Basketball."

"Are we tall enough for basketball?"

"Yes."

"Wendy, what do you think."

"Basketball will be fine."

"Good, practice starts in two weeks. See you there! Maybe this year we can win a few games."

Expecting a repeat of their Grandmother's attack when they returned to their quarters, the girls were pleasantly surprised that nothing was said about Rachel's lapse of judgment. Greg and Avi immediately downloaded to the girls the significant parts of their meeting of the afternoon. As the conversation progressed, the girls wondered if somehow their parents did not know what had happened although surely Rose would have told them if no one else did. The lack of comment was almost worse than being reprimanded. All through the conversations they wondered who would break the news first.

After Greg and Avi brought the rest of the family up to speed on their briefings from earlier in the day. Rachel and Wendy briefed Rose and their parents on their day. Rachel decided that coming right out and telling them about their detention and the reason for it was the safest plan. Neither parent made any comment indicating that anything untoward had happened. They reminded Rachel and

Wendy what was expected of them as far as their participation in the defense of the planet and the importance of their effort in the undertaking. The family's mood was serious, but not somber. They knew the scope of the task that lay ahead. The enormity of the task was daunting. They knew that they would do everything in their power to accomplish the mission ahead of them, but they had serious reservations as to their ability to succeed. Only time would tell.

"Rachel, Wendy, before you go to your rooms, give me your knives," Avi commanded.

"But Mom!"

"No but and no accidents. Hand them over."

They reluctantly gave Avi their knives.

After changing into casual clothes, they departed for the mess hall. They found an empty table and sat down. They were about half way through eating when Reuben and Rashi came over to the table with their parents and their little sister.

"Hi, I'm Abraham, this is my wife Sarah and our daughter Miriam. Your girls already know our boys Reuben and Rashi. May we join you?"

"Of course, if you don't mind us continuing to eat," Avi said.

"You're Rachel," Miriam said brightly. "Call me Mimi. Do you know why they call me Mimi?"

Rachel smiled in spite of a mouth full of food and shook her head.

"Because when I was little I used to walk around with my hands in the air saying 'Me, Me' when I wanted to be picked up. I'm nine now. I'm small for my age. Can I sit next to you?"

Rachel nodded, and Mimi dragged over a chair. She hopped up and squiggled back into it with her feet well off the ground. Mimi looked at Rose. "Are you their grandmother?"

"Yes, dear."

"I don't have a grandmother, can I borrow you?"

Rose laughed. Wendy and Rachel had not heard that warm a laugh from Rose in over a year. They smiled at each other.

"Of course, dear. I would be happy to be your grandmother."

"Oh, goody," Mimi looked around. "I'll be quiet now," she said.

Abraham looked at Rachel and Wendy, "You ladies did very well in your placement tests today." He turned to Greg and Avi, "I understand you mostly taught them yourselves. You have done an incredible job."

"Well, when you spend several months at a time on a cargo ship in hyper drive between planets, there is not a whole lot else to do. The ship's computer does most of the hard work," Avi said.

"Is it true that you young ladies helped write the games Pirate Interdiction, Valiant Soldiers and



Planetoid Defender?"

"Dad did Soldiers by himself. We helped in later versions of Pirate and Planetoid. Why?" Wendy asked.

"Your computer programming, database and spreadsheet skills are well above grade level. Your graphic arts skills are even higher."

"Excuse me for asking," Avi interrupted, "but how do you know this?"

"I teach engineering, advanced math and theoretical physics at the Ba-it Sepher. I am responsible for assigning new students to their classes. Sarah teaches biology, chemistry, anatomy and physiology. With the exception of their Hebrew, they are above grade level in all of their classes. Which is why I wanted to talk to you tonight. I can either assign them to the highest classes at their age group or assign them up one year in those highest classes and challenge them. It's your choice."

"Would we be bored in the classes for our age level?" Wendy asked.

"Probably."

"We get in trouble when we're bored. What classes are Reuben and Rashi in?" Rachel asked.

"The higher age level."

"There's your answer," Rachel said.

"We go up," Wendy followed "Will Rashi be in all my classes?"

"Not your Hebrew, but all your others."

"We studied Hebrew on the ship for months on the way here. What's wrong with our Hebrew?" Rachel protested.

"Your reading is fine. Your writing leaves much to be desired. You will get lots of writing in Miss Feinstein's class. It will be good for you."

The girls groaned. Everyone else chuckled. Mimi put her hand on Rachel's elbow and said, "Miss Feinstein is my aunt. She's sweet. You'll like her."

Rachel smiled. "Thank you. You're sweet, too."

Mimi smiled.

"I understand that your girls have offered to take the boys flying," Abraham said.

"Subject to your permission, of course," Greg replied.

"Let me be clear about something." His expression turned stern. "All my life I have worked in a classroom, first as a student and then as an instructor. My only regret is that I did not take the time to do anything exciting or off the beaten path. Sarah and I married young and had Reuben early. Looking back we wonder if we should have waited, but we look at our wonderful children and we know we did the right thing. Still, in our hearts there is that yearning for adventure. I do not wish to deny my

children the opportunity to do something they will always remember. At the same time I do not wish to expose them to unnecessary danger. Do you understand my dilemma?"

"Quite well," Greg replied. He thought for a second. "How solid are you on the mathematics of hyper drive?"

"Extremely. I did my PhD thesis on it and I assist our research labs."

"Could you teach it?"

"Yes."

"Could you teach it to Reuben and Rashi?"

"They already know the principles. I taught them long ago."

"Could you teach it to Mimi?"

Mimi sat up in her chair at the mention of her name.

Abraham thought for a minute. "Yes, I think so. The basics anyway."

Avi smiled, "That's one I don't have to teach."

Greg nodded to her and turned back to Abraham, "Can you be available to teach flight school every day after regular school. This is in addition to your regular job."

"Yes."

Greg said, "Let me discuss this with Admiral Sherman in the morning. Mimi, do you know how to keep a secret?"

"Yes. Is what you just told my daddy a secret?" Mimi replied wide eyed.

"Yes."

"Would it spoil somebody's surprise if I told?" Mimi asked.

"Yes, it would."

She raised her right hand. "I can keep a secret."

"Sarah," Avi asked, "you teach physiology. Could you teach..."

"Yes," Sarah interrupted.

"That's two," Greg said.

"Was that a secret too? What you told my Mommy?" Mimi asked.

Avi and Sarah both nodded.

"Oh goody, I love secrets!" She clapped her hands together in excitement.

Faye Anne appeared out of nowhere with her parents following behind her. “They don’t believe me!” She shouted indignantly to Rachel from half way across the room. “They don’t believe you said you would teach me to fly!”

Greg looked at Rachel with a sly grin and one eyebrow raised. “Did you?”

“Yes, Dad. I thought we could start with the simulators built into our ships on the ground and then see how she did. It seemed like a good idea. I think she’d enjoy it. I’d love being her instructor, with your help of course.”

“Admiral, I apologize for my daughter being so forward. If it is acceptable to you, Rachel is qualified to teach the basics and Avi or I can take over later,” Greg offered.

“We certainly need the pilots and I would be shirking my duties if I denied my own daughter the chance to help defend her home. I had hoped she would have chosen something not on the front lines.” He turned to his wife, “Levonah? What do you think?”

“She’ll do what she wants whether we want her to or not. At least this way we’ll know where she is. You have my permission.”

Faye Anne smiled and hugged Rachel. When Mimi put up her hands, Faye Anne hugged her.

“Admiral, we have to collect some personal things from the cargo ship. Can we borrow a passenger ship to go get them. The P I’s only seat two and that would be cramped,” Greg said.

“Say, something that seats a dozen, perhaps?” Admiral Sherman looked at Faye Anne and then at the boys. “I think that can be arranged. I’ll find something that does not require a flight suit. I don’t think we have any that small,” he said looking at Mimi. “After Havdallah service on Saturday afternoon, come to my office. No, better yet, why don’t all of you join us for after Shabbat dinner in our quarters. Abraham, I have a theory I have been wrestling with you might be able to answer. It involves hyper drive in the regions between the galaxies. We can meet at the chapel and walk from there. Friday evening, then.”

The remainder of dinner was devoted to light conversation about school and merging the new arrivals into the community. After dinner, the ten of them returned to Greg and Avi’s quarters where they chatted late into the night. Mimi fell asleep in Rose’s arms as soon as Rose finished reading her a story. The sight of Rose seated in the over stuffed chair gently stroking the sleeping child’s hair somehow put everything into perspective. Reuben and Rashi blew off their homework that evening willing to withstand the anger of their instructors the following day especially since two of their instructors were their parents.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER EIGHT

THE FOUR DAYS REMAINING in the week passed without incident. The girls discovered much to their surprise that they enjoyed Miss Feinstein's class and found themselves challenged in all their classes. David was in all of Rachel's classes except the advanced math. Faye Anne was in Rachel's literature, humanities and arts classes. Faye Anne's sister, Esther, was in all of Wendy's classes except for the advanced math. The girls found the gossip mill everything Faye Anne warned them it would be. They were grateful for Reuben and Rashi's calming presence and found themselves frequently retreating to the boys for assistance. The boys, of course, were delighted with the attention and only too happy to help.

Greg and Avi toured the defense facilities and met the personnel who would provide support. Their whirlwind tour gave them only the slightest idea of the depth of the support available, but, other than the serious shortage of pilots, it was far stronger than anything they could have imagined. The level and intensity of the research came as a complete surprise to the two pilots who had been isolated for half a generation. They were stunned at how far behind the technology they had fallen and how much they had to learn to catch up.

Rose assimilated into the community as if she had lived there all her life. She quickly found a place in the organization supporting the evacuation of mistreated women and children from the central system. The small group of activists gladly welcomed her and kept her busy. She sent a message in a packet of mail going on a courier to New St. Louis informing Ellie Mae and Elvira of her new status and expressing her hope that she could continue to be of service to their efforts.

After school on Friday, the community shut down and went to services. Conversations following the evening services were light and convivial. Sabbath morning services at the temple were followed by a free-flowing discussion of a variety of religious topics over a buffet lunch of delicatessen foods many of which neither Greg nor Avi had eaten since leaving Earth. Some of the discussions over minutiae of the scriptures and the commentaries became heated and passionate. Greg listened intently to several conversations but did not participate. It was exciting for him to listen to debates on subjects he had last read about as a teenager.

After one of the discussions wound down to its inevitable stalemate, the Rabbi addressed Greg. "Do not be afraid to comment or question. None of us here has all the answers, in spite of what some of us think." He looked at one elderly gentleman who had been particularly vocal in a previous discussion. "Is there a question you would like to pose for the group to discuss?"

Greg thought for a second and then started tentatively, "I think we are all agreed that the Taliban were bad for their people."

Several men nodded. "I think we all agree that the Swordsmen are bad for their people."

More heads nodded. "Throughout the ages there have been several theocracies which were identified as being bad for their people. There is a very real chance that we may go to war against one such theocracy."

Several men started to speak. He held up his hand. "That's not the part I want to discuss. We can

talk about that later. I want to discuss something more basic. I think we are agreed that the theocracies I have mentioned deserved to be overthrown. Yet, we live in a theocracy. Let me ask the most basic of questions, the one even the youngest child is taught to ask. Ma nishtanah ha lila haza sebchol ha laylot? Why is this theocracy different from all other theocracies. Why is the theocracy in which we live a good thing and the one the Swordsmen support a bad thing?"

Suddenly the men grew quiet. "Why do the Swordsmen deserve to be overthrown and we do not? Surely there is more to it than their status as a theocracy?"

The Rabbi broke the silence. "It is a rare question that stops us cold. This is an excellent question. Let me offer a thought or two. Maybe collectively we can find an answer. Although, now that I think about it, I am not sure I agree with one of your basic premises. There is some cause to believe that the Swordsman religion may actually have some good for society as a whole."

Several of the men tried to interrupt. "Hear me out," the Rabbi said.

"One of the problems we share with other densely packed populations has to do with how you deal with those people that do not fit. There have been extended periods in Earth's history when those people who were so anti-social that they were a hazard to themselves and others had a frontier to retreat to. Our expansion through space gives us a new frontier again where these people can go, but as a society, what do we do with our failures and our misfits? The Swordsmen have given these people a place to go. By absorbing prisoners as they are released from jail following long periods of ministering to them in prison, they have improved the quality of life in our cities merely by removing many of the criminals from our streets. Basing our opposition to the Swordsmen on how they treat their populations is too simplistic."

"But Greg's question dealt with the structure of the government," one of the men countered.

The Rabbi paused, "Yes, first, let us distinguish between a theocracy and a dictatorship. Some of what we think of as theocracies are dictatorships and only theocracies in name. Others, like ours, are more correctly defined as theologically based representative democracies. The Swordsmen, however, are not a dictatorship. They are organized more like a corporation. Can you name the dictator who runs the Swordsman church?"

The men exchanged glances. No one could answer.

"That's because it's run by a council. There probably is one person who heads up the leadership council, but that person is apparently chosen from among its members. The Pope is chosen in a similar procedure. It's not that simple."

"Rabbi," one of the men interrupted, "are you saying that dictatorships are good or bad?"

"Either, both. It's more involved than that. A benevolent dictatorship is one of the most humane and efficient forms of government ever created."

"But who is to say if a dictatorship is benevolent or not?"

"Indeed. There are those who think Brigham Young was a benevolent dictator, strict, but benevolent. Others think he was an obsessive madman. What about Moses? We think of him as

benevolent, but didn't he write the book that details his activities? Can you name a man who wouldn't like to glorify the good and ignore the bad in their pasts?"

"Surely there is some measure we can use."

"Perhaps. We know that a dictator like Idi Amin who massacred large numbers of his citizens was a bad dictator, but there are those who still believe that what he did was right. Who is to say? What about Pol Pot in Cambodia? The Swordsmen believe in "ethnic cleansing" the same way Hitler did. Since we are among the targets of this cleansing we think this is a bad thing. There are those who view us as a corrupting influence and would rather we not interact with them. What if we were to evict from our midst those who did not believe as we did?" He paused as a thought occurred to him. "In fact we have done this by taking with us only those with whom we had a religious affiliation and reinforced that by splitting the colonies into four parts along religious lines."

"But we didn't kill anyone in those other colonies nor did we kill any of those who opposed us as they do."

"That is true. Perhaps that gives us a standard by which to judge. If it is the actions of the government and not the form of government that determines the rightness or wrongness of that government we should be able to determine a code of conduct against we can judge their actions."

"Those governments that use murder and intimidation as a method of ruling would be deserving of being overthrown, and those that use more benign methods would not," one man offered.

Other opinions were offered.

"I think it is more complex than that. Is capital punishment not murder?"

"But it is practiced so rarely."

"Is it really?"

The discussion quickly degenerated over the issue of capital punishment as murder.

The Rabbi regained control. "I think we are all agreed that any organization that causes the wholesale slaughter of civilians is deserving of overthrow. However, by that standard, the United States, in its extermination of the Native Americans in the conquest of its Western Frontier and by virtue of its use of nuclear weapons in Japan, would have qualified as deserving of overthrow. Now we could use the argument that the America and Japan were in a declared war with each other. The question then comes as to what constitutes a war. Was the war declared by Hamas on the Israelis truly a war? As Jews, we would say yes, but would a Christian agree?"

"A Christian would not agree because the goal of all Christians is the elimination of the Jews. How could they possibly agree?" Several of the men murmured agreement.

"Let us assume the declaration by Hamas that they wanted to purge the land of all Jews was in fact a declaration of war. Does the practice of targeting killings as implemented by the Israelis against them in the early twenty-first century constitute an act of war or a form of ethnic cleansing? Were the American attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq justified by the World Trade Center attack? What was the

fatality ratio? Ten thousand to one? How can that be justified? Was it in fact a crusade against Islam as some of the contemporary critics claimed?"

"All wars involve killing," one man said. "Even the Promised Land had to be taken by force."

"At some point the killing must stop," Greg said for the first time since the conversation started, offering an opinion.

"How do we make it stop?" The Rabbi interrupted, "Before we tackle that, let me see if I can form some consensus from our discussion to this point. In the short term the form of the government is less significant than its actions. We are not talking about its long term stability, only its short term effect on its population and whether it deserves to be overthrown. Good government can come in many forms. So to answer Greg's original question, it is not the fact that a government is a theocracy that is the issue. It is the actions of that government that determine whether it should be overthrown."

Avi had been listening to the conversation from the outside for a while when she said, "You men make this all so complicated. The only reason we want to kill Swordsmen is because if we didn't kill them, they would kill us. If they weren't so terrified of God clearing away all living beings in retaliation for mankind's supposed sins and killing anyone who refused to conform, we wouldn't care about them or how they treated their people. It's just like pirates. If they didn't take things that did not belong to them and kill people in the process, they could drink all the rum they wanted and sing their silly songs, and we would not care what they did."

Several of the men agreed.

"The best solution is to figure out how to stop them from killing us. I think we would be perfectly happy to let them be as long as they left us alone," Avi concluded.

"Clearly one way to stop the killing," Greg said, "is to deprive renegade governments of the weapons with which to make war."

"Or to make the punishment for the war so severe as to make it too painful to consider."

"That is the Federation's strategy with the current Space Force build-up."

"Worked with the Pirates. Should work again."

"I'm not sure that's true," Greg interrupted. "The Federation Space Force had battled the Pirates to a stalemate. We killed the ones we found, but mostly they learned to stay out of our way. What took the organized Pirate bands out of action had more to do with a strategic mistake they made and the increased density of traffic on the travel lanes."

"What mistake was that?"

"They got overconfident and attacked a Swordsman base."

"What happened?"

"As nearly as I can tell, the Swordsmen wiped out the attacking Pirate force. As I understand it,

the Pirates had been told that the Swordsmen were religious zealots with no fighting sense. They became overconfident. They expected to be able to walk in and take whatever plunder they wanted. It didn't work. I stumbled into their abandoned base not long after that and rescued the survivors."

"Is that the frontier station that Davidson runs now? New St. Louis?"

"Yes."

"That was you?"

"Yes."

"And you rescued all the women?"

"I know what you're thinking. Don't go there. Half of those fifty women and many of their children died defending our planet. They died in the field of battle. They were great pilots and fierce warriors. Whatever else is true, they earned our eternal respect and gratitude for the casualties they inflicted on the Swordsmen."

"Amen."

"And you trained them?"

"Avi, Myra and I did, with the help of the simulators."

"And you want to do that here."

"I don't think I am supposed to discuss future plans," Greg hedged.

"Come on! Greg, we know why you're here. We know the threat is real."

"Some of us don't believe the threat is as real as others."

"It's real."

"Why would they attack us?"

Several men spoke at once, and the discussion disintegrated until the Rabbi held up his hand.

"Gentlemen, let Greg offer his opinion."

"To tell you the truth, I don't know if the threat is real or not. It doesn't matter. The answer has to do with the consequences of being wrong. Hypothetically, let's ask the question. What if I am wrong? If I say there is a threat and we build our defenses against an attack that never comes, we have expended resources we could have diverted to other uses. That's painful but not life threatening. If I say there is no threat and we get attacked without defenses, previous experience would indicate that every person on this planet would be killed. Which course of action would you choose?"

"Do you propose attacking them? A preemptive first strike can be an effective strategy."

"No. Then we are no better than them. We need to be defensive and not offensive. Offense is easier than defense, but we need to take the high road."



“How do we know when they will come?”

“According to the information Admiral Davidson gave me, it will take three years for them to rebuild their forces to the point where they can resume their conquests. We have at least that long.”

“Is that enough time?”

“There is no such thing as enough time to build defenses.”

“Amen.”

“Before we leave this,” one of the men said. “Blood feuds have been known to go for so long that the participants have forgotten who started it or why. Remember that the current battles between Islamic factions started less than a generation after Mohammed’s death. I fear that we are at that point with the Swordsmen. Who is to say who is right?”

“The answer is simple,” Greg said. “In every battle we let them fire first. They make their intentions clear. They may start it, but we will finish it.”

Greg was not accustomed to being able to discuss serious issues in this type of free ranging conversation. Once he got used to the idea, he enjoyed it. The remainder of the afternoon was spent in discussion of a wide range of topics. They discussed the ethics of using pornography as propaganda. They wrestled that to a stalemate and gave up. They discussed the role of women in combat. They agreed that men might make better foot soldiers, but in sophisticated systems like aircraft or ships, the differences had more to do with personality than physical strength. Men and women should be equally capable as flight crews. There was a long discussion on the psychological effects of having men and women fighting together. They agreed that the benefits outweighed the significant problems.

The longest discussion of the afternoon centered around the Rabbi’s desire to create a Rabbinical seminary on the planet to serve a Jewish population that was becoming further and further dispersed. As Greg listened to the conversation, he wondered if such a seminary would be the magnet that would draw a Swordsman attack. If it was, he needed to be ready.

Greg zoned out on the conversation for a while thinking about what defending this system would involve. When he mentally returned he realized that the Rabbi had moved from his seminary idea to a much grander vision. The Rabbi was detailing a plan to make education an export product. The system had already attracted enough retired university faculty to create a high level academic community. Many of these career educators were finding that retirement lacked a certain amount of involvement and challenge that they missed. Additionally, there was concern that the Jewish students that had been left behind on Earth to finish their educations were being exposed to unnecessary risk. The newly settled planets would need doctors, engineers, attorneys and a wide variety of professionals to support their economies. Earth’s university structure was stretched beyond its limits. As he saw it, since Jews believed in education in a way that few other cultures did, it only made sense to develop what he called a “Boston in space” here on Eretz.

Greg thought the idea made sense, but he wondered if colleges made money, after all, every college he ever heard of was always out fund raising. He asked, “Rabbi, is this financially viable?”

“Initially, no. It will take a generation before it pays for itself.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Yes, and to make matters worse, I propose that we not charge tuition up front, but rather have the students take out loans that they would pay out of their future earnings. While they are in school, their tuition, lab fees, books, room and board would be covered. Once they start working, they would pay the loan off. Those going into the military have an extra advantage in that they immediately start getting a salary and don’t have the start up costs of opening their own practice. The Federation is always looking for good officers so finding a position in the military should not be that difficult.”

The four Jewish settlements on the planet were divided along ideological lines, but from the other participants in the conversation, it appeared as if the Rabbi’s idea was well accepted, and “New Boston” might come to fruition. Greg thought there was something poetic about the Jews developing education as an export product. It was poetic, and it felt right. He smiled each time he thought about it.

After the evening services ending the Sabbath, the Solomon family, and the Abrams family went to Admiral Sherman’s for dinner. The Shermans had three children. Faye Anne was the oldest. Esther was Wendy’s age, and there was a boy Mimi’s age. Dinner was formal and well disciplined. The discussion was polite and centered on the children’s progress at school. The Math Competition and Rachel’s conflict with David were hot topics. Reuben’s description of the expressions on the competing team’s faces when he presented the winning answer brought waves of laughter, and he appreciated being the center of attention.

After dinner, the adults retired to the living room. The children, including the Sherman children, Wendy, Rachel, Reuben, Rashi and Mimi did the dishes. Once that was done, Mimi and the youngest of the Sherman children promptly disappeared into the bedroom dragging Rose with them. Esther took Wendy and Rashi to the study and demanded to be shown the cheats on the latest version of Pirate.

Admiral Sherman and Abraham discussed the question of whether the gravic fields between the galaxies were different from the gravic fields within the galaxies and the impact that would have on the function of hyper drive. They discussed recent observations made in the areas between the arms of the galaxy as possible guidance. Lacking specific information, they speculated as to what information they would need to make the determination and how to go about getting it. Greg and Avi got lost half way through the conversation, but the three eldest teenagers seemed to follow most of the discussion even if they did not understand all of it.

Admiral Sherman opened a discussion of how to defend the system against another attack like the one in which the Swordsmen had been so soundly defeated.

Rachel interrupted. “Sir, with all due respect, I don’t think we will see an attack like that again.” Admiral Sherman turned to her, “Why not?”

“Actually it was something Reuben said. When I told him what the Swordsmen did to Homestead, he told me he wanted to take one of the P I’s and lob nukes into their spaceport and leave them grounded.”

“I think we all want to do that,” Greg commented.

“Yes, and that brings up the question if we want to do that, what if they want to do that too?”

How do we defend against it? A hyper capable ship can drop into the middle of our system, throw a couple of missiles and get away before we even know it's been here. How do we defend against that?"

"A kind of hit and run strategy," Avi said.

"Yes, like the one the Irish Republican Army used on the British for a century," Reuben added.

"Very difficult," Greg agreed.

"Decoy's don't work, because they aren't looking for hard targets like battleships. They're looking for soft targets like freight depots and population centers," Rachel continued.

"So what do you suggest?" Admiral Sherman asked.

"We deploy as many sensors and remote weapons as we can. We deploy as many small patrol craft as we can and keep them combing the system for intruders. We don't need big ships. We need lots of heavily armed small ones. We shoot first, and ask questions later."

"That makes sense," Abraham offered, "especially since we can detect a ship in hyper."

Avi's expression immediately betrayed her skepticism. "Assuming that we know a ship in hyper has passed one of our sensors, how do we get the information to where we can use it?"

Avi asked. "The ship is moving faster than the signals."

"We have to equip each sensor pod with courier missiles," Rachel suggested. "The intruder will be decelerating. The courier missiles do not have the limitations imposed by having a human crew. The courier can travel at ten or even twenty G. That will give us a short window of opportunity in which to hyper jump to the intruders' intended destination and blast him when he arrives."

"That still calls for lots of patrol ships," the Admiral thought out loud.

"Based on the numbers and location of the current fixed installations and a close-in strategy. I guess we need thirty ships, and two hundred sensor stations," Reuben offered. "If we wish to establish our perimeter further out, which we really should do, we need exponentially more ships we don't have."

Greg addressed the issue. "We have the ships for the close-in strategy or will have them soon. The question is whether we can deploy them quickly enough. They could field a couple of destroyers fairly quickly, and we would not be ready."

"Actually Dad, it's not the destroyers that concern me," Rachel said. "It's the P I's. A full sized destroyer in our space would be a sitting duck against our P I's. We demonstrated that the last time we faced them. Other P I's in the hands of skilled crews could be devastating. Do we know if they have any P I's? They didn't last time, but that was then and this is now."

"I think," Greg said, "we have to assume that the two missing P I's that are short jump capable are in Swordsman hands. I think we also have to assume that the pilots are former Federation Space

Force and will know what they are doing.”

The discussion raged for a while on how to deal with hit and run tactics until they finally beat it into the ground. After a break in the conversation Rachel asked, “When we entered Immigration we were told that everyone between the ages of three and twenty-one needed to be in school. Why are there no students in the school older than eighteen?”

“Because they’re off-planet,” Abraham said. “They’re either in the service of the Federation, mostly in the Space Force, or in colleges in the central system, mostly on Earth.”

“Which is partly why we find ourselves short of pilots. The most likely flight crew candidates are in training somewhere else,” Admiral Sherman added.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Avi asked.

“Yes, but there are places where the Swordsmen influence is not as strong as others. Our students understand the risks, but they are trained to melt into the local society and not attract attention while at the same time learning everything they can from their teachers,” Abraham explained.

Admiral Sherman continued “When we left the central system, we arranged for our students who were then sixteen or older to stay and go to school or enter the military. A few of them have graduated or finished their enlistments and returned. They have brought us news of the others. We have lost a few, but the majority seem to be doing well. We look forward to them coming home to us, but in the meantime we are short handed, and I fear we may not have enough of them returning soon enough to fend off what we now believe to be an imminent threat. We were naturally thrilled when Admiral Davidson suggested that he could persuade you to join us.”

“Davidson? What does he have to do with this?” Greg asked.

“He is one of us. So is his aide,” Admiral Sherman said smugly. “Didn’t know, did you?”

“Never would have guessed. I always thought he was a Presbyterian.”

“One of his wives was. He went to church with her to keep her happy, but he is one of us.”

“I always wondered what was up with his aide,” Avi said. “Even with those two ex-wives hanging around I wondered if the two of them had something going on.”

Admiral Sherman laughed. “Commodore Dankese is the opposite number there. She refuses to get married because she thinks it will hurt her chances for promotion. She could well be right.”

“So, Admiral Davidson’s comment about sending his aide to the intelligence service is some kind of in joke?” Avi said incredulously.

“Yes, and they think it is hysterically funny.”

“Are you expecting us to head to the central system when we are eighteen?” Rachel asked.

“There’s a tough question. I think a lot will depend on our defensive position at the time. We

will have to wait and see.”

They discussed the impact of having such a large segment of the population gone for such an extended period of time. Sarah was especially concerned about its effect on the younger children in the families who saw their older siblings suddenly gone out of their lives with no certainty they would ever return. Rose commented that most young adults leave home at about the same age and younger siblings adjusted the changes without undue stress. As the conversations progressed that evening, Rose’s sense of perspective calmed many of Sarah’s concerns.

By the time the conversation wound down, Mimi and the youngest of the Sherman children had fallen asleep on the floor in the bedroom. Everyone was getting ready to leave when Admiral Sherman said, “Oh I almost forgot! I have a ship and pilot for you at 1500 hours tomorrow, Sunday, to take you to your ship. You can all go, and you don’t need flight suits. Meet me at the flight ops briefing room at 1400 hours.”

When the pandemonium created by the announcement settled down, Rachel said, “If we meet at 1300 hours, I can give you a tour of our ships!”

Tired and excited, everyone headed off to bed.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER NINE

**E**VEN THOUGH THE THREE families had planned on gathering at 1300, by noon they were clustered at tables in the mess hall. The children were thrilled at being allowed to see the ships and take a ride out to the freight depot. Mimi was so excited she could hardly sit still, and Rachel had to remind her several times to eat her lunch. Rose elected to pass on the trip claiming she had some shopping she wanted to do. Wendy and Rachel speculated that she was tired from all the work she had done redecorating and furnishing the apartment. Avi knew better, but as long as her mother was happy and active, who was she to interfere with whatever her mother was up to these days?

After lunch, they trooped to the hangar. They split the children into two groups. Wendy took one group to her mother's ship, and Rachel took the other group to Greg's ship. The adults stayed behind to let Wendy and Rachel conduct the tours. Rachel strode over to Greg's ship and put her hand on the recognition pad. The ship's computer responded, "Hello, Rachel." The children giggled.

"Rachel Solomon requests permission to come aboard."

"Permission granted."

"Request permission to bring some friends aboard for a tour."

"Have each of your friends place their hand on the recognition pad and state their name." Each of the children was recognized and given permission to board.

Wendy placed her hand on the recognition pad on Avi's ship and it greeted her. The children in her group were individually recognized and granted permission to board.

Faye Anne went with Rachel and promptly sat in the pilot's chair. "How do you know what all this does?"

"We've been in these ships since we were babies. We have simulators to teach you."

Rachel took the kids behind the flight deck and showed them the crew quarters. She showed them the hollow in the wall enclosed with netting that served as a bunk, the counter top that served as a galley and the fold down dining table. The children were impressed with the hygiene unit and made jokes about what the initials for the personal hygiene unit spelled.

"These ships are designed for two people, but you can see why so many of them are operated solo. Can you imagine two people stuck together in this small a space with nothing to do for months at a time traveling in hyper drive? In combat, they are better off with two crew members, but the controls can be operated from either seat so one person can take the ship into combat. That's the way Mom and Dad flew when they were in the Force. We convinced them that they would be better off with a second person so we fly with them now."

"Can you fly one of these by yourself?" Faye Anne asked.

"Wendy and I can fly by ourselves. When we're on patrol that's how we sleep. One sleeps, and one flies."

"If you wanted, could you just strap in and go?" Faye Anne asked.

"Someone would have to open those big hangar doors first," Reuben wisecracked.

"If the ship was prepped, yes, either Wendy or I could take off if we wanted. Let's check the ship's status." She turned to the console. "Command mode! Flight readiness status report."

"Fully fueled. Fully armed. Flight rations stocked. All systems checked nominal," the computer replied in its HAL voice.

"Is there anything which would prevent us from flying should we elect to do so?"

"The big hangar doors," the computer replied, "and your father's permission."

Rachel shook her head. "Dad programmed a sense of humor into his ships. The big cargo ship gets really strange sometimes."

Mimi climbed into the rear seat, "Rachel? Are we flying in this ship?"

"No, we're taking that pretty passenger ship outside on the flight line. See the white one with the pretty blue pin stripes? That one."

"Why can't we take this one?" Mimi asked.

"Because you need a flight suit, and because it only fits two. That big ship fits all of us, and you can sit with me. Besides, I bet that nice passenger ship flies a lot smoother than this one. This one gets real rough sometimes."

Rachel pointed out some of the controls and explained what some of the displays did. At the end of the tour they returned to the hangar floor and admired the other P I ships sitting silently in long rows in the massive hangar.

"That's quite a collection!" Rachel exclaimed when she realized how many there were. "How did you get them?"

"We bought them," Admiral Sherman answered. "The Space Force was phasing them out in favor of destroyers. We snapped them up as soon as they were available."

"Dad says you're short of pilots. Do you have enough pilots?" Rachel asked.

"No. We have test pilots for the research ships and ferry pilots. We have freighter pilots who travel in hyper between here and the central system, but none of them have been trained in combat. Most of them are too old to expect them to survive combat. So we have all this magnificent hardware and no one to run it." Admiral Sherman replied.

"Where are your pilots now?" Rachel asked.

"We keep about half of them busy on runs back and forth to the central system. They fly our cargo vessels. Most of the rest stay out at the freight depot. A few stay here and work with the electronic warfare research center. Jake is our pilot for today. Shall we board?"

The passenger ferry's pilot greeted them as they boarded and strapped in. He looked old enough to be Greg's father. For a moment Wendy wondered if this was the same person that processed them at immigration, but when that old man showed up to verify who was on board for departure, Wendy realized there actually were two people that old. Maybe she could fix Rose up with a date. Rachel took extra time with Mimi's straps due to her small stature. The pilot was part way through the pre-flight briefing when Admiral Sherman's communicator sounded for his attention. He spoke into it in hushed tones. The expression on his face showed concern. He disconnected his conversation. Before he could say anything, Greg's communicator to the cargo ship sounded. Greg responded.

"Intruder alert," the cargo ship's computer announced.

"Identify," Greg commanded.

"Drive signature indicates pilotless drone. Trajectory suggests a recon mission. Does not appear to be armed," the computer replied.

"Projected ETA?" Greg asked.

"Twenty-four hours," the computer replied.

"Maintain tracking," Greg ordered.

"Request permission to relocate to better vantage point," the computer said.

"Permission denied. We are en-route to your location," Greg responded.

"Acknowledged."

Mimi looked up at Rachel and asked, "Who was your Dad talking to?"

"The computer on the cargo ship," Rachel answered.

"Wow! That ship talks, too! I like talking ships!" Mimi exclaimed.

Greg turned to Admiral Sherman. "Is this happening often? Should we intercept it?"

The Admiral sighed. "This is the third time in six months we have been alerted to a recon drone. We have made no attempt at interception although long range telescopes and electronic surveillance have verified that they are recon drones. The drones are of the type used by mineral prospectors in search of rare or valuable elements."

"But you don't think that's what it is," Avi surmised.

"No, but we can't prove it," the Admiral replied.

Greg thought for a few seconds before saying, "When we jumped to the Swordsman base, the P I pilots used a fiber optic to connect our ships so we could jump in formation. Are any of these P I's equipped with that device?"

"All of them. Yours are the only ones without it."



“Do you have anyone on planet who knows how to run it?” Greg asked.

Admiral Sherman said, “I should hope so. It was developed here. One of our test pilots should.”

Abraham spoke up. “I worked on it in its early stages. I haven’t worked with it in a long time, but I wrote much of the software.”

Greg’s face lit up with a giant smile.

Wendy groaned and leaned over to Rashi. “I know that smile. We’re in deep shit now.”

“Anyone else know the system?” Greg asked.

“Faye Anne was one of my guinea pigs for the training manuals and interface. She seemed to have the best grasp of the equipment. I think she could run it.”

Greg’s grin became malicious. “Let’s go for a ride! I suggest that I take one of the ships with the fiber optic and Avi take one. Abraham can ride with me and run the fiber optic. Faye Anne can ride with Avi as back up. We will intercept the drone, hook into it and find out who sent it and why.”

“Can you do that?” Admiral Sherman asked in amazement.

“If the software will support it,” Greg replied.

“The software will support it,” Abraham affirmed.

“Then let’s go,” Greg said.

“Dad! Don’t even think of leaving us behind!” Rachel said.

“She’s probably right,” Avi agreed. Greg nodded.

Rachel started giving orders, “Reuben, you ride with me. Rashi, you go with Wendy. I claim Dad’s ship.”

“I’m good with Mom’s,” Wendy said, “What do they do for flight suits?”

“I have a flight suit in storage with the space flight readiness building.” Abraham said. “I think we can find suits there to fit everyone else.”

“Admiral,” Greg asked, “will you authorize a mission to intercept and interrogate the drone?”

“The mission is authorized,” the Admiral replied.

“Everyone return to quarters and get what you need for a mission of four days.” Greg got up to leave.

Mimi tugged at Rachel’s arm. “Can I come too?”

“Not this trip. We don’t have a flight suit your size. Maybe later.” Rachel gave her a quick hug and headed for the door with Wendy right behind her.

Reuben, Rashi and Faye Anne followed them. As they ran across the hangar Rachel shouted, "Get four sets of underwear and heavy socks! Make sure you bring deodorant and a tooth brush!"

Wendy grabbed Faye Anne's arm. "Bring your sturdiest bras."

Faye Anne looked surprised.

"Trust me!" Wendy added.

Avi intended to tell Rose where they were going, but Rose was nowhere to be found. Avi left her a note deciding whatever her mother was doing was none of her business. Avi wondered if she was deluding herself, but rationalized that trying to stop her mother once she set her mind on something was next to impossible.

An hour later, each properly suited up flight crew member began pre-flight walk around checks on their ships. Rachel showed Reuben how to inspect for leaks and visual damage. Wendy and Rashi took their time going over Avi's ship. Avi meticulously showed Faye Anne what to look for in their ship. Abraham already knew what to look for so he and Greg were ready before the others.

Sarah and Mimi came to see them off. Sarah kissed her husband and said, "I knew you'd get a chance to fly. I love you. Come back safe."

Mimi reached up to her father for a big hug.

Sarah came over to her two boys. "You will be alone with a young lady for several days. I expect you to behave as gentlemen. You understand me?"

"Yes, Mom!"

Sarah faced her sons. "Be careful. Flying the real thing is not the same as a simulator. I want you back with all your pieces in their right places." Reuben and Rashi hugged her and Mimi and climbed into their ships.

Faye Anne's parents, her sister and brother came to see her off. "Faye Anne, you do what you're told. Understand? This one's not about you," her mother reminded her.

"Yes, mom. I'll be good." She climbed into the ship with Avi.

Two hours after the intruder alert was received, four ex-Federation pirate interdiction craft departed Eretz headed for the freight depot on the planet's moon.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER TEN

THE FOUR SHIPS LANDED as instructed at the freight depot. Rachel and Wendy linked to the cargo ship's air locks so they, Reuben and Rashi could board the cargo ship without needing EVA suits. They instructed the cargo ship's computer to undock the P I ships and park them on the flight apron. Greg and Avi docked their ships in turn, and soon all eight were on the cargo ship's flight deck.

"We have a couple of hours before we need to head out." Greg said. "While we're here, Wendy and Rachel pick up what you need to take down to the planet and stow it on your ships. I think we should take our EVA suits with us. We can leave them on the P I's."

For the next hour there was a mad scramble as they packed their possessions, clothes, games, workstations, data assistants and whatever else they thought might be of use into their P I ships. They loaded Greg's ship then Avi's. Those two ships moved to parking spots, and the two ships the girls were using re-docked. After everything else was loaded, Wendy was still searching deep into her personal storage compartment. Miraculously, the personal storage compartments had not been ransacked by the Swordsmen the way the rest of the ship had been after it had been hijacked. Faye Anne, Reuben, Rashi and Rachel sat on the edge of Wendy's bed anxiously waiting to find out what she was searching for so intently. After much bumping and thumping, a small flight helmet rolled out on to the floor. A few minutes later a small boot flew out and then another followed by a small flight suit and a set of small gloves. When the bumping and thumping finally stopped, a disheveled Wendy emerged victorious.

Rachel picked up the suit and asked, "Why do we need this?"

"It's one of my old flight suits," Wendy said.

"I see that," Reuben said.

Wendy smiled. "It's for Mimi. Did you see the look on her face when we left her behind? I thought she was going to cry."

"I think it's too big for her," Rachel observed.

"Even better," Wendy said. "We can tell her when she's big enough to wear the suit, she can fly with us. That will make her feel better."

"And I thought the kid was taking advantage of me!" Rachel said.

"She does that to everyone!" Reuben laughed.

Greg and Abraham left first. Avi and Faye Anne followed. The two remaining P I's were re-docked. Rachel and Wendy piloted the cargo ship to a point in space where it could better monitor the drone's activities. They left to join the others. Once clear of the cargo ship, Rachel and Wendy extended their weapons pods. They hyper jumped to a point slightly behind the drone's path so they could catch up with it from behind in standard drive. For the four passengers, this was their first experience with a short hyper jump, and they immediately understood the difference between the

longer jump they had made a few years earlier on their way to Eretz from the central system and this much shorter jump. Faye Anne especially understood Wendy's admonition about good support.

When their passengers had recovered from the shock of the hyper jump, the four pilots advanced on the drone now coasting on its assigned trajectory. Following the current path, the drone would intercept the freight depot. Greg assumed its mission was to investigate and photograph the depot. The four ships took their positions. Greg was slightly ahead of the drone. Avi behind and the girls on either side. The girls rotated their craft so they were looking at the drone. This was the position they called "around the clock". With all their missile tubes loaded and the lasers armed, any hint of a problem from the drone could mean instant annihilation. The tactic was used to advantage when capturing the stray scouts that had wandered into their old home's defensive perimeter.

Greg and Abraham deployed the probe in the direction of the drone. It quickly found the open port and immediately started streaming data. Abraham read as much of the data as he could as it poured into the P I's memory. When it was finished, he said, "It works from a tender. Can you open the navigation program so I can give you the coordinates?"

"That's not far from here." Greg commented once the display indicated the location that corresponded to the coordinates. We could hyper jump that in about six hours."

Abraham scanned the data. "I can give the drone the electronic equivalent of a lobotomy. It will complete its mission, but won't bring back any data. I can make it look like a malfunction."

"Do that. I'm contacting Admiral Sherman for permission to investigate the tender," Greg said.

Admiral Sherman gave permission to investigate but not to engage the tender.

Not comfortable jumping in formation, Greg jumped to a point not far from the tender first. The others followed one at a time.

The tender was a cargo ship like Greg's except that the cargo attachments had been modified to support launching platforms for drones. There was a P I attached to one air lock and a destroyer attached to the other. Two of the drones bristled with antennae and sensors like the one they had intercepted. Six appeared capable of carrying nuclear payloads.

"Now what do we do?" Abraham asked.

"We orbit and see how long it takes them to respond," Greg replied. He had the ships move to a "finger four" formation with their weapons armed.

The P I left the tender first and headed in their direction with its targeting radar activated. Greg hailed it, and it failed to respond. Greg had the computer initiate a broad multi-band hail on all the normal frequencies. It did not respond. The destroyer separated from the tender. The tender started its engines. The destroyer approached with its targeting radar activated.

In the old days, when he was fighting pirates, Greg's decision would have been easy. He would have targeted all three ships and destroyed them. Now his options were less clear. If he attacked these vessels, he could provoke an incident. He heard a strange clicking noise from the back seat. "What are you doing back there?" Greg asked.

“Taking pictures,” Abraham answered. Greg twisted around in his seat to see that Abraham had twisted around in his seat enough to be able to look out the front view port and was photographing the approaching ships.

“Do your boys have cameras too?” Greg asked.

“Yup, and we loaned one to Faye Anne. You didn’t think we were going to miss an opportunity like this to brag to our friends did you?”

Greg laughed. He called to the other ships, “Everyone get out your cameras. It’s recon time! Program navigation for short jump to a round the clock on the tender. Roll your ships so your back seat gets lots of good pictures. Stand off at one kilometer. On my mark, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Mark!”

The four P I ships disappeared from the spot where the interceptors intended to find them and moments later reappeared around the fleeing cargo ship. After a few minutes in place, Greg called, “Close to one quarter of a kilometer.”

When all the ships were in position he called, “Polar Rotate on my mark! Mark!”

Wendy and Rachel rotated their ships around the cargo ship on an axis formed by drawing a line from Avi’s ship to Greg’s. Their passengers were furiously taking photographs. This was a maneuver they had practiced dozens of times. Rachel called it square dancing with space ships.

As they approached their starting point, Greg called, “Program navigation for a short jump to a round the clock on the destroyer. Stand off at one kilometer. On my mark, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Mark!”

This time instead of calling for a polar rotate, Greg rolled his ship so that he was inverted relative to the destroyer. He matched speed with it and approached it head-to-head. He approached close enough that he could see the faces of the crew behind the view port. Abraham dutifully shot pictures as fast as he could. Rachel sang a few bars of “Danger Zone” into the communicator and asked if anyone knew a Top Gun named Tom Cruise. The old movie was one of the boys’ favorites, and they instantly got the joke. Even Faye Anne laughed in spite of her fear of actually being in a combat like situation.

“One more time,” Greg called out. “ Program navigation for a short jump to a round the clock on the P I. Stand off at one kilometer. On my mark, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Mark!” The suspect P I retracted its weapons pods in a gesture of submission. Greg approached as he had with the destroyer, and Abraham took photographs. When he was satisfied that he had enough pictures, Greg commanded the crews to return home and meet at the cargo ship. Wendy left first, followed by Rachel, Avi held position until Greg had passed behind her before she left, and shortly thereafter Greg left.

Once they had stabilized in hyper, Rachel asked Reuben, “How about you drive for a while? I need to use the facilities.”

“What do I do?” Reuben asked.

“You can nap in the chair or play simulations. There’s not a lot to do for about five hours. Once I’m done, if you want to get something more nourishing than those energy bars we’ve been munching,

you can come back here. The ship will fly itself until we get ready to drop out of hyper.”

They changed places, and Reuben asked, “What do I do if I want to run a training exercise?”

“See that big red switch in the upper right hand corner of the console?”

“The one labeled Simulation and Normal?”

“Yeah, switch it to Simulation and your displays will read for the simulation, but you won’t do anything to the ship.”

“Very nice.”

“Oh, and don’t turn around.”

“What?”

“Keep your eyes forward!”

“Oh, sure!”

Rachel quickly shucked her suit and jumped into the hygiene unit. Still slightly damp when she exited, she rummaged through her locker for some fresh undergarments. Reuben discovered that he could see her reflection in the view port if he sat in exactly the right place but found that all he could see was her heavily muscled back and shoulders. Disappointed, he sat back down and studied the control console in front of him. After dressing, Rachel selected real meals for them to eat and brought one to Reuben. After eating, she told Reuben she was taking a nap in the sleeping compartment and for him to wake her in about three hours.

Wendy made Rashi the same offer of sitting in the front seat. However, she was not quite as nice as her sister. She climbed into the sleeping compartment and promptly went to sleep. If he wanted food he was on his own.

Faye Anne passed out from the tension and excitement. Avi listened to her quiet snore and smiled. Faye Anne would be all right.

Greg and Abraham talked the whole trip back. Abraham was a wealth of information on the community and how it worked. Greg soaked up as much as he could.

One at a time they dropped out of hyper drive and formed up around the cargo ship. The cargo ship greeted them and advised them that there was some big confrontation brewing on the surface and they should leave immediately. Without taking the time to dock, they headed for the planet’s surface.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER ELEVEN

GREG'S SMALL EXPEDITIONARY FORCE had left the planet's surface at 1400 hours on Sunday and returned at 1700 hours on Wednesday. When they arrived at immigration, they were served notice to appear before the community governing council that evening at 1900 hours. Still in their flight suits, they decided to get dinner rather than changing. Facing the council hungry did not seem like a good idea.

Admiral Sherman met them in the mess hall. He took the cameras and gave them to his intelligence people for analysis. Greg and Abraham quickly briefed him on what they had learned. Sarah and Mimi showed up a few minutes later. Spotting a large fabric bag with her name in big letters at Wendy's feet, Mimi was torn between sitting next to Rachel or Wendy. Neither Rachel nor Wendy mentioned the bag although Abraham whispered to his wife what was in it. Sarah laughed, her eyes twinkling with the pleasure of a good joke.

Rose, Levonah and the rest of Faye Anne's family joined the group for dinner. After dinner they headed to the council meeting together. Wendy calmly tossed the bag over her shoulder as they left with a wide-eyed Mimi following close behind. Mimi tried to get Rose to tell her what was in the bag, but Rose, not having been let in on the secret, had to plead ignorance. The council meeting was held in the school cafeteria which had a stage. Tables had been set on the stage for the council members. Microphones had been placed on the tables and chairs were arranged facing the stage.

Since they were early Rachel suggested that they spend the last few minutes before the meeting in the field house. The by now rather large troupe gathered in the field house and Wendy put the bag on the floor. Mimi could not take her eyes off it. Wendy sat down in front of the bag and motioned for Mimi to sit beside her. Faye Anne giggled in anticipation. Rachel, Reuben and Rashi smiled at watching Mimi so excited and so mystified at the same time. They enjoyed the drama as Wendy drew out the suspense. Wendy smiled at Mimi, and with one eyebrow raised pretended to twirl a handlebar mustache. Wendy opened the bag and pulled out a boot. Mimi looked at her with a question in her eyes. Wendy just smiled and reached back into the bag. Wendy pulled out another boot and then the gloves. Mimi was trembling with excitement. When Wendy pulled out the helmet and placed it on Mimi's head, Mimi almost fainted. When she saw the small flight suit, she let out a high pitched scream and jumped to hug Wendy. Everyone in the room laughed as Mimi held the flight suit which was still too large for her up against her body to show it off.

Avi leaned over to Mimi and said, "When you grow into that suit, you can fly with us."

Mimi was so excited happy tears rolled down her cheeks.

Sarah took Mimi and the suit home pledging to meet them as soon as they could while everyone else headed for the council meeting.

The meeting started on time. The Rabbi sat in the center of the table. There were three council members on either side of him. The first order of business after the minutes and financial report was a request for funding for additional playground equipment for the school. So many of the new immigrants had brought small children that the current playground was getting crowded. After checking with the treasurer to verify that funds were available, the request was approved.

The second item on the agenda was a request that the writings of a certain obscure Cabbalist writer be banned from the school's curriculum. The discussion raged for half an hour before the council

finally voted not to ban the works, but rather would make the discussion of this writer voluntary on the part of the instructor. This meant that the one instructor who was comfortable dealing with this writer could do so and the other instructor could avoid the subject if he so desired.

Abraham commented to Greg that he had studied the Cabbalists as a teen, and the Cabbalist writings were responsible for his love of math. Now, as an adult, he considered them fascinating but irrelevant. He felt their real significance was to remind people that even a culture as rational as the Jewish culture did go off the deep end from time to time and could stay there for quite a while.

The third item on the agenda was a request to bring Rachel and therefore her parents up on charges for reckless endangerment with regard to the incident in the cafeteria. The council called witnesses and listened to testimony as to what occurred. David was interrogated as to his participation. Rachel was interrogated as well. Rev Schwartz testified to the punishment he had already invoked. As the questioning progressed it was difficult to determine what each council member thought other than they were diligently trying to determine the truth of the incident. Unlike many government proceedings where the participants' viewpoints are established in advance of the hearings, this council appeared genuinely neutral and intent on making an unbiased decision. Greg and Avi found the attitude refreshing and hoped that this was a proper indication of the attitudes of the rest of the community.

David's father interrupted the proceedings at several points to make inflammatory and derogatory comments about Greg, his family, the Admiral and his family and Abraham and his family. Finally the Rabbi asked Greg if he had any further comments. Greg rose and slowly advanced to the podium.

"Esteemed council members, citizens of Eretz, we have come to you as refugees. The planet we called Homestead was destroyed, rendered uninhabitable by a people who have no concern for human life. We helped stop them, but at tremendous cost. Had we not stopped them, they would be here now, and this planet which you call home would already be a wasteland. We do not come as conquering heroes, we come as refugees. Refugees tired of fighting, tired of needing to think in terms of protection and defending ourselves. All our lives my wife and I have fought. We fought until we defeated those who fought against us. We fought until we killed those who sought to kill us. In the Space Force and fought against those who would do harm to others and helped defeat them until a new and more powerful foe arose. We faced them at Homestead and we survived.

"We were instructed to report here by a dear friend charged with the defense of the sector in which we previously lived. We came as refugees hoping to provide assistance to people who would make us welcome and allow us to feel safe and at home."

He paused to gather his thoughts. "I can't fault the greeting my wife and I were given by Admiral Sherman and his people. I would have preferred a few days to get acclimatized, but being immediately put to work is better than the greeting my daughters received at the hand of this insensitive young man. Rachel and Wendy wish nothing more than to be treated like normal teenagers for the first time in their lives. David guaranteed that could never happen. They wanted to melt into the background and become one with their peers. David denied them that. They wanted to go to school, spend time with their classmates and have normal dates with normal boys and perhaps even settle down to normal lives. How much of that can they do now? Rather than bringing my daughter up on charges, I would suggest some form of reprimand be issued against David and his father for the irreparable damage done to my daughters. Thank you for your time."

The only woman on the council raised her hand for recognition. "Mr. Solomon, is it true that



you have personally killed over a dozen men in face to face combat?" she asked.

"Yes, it is," Greg replied.

"Can you name them?"

"Some of them," Greg answered. "The only ones you would know are Pierre and Anthony LaMarche and Daniel Esperanza. Asking for formal introductions while under attack is not generally considered a brilliant move."

The councilwoman continued, "Are you were aware that you were tried in absentia and convicted of the murder in the first degree of Daniel Esperanza. You were sentenced to death by firing squad."

"Where was the trial held?" Greg asked.

"Leda," the councilwoman replied.

"They have no jurisdiction over the location in which the events took place."

"The Federation acknowledged the system wide warrant for your arrest issued ten years ago. You are a fugitive," she stated flatly.

Greg paused before replying. "If it is the wish of this council that I leave, I will take my family, and we will leave."

"Quite the contrary. We are all fugitives. We are all refugees. We are all under sentence of death somewhere. We have a non-extradition policy that is well known throughout the Federation. You are welcome to stay, but you must realize that we have our rules, and your daughter has broken several of them for which some sort of punishment is in order."

"I understand," Greg replied.

"Mr. Solomon, as I see it, there is no question as to the facts of the incident. The testimony is consistent. The only question remaining for this council is the issue of punishment. I do not agree that the punishment invoked by Rev Schwartz is adequate. I would therefore move that all the students involved serve an additional two weeks of detention with Rev Schwartz every day after school. I would be willing to make an exception for Reuben and Rashi on those days when they are competing in Math or Science competition. For each competition they win, they do not have to make up the day they miss. For each day they lose, they make up the day. I would also recommend that in addition to the detention, Rachel be required to teach a marshal arts class in the gymnasium every day after school for the remainder of the school year."

Sarah leaned over to Avi who had been looking worried through the entire proceeding. "The councilwoman is Rev Schwartz's wife. She's an attorney. I wondered what she was up to. Everything will be fine. Rachel is getting off lighter than what the council originally proposed. You can relax."

The motion was seconded and carried on a voice vote.

The punishments were accepted and the proceedings duly recorded.

The Rabbi took the floor. "The next order of business has to do with the unauthorized use of Eretz space craft by under-aged crews in an offensive mission against unknown craft entering our system. Mr. Solomon would you please answer the charges?"

Greg thought for a second before responding, "Rabbi, when I finish testifying, please call Admiral Sherman to verify that the missions were authorized."

"Missions, plural?" Mrs. Schwartz asked.

"Yes, there were two of them," Greg replied.

"Were they dangerous?" Mrs. Schwartz asked.

"Space travel is in itself dangerous," Greg stated.

"Please continue."

"We took four Pirate Interdiction type craft. Of these, I personally own one and my wife, Avi, personally owns the other. Wendy and Rachel have passed the Federation pilot exams and are fully certified on these ships. Rachel piloted the one I own and Wendy piloted the one Avi owns. Everything they did was legal under Federation Spaceflight Navigation regulations. As to the other ships, Avi and I are certified as advanced instructors on these and on every small attack and scout class space craft that was in service of the Federation Space Force at the time we mustered out. Therefore, once we ascertain that Admiral Sherman had authorized the mission and its crews, you will see that everything we did was legal under Federation regulations."

The Rabbi called Admiral Sherman to the podium. "Is it true that you authorized this mission?"

The Admiral stood beside Greg and said, "Yes, I did under my authority as commander of the Combined Defense Forces. For the record, both Greg and Avi Solomon are Captains under my command as well as having been recalled to active duty in the Federation Space Force at the rank of Captain. They are not civilians. Therefore, there may be question as to whether this council has the jurisdiction necessary to bring charges."

"I move that the charges be dropped," Mrs. Schwartz said.

The motion was seconded and carried on a voice vote.

Greg turned to leave the podium.

"Admiral Sherman, Captain Solomon, not so fast please." Mrs. Schwartz interrupted them. "We may not have jurisdiction, but we have a right to know what you were doing out there. Could you please tell us about the mission you so suddenly took which involved so many of our youth?"

Admiral Sherman stepped up to the podium. "I received a report that a pilot-less drone had entered our system. This conclusion was verified by long range sensors on the Solomon's cargo ship."

"A cargo ship with military sensors?" Mrs. Schwartz asked.

"Yes, from the days when pirates were a serious threat," Greg replied.

“Please continue.”

“Captain Greg Solomon volunteered to take one of our more sophisticated ships in an attempt to determine who sent the drone. Abraham Abrams offered to operate the mission specific equipment. It made sense to send two vessels in case the drone was armed. Captain Avi Solomon volunteered to accompany her husband in a second identically equipped ship. My daughter, Faye Anne, has been trained on the equipment and we agreed she should join the mission. Wendy and Rachel refused to be left behind. Since their parents own the other two ships that went on the mission, we technically could not stop them from accompanying their parents.”

“Admiral, excuse me,” Mrs. Schwartz interrupted. “What do you mean you could not stop them?”

“They are not under my command. Even though their parents are under my command, the girls are not. They own the ships, and I had no justification to prevent them from going. There appeared to be no reason to prevent their action.”

“I assume that same would be true of the Abrams boys,” Mrs. Schwartz concluded.

“They had their parents’ permission,” Admiral Sherman replied. “I had no authority to stop them from traveling as a passenger in a privately owned vessel.”

“What would it take to put them under your command?” Mrs. Schwartz asked.

“They would need to be inducted into the Combined Defense Force,” the Admiral replied.

“At what rank?” Mrs. Schwartz asked.

Admiral Sherman scratched his head. “Airman Basic, or flight crew trainee, perhaps. Why?”

“Give it some thought. Please forgive the interruption. Admiral, please finish telling us about the mission.”

“The task force stopped at the cargo ship to retrieve personnel effects and parked the cargo ship in a location where its sensors would be better able to support their mission.”

While he was talking, an ensign plugged a data module into the room’s projection system and put up an image on the screen.

Admiral Sherman looked at the display. “This is what they found when they intercepted the drone.”

The image showed a gray unmarked vehicle bristling with antennae and dish receivers.

“This is the drone as they approached it.”

The ensign advanced to the next image.

“This is Captain Greg Solomon’s P I ship connected to the drone as viewed from Captain Avi Solomon’s ship. Notice that our ships are identified as to their ownership. The two privately owned ships carry the markings of their previous planet. This drone is not marked. That is a violation of

Federation regulations.”

They advanced through several more pictures of the two ships tied together.

“Dr. Abrams was able to determine from the drone’s navigation computer where its tender was located. The four ships hyper jumped to that location and this is what they found. We had to digitally enhance the images due to the low light levels at that great a distance from light sources, but what you see is plain. See the drones without the antennae and dishes? Those drones are nuclear capable. We don’t know that they have nuclear warheads, but we do know that they are capable of carrying nuclear warheads and they have no other function for which they are intended.”

Several more photos were displayed of the ship from different angles.

Mrs. Schwartz turned to look at Admiral Sherman, “So what you are telling us is that we are looking at a repetition of the Cuban Missile Crisis.”

“That would be correct,” Admiral Sherman replied.

“How do we know whose missiles these are?” Mrs. Schwartz asked.

Admiral Sherman pointed to a picture that showed the faces of the opposing pilots. “Captain Greg Solomon and Mr. Abrams photographed the crew inside the cabins of the two escorts that attempted to intercept them. We have identified the pilot of each vessel. They are former Federation pilots and are known to be working for the Swordsmen.”

A murmur arose from the audience.

Admiral Sherman continued, “We also know that the ship shown in this image is one of two previously unaccounted for Pirate Interdiction warships capable of short hyper jumps. The short hyper jump is a significant strategic advantage which makes this ship extremely dangerous.”

“Don’t we have similar ships?” Mrs. Schwartz asked.

Admiral Sherman nodded, “Yes, but their advantage to the offensive force is much greater than to the defensive force. The problem is you don’t know where the ship is going until it gets there and then you don’t know it was there until after it’s gone and has fired its missiles.”

“Sounds like Heisenberg to me,” Reuben quipped. Rachel elbowed him.

“There must be something we can do,” the Rabbi said.

“We are working on it, but have no immediate solutions. We will inform the council when we do,” Admiral Sherman replied.

“What do you recommend for the interim?” Mrs. Schwartz asked.

“Lots of ships on patrol. Even that may not help, but it’s the best we have,” Admiral Sherman admitted.

“But you don’t have the pilots,” the Rabbi observed.

"That is correct," Admiral Sherman affirmed.

"I trust you will do your best to rectify this situation and we should leave you to it," the Rabbi said.

"Yes, thank you."

Mrs. Schwartz said, "In the meantime, I move we call an emergency meeting of all of the community councils to draft a formal protest to the Federation against this incursion into our sovereign space as defined by Federation statute."

The motion was seconded and carried.

"Admiral, will you provide transportation for the other councils?" Mrs. Schwartz asked.

"Certainly, and I will prepare a formal presentation," the Admiral replied.

"Shall we schedule the meeting for Monday evening?" Mrs. Schwartz asked.

The meeting quickly moved through the other agenda items and adjourned.

After the meeting, the three families returned to Admiral Sherman's quarters. Once they had settled, Sarah got everyone's attention.

"We have another problem. The school administration is furious that we took five students out of classes for three days without asking their permission. Faculty meeting this afternoon was as heated as I have ever seen it. I floated the idea of a Reserve Officer Training Program, but it was shot down on the basis that non-academic exclusive societies are prohibited at the school. They either want the kids in school full-time or out full-time. I did point out to them that the Maccabees and the Rabbis of the Talmud recognized that military defense took priority even over the high holidays. There are precedents from the State of Israel where religious requirements were waived for those involved in military activities. They finally agreed that if the students were on active duty or in the active reserve, they would compromise and allow such students to participate in the school and school activities provided that school officials receive formal notification when the students are pulled from class."

"Advance notification?" Avi asked.

"No," Sarah said. "They recognized that may not be possible. They want to be sure that the students are not truant and are on an authorized mission."

"Fair enough," Avi said.

"Does it matter what we think?" Rachel asked.

"Yes," several of the adults said at the same time.

"I like the idea of formal induction into the Defense Forces. I am not sure that Airman Basic is the right rank. I would prefer the term Cadet, but that is up to you."

"Cadet is another word for student," Greg observed.

"I will have the personnel and legal team work out the policies and procedures in the morning,"

Admiral Sherman said. "We've had an exciting few days. Let's go to bed and attack these problems fresh in the morning."

As they left, Sarah pulled Rachel aside. "Did Reuben behave himself?"

Rachel chuckled. "My period started when we were out there. I think he may have gotten more of an education than he wanted."

Sarah smiled a knowing smile and said, "I was worried."

"I know. Don't be. He was fine. You should be proud of him."

"Thank you. They are both such big babies."

"Which is why they are so lovable."

Sarah then pulled Wendy aside.

"Did Rashi behave himself?"

Wendy smiled, "Yes, he did. Once I showed him how to run the simulations, I hardly knew he was there. Besides it's not me he's interested in."

"Oh?"

"He has a serious crush on Esther."

"Esther?"

"I probably shouldn't tell you that, but he's nuts over her."

"She's a sweet girl."

"I thought so, too."

"Thank you."

Wendy smiled. "You're welcome. He can fly with me anytime."

## ERETZ - CHAPTER TWELVE

A FEW DAYS LATER, after the teenagers who had flown together were formally inducted as “Cadet Space Flight Trainees” and assigned their duties, Rachel pulled David aside as they walked to class. “David, would you like to fly?”

“What are you talking about?” he sneered.

“Admiral Sherman needs pilots. I think you have what it takes,” Rachel said.

“You can’t be serious.” His lip curled in sarcasm.

“Deadly. You know me, I don’t joke about this kind of thing. Are you interested?”

“Maybe,” he said, his tone softening.

“Admiral Sherman wants to run a psych screen on you first, but I think you’d enjoy flying, and you’d be good at it. Look, half of what we do is about attitude. Your attitude sucks. Just like my Dad’s at your age. You’ll fit right in. Ask your parents for permission, and let me know tomorrow.”

She turned and walked away leaving him speechless.

David joined the Cadets and learned to fly. Some of the younger adults and many of the older students also joined the flight program. By the end of the first year, the Defense force had fifty fully armed, fully staffed short hyper jump capable P I ships on active duty in patrol rotation.

The “missile crisis” protest prompted a full scale investigation of the Swordsmen’ military activities and resulted in a two year moratorium on their purchase of additional military hardware. The price on surplus military equipment promptly dropped and planets which previously could not afford to develop defensive forces found themselves in the position to do so. Surplus ships and sensor arrays leaped off the surplus dealers’ lots. Soon every inhabited planet had protective sensor arrays and some sort of small armed defensive planetary guard force.

The Federation Space Force found itself in the uncomfortable position of having to ask permission to land places it had traveled freely before. Since permission was routinely granted, even the old hands grew to appreciate the new relationships. The planetary defense units and the Force built supporting relationships and mutual defense organizations. The Federation Military Force’s role shifted from military to police operations. They were as likely to become involved with interception of contraband or stolen cargoes as they had been in the combat of pirates.

Homestead’s Northern Hemisphere was abandoned and the population moved to the less damaged Southern Hemisphere. Memories of the people who had died there haunted the survivors even as they deserted the places they had cherished so they could rebuild on a new place and leave the pain behind. The Space Force built its Advanced Pilot Training Center on a string of islands in the southern ocean and provided a small, elite force to protect the planet at Federation expense. With fewer than a thousand personnel stationed at the training center, their impact on the rest of the planet was minimal. Once the media left in pursuit of other hot stories, the immigration into the planet slowed and the population stabilized. In a matter of a few years, the frozen foods business expanded, and the planet became one of the Federation’s largest exporters of high quality beef. The herds quickly reestablished

themselves, and the planet developed an enviable reputation for the quality of its livestock. The Clydesdale and Percheron horses had escaped the assault and were rapidly increasing their population under Horst's and Anna's dedicated guidance.

Even though they had been temporarily disarmed, Swordsman rhetoric did not change. As bellicose as ever, they directed their anger toward those who stood in the way of their conquests. The Jews, in particular, were the subject of continuous verbal and propaganda attacks. Publishers and distributors of popular entertainment media found the propaganda war to be a financial windfall as the parties involved attempted to out-manuever each other. With greater numbers of people and more ample resources, the non-Swordsman portion of the population increasingly marginalized the Swordsmen who became more strident and threatening.

Mimi grew into her flight suit. As promised, Avi took her out for her first flight. After her initial flight, Mimi routinely accompanied Rachel on patrol and quickly learned to read the sensors. She took to weightlessness even more readily than Rachel and Wendy had. She particularly enjoyed the opportunity to fly from place to place around the cabin. Endowed with a light easy laugh and a ready open smile, Mimi brightened every room she entered.

Greg and Avi were in a briefing on the results of some exciting research on the new sensor arrays when an ensign entered the room. He held up one hand with all five fingers spread and gave the thumbs up sign with the other. Admiral Sherman smiled. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I need to interrupt this proceeding. We have a new weapon! Please follow me to the hangar."

When they arrived, Admiral Sherman pointed to a missile sitting in its cradle next to a P I ship. Except for its bright mirror like surface and its nose cone with screw threads, it looked exactly like the missiles the P I ships normally carried. The Admiral was so excited he almost bounced as he walked.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the newest addition to our arsenal. It has performed perfectly in all five of its trials. This is the Electronics System Disruptor. It is capable of destroying sophisticated electronics systems within a kilometer. It can be fired from any of our P I and picket ships without modification. It is designed to seek out reactor heat radiator panels and embed itself into a panel. Once there, it will emit pulses that will destroy the electronics on any ship within its range. If the ship tries to move or to hyper jump, it will stay with the ship and transmit its destructive pulses through the hull of the ship. Within ten minutes of impact even the most hardened navigation system will be destroyed. We are looking at the most significant technological advance in the history of space warfare since the refinement of the short hyper jump. Avi, could you hand me your knife?"

Avi pulled her knife out of its sheath behind her neck and handed it to him.

"This is the inspiration for this missile."

He held up the knife so it threw rainbows on the floor. "I went back to the team who developed this material and had them develop a new material. It took them a year to create it. You can laser it, and the laser will bounce off. Radar will pass through it. The nose is so hard it will penetrate the side of most ships. It spins in flight so these screw threads drive it into the ship's side. We can destroy the ship's electronics with a single hit from anywhere."

"What happens to the crew?" Greg asked.

"They will die eventually," Science Officer Mendelssohn stated coldly.



“How long is eventually?” Greg pressed her.

“That depends on their level of stores and whether they can get a distress courier off before the pulses destroy those as well,” Science Officer Mendelssohn said.

“Could be weeks or months,” Greg mused.

“Yes.”

“That is not acceptable,” Greg proclaimed. “What happens to the ship?”

“Short of a complete overhaul in a major shipyard, it is dead. As dead as if you blew its reactor,” Admiral Sherman said.

“Except it’s not,” Greg stated. “What happens to their life support systems?”

“The life support systems continue to function,” Science Officer Mendelssohn answered.

“Why is that?” Greg asked.

“Should I explain how this works?” Science officer Mendelssohn asked.

“Yes, please do,” Avi said. She had become increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of sealing people in a tomb somewhere in space and waiting for them to die. Killing quickly in battle was one thing. This was something else.

“It produces high energy pulses at the specific range of resonant frequencies necessary to destroy the CMOS components in the ship’s computers. Using sympathetic vibration, it destroys the CMOS junction and renders the computers inoperative.”

“Don’t the life support systems use CMOS?” Avi asked.

“No,” Science Officer Mendelssohn said. “Spacecraft designers assumed that the ships might be exposed to a variety of radiation sources and used the older TTL technology in those systems. Life support and basic maneuvering systems are designed to function autonomously in case of major system failure. The designers sacrificed speed and power conservation for reliability in case of emergency. The TTL logic is slower and uses more power, but the occasional stray reactor emission will not destroy it the way it will a CMOS component. The missile does not harm the TTL junction.”

“What about the reactor?” Greg asked.

Science Officer Mendelssohn said, “The reactor will sense a system failure and automatically shut itself down. The reactors use mechanical relays as their back up system for all the obvious reasons. Once we shut down the ship’s main computers, the ship will run on batteries unless the crew takes over manual control of the reactor. Most reactors can operate at minimum power levels manually for extended periods of time.”

“What about rescue?” Greg asked.

“Excuse me?” Admiral Sherman asked.

“I have killed enough people,” Greg said. “You offer me a way to disable my enemy without killing them and tell me you will leave them to die anyway. I won’t do it.”

“They would kill us under the same circumstances,” Science Officer Mendelssohn protested.

“Why are we different from all the other peoples? Either you figure out some way to rescue the people in the ships we kill or I’m not flying this missile.” Greg turned to walk away.

“This is mutiny!” Admiral Sherman sputtered.

“It’s not mutiny until you order him to carry the missile and he refuses,” Avi reminded him. “We’ll see you later. A cargo vessel would be an ideal rescue platform. Think about the message you would be sending the rest of the Federation. Are we ethically better than the Swordsmen or not?”

She turned to leave the room retrieving her knife as she went.

“Rescue would be the humane thing to do,” Science Officer Mendelssohn said quietly.

One of the other pilots commented, “You know, we don’t have any way to get someone out of one our own ships if it becomes disabled. We probably should think about rescue.”

And so it was that the planet Eretz became the pioneer in space ship-to-ship rescue. Within six months, they had configured four ships for rescues of various sizes. The largest was a cargo ship the size of Greg’s capable of rescuing the largest of the passenger liners. The accommodations were hardly luxurious, but rescue ships were not party boats. Rather than keep the rescue developments secret, they published the specifications in technical journals and made drawings available to any ship builder who wished to incorporate the rescue technology into their designs. Shipyards all over the Federation were flooded with requests to modify existing ships to accommodate the new rescue equipment.

Greg and Avi, who had shepherded the project from the beginning, were publicly given credit for its success. Rose and the Cadets worked with the prototype testing and re-testing to determine the safety and effectiveness of the design.

The key component in the technology was a two meter diameter flexible tube that spanned the gap from one ship’s airlock to the other. It could be inflated and passengers could pull themselves along from one ship to the other using the ridges in the tube’s sides. The hard part had been designing the system so that it did not require a person in an EVA suit to make the connections. In the end, the design had to be simple enough and easy enough for Rose to make the links and initiate an evacuation.

Several of the engineers and designers who had worked on the project were honored in trade magazines and at engineering society conventions. The publicity helped the planet’s public image, but only deepened the Swordsmen resolve to punish those who had made them look so inhumane.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**T**HE TWO YEAR MORATORIUM on military equipment purchases by the Swordsmen expired. They rapidly fulfilled contracts they had negotiated in advance and quickly assembled a substantial fleet. Less than a year after the moratorium ended, they had assembled a force of over a hundred ships and had trained over twenty thousand Marines. The force was scattered over two dozen planets and escaped notice of all but the Eretz intelligence service. When the time came to launch the attack, rather than drawing attention to themselves by jumping directly to their destination, the Swordsmen ships jumped to a location beyond where the Federation Space Force's sensors could find them and then jumped back in to their attack position.

The Eretz Combined Defense Forces had not been sitting still while the Swordsmen armed themselves. They had increased their P I force to a hundred warships. Their rescue vehicles looked more like prison ships than like luxury liners. The armament on the P I ships had been doubled to twenty-four internally and twenty-four externally mounted missiles and forty-eight lasers. The lasers taxed even the larger reactors when they were all firing, but even under full load, the ships could make the short hyper jump without damaging the reactors. During readiness tests they had discovered that the P I ship was immune to the electronic Disruptor missile. The Swordsmen were known to have at least two short jump capable P I's. Only traditional missiles could be used on them. Destroying one took multiple direct strikes unless one was lucky enough to get the "up the pipes" shot in which case a single heat seeker could do the job. The P I's electronics, designed for a more hostile environment than any other ship ever built, could withstand the Disruptor until the missile exhausted its batteries. The joke among the pilots was that whoever designed the P I must have been doing some seriously heavy drugs. Greg and Avi both owed their lives to the obsessive behavior of the P I ships' designers.

The Eretz P I ships were deployed on the assumption that the invaders would jump directly into the system and immediately strike at the most sensitive targets as had been determined by their previous recon probes. Repeated unmanned Swordsman probes alerted the defensive forces to the potential and preferred targets. In other systems, the patrol ships were lightly armed highly maneuverable picket ships that operated within a short range of a mother ship. The Eretz defensive plan had its compliment of pickets, but primarily used the larger, more heavily armed P I which, due to its monstrous reactor, could match the picket for maneuverability. The defenders sat quietly, patiently floating in their respective orbits radiating as little emissions as possible to minimize their ability to be located. They waited for weeks for the attack they knew would come sooner or later.

They were right. Faye Anne was the first to draw blood. She had analyzed everything she could get her hands on to determine where the Swordsmen would strike first and even what strike angle they would prefer. She chose a spot in space where, if she understood Swordsman psychology as well as she thought she did, the first ship would appear. A foreign P I ship materialized in front of her position close enough for her to see that it lacked the Eretz battle markings. The Eretz ships had the Hebrew word for "life" in bold letters on their flight surfaces and on their fuselages. The foreign P I ship carried a pilot-less drone attached to its airlock. Faye Anne quickly identified the drone as one of the nuclear warhead carriers. With its back to her, the foreign P I launched the drone and four missiles at the freight depot. Faye Anne had planned for exactly this scenario. She had loaded her four missile tubes with heat seeking armor piercing missiles. They were programmed to fire three seconds apart from a single button command. She quickly smashed the fire button and four missiles jumped in sequence from her ship's tubes. The first detonated against the foreign P I ship's propulsion system clearing a hole for the

second. The second missile followed the first and detonated behind the propulsion system and tore it away. The third missile blasted away the reactor shielding and the fourth penetrated the reactor. The reactor detonated and the ship disintegrated into a rapidly expanding cloud of gas and debris. Faye Anne quickly spun her ship as she had been trained to let the heat shield on the ship's underside take the brunt of the force of the explosion.

Alerted by a "screamer" signal Faye Anne initiated when she spotted the intruder, the defensive laser and missile batteries on the surface brought their force to bear on the incoming drone and the four missiles. The intense barrage intercepted and destroyed the missiles and the drone far enough away that they could do no damage.

Reuben was next. The foreign P I materialized in front of him face to face. He did not wait for the other ship to fire first. He launched two missiles. The first passed through the view-port and detonated inside the flight deck. The second missile passed through the hole left by the first and penetrated the ship's munitions magazine. The ship disintegrated in the resulting explosion.

As was Greg's custom, the ships were in communication each with their own frequencies supported by a redundant network of repeaters. The foreign P I ships started to rain in. Defending P I ships materialized all around the attackers. All of the Eretz ships were short jump capable. Only the first two of the Swordsman P I ships into the system had been the short jump capable model, and they had been eliminated in the first few minutes of the battle. The defenders maintained their discipline as the dogfight developed. Constantly chattering, they reminded Greg of a basketball team as they worked their defense. The plan was to shoot only the P I's with live missiles. All the other ships were to get the Disruptor. Where the defenders had a single type of ship, the Swordsmen had a wide variety of ships that included destroyers, non short jump capable P I's and smaller scouts.

Greg, Avi, Wendy and Rachel stood away from the primary targets and watched the unfolding battle. Their job was not to deal with the initial wave of assault craft. They had a different task. Abraham rode with Greg. Forty of the Swordsman warships had entered the system when Abraham said, "I have their origination point. Shall we go?"

"How far?" Greg asked.

"Two hours in hyper," Abraham replied.

Greg relayed the navigation information down the fiber optic to Avi, Rachel and Wendy. Science Officer Mendelssohn rode in Avi's back seat. Mimi was with Rachel and Esther was with Wendy. The P I's in the main group had been armed with eight Disruptors in the external racks and forty standard missiles under the assumption that they would first engage other P I's for which they needed the standard missiles. This assumption had been correct. Greg, Avi, Rachel and Wendy were armed with forty Disruptors and eight standard missiles. Greg initiated the jump.

They dropped out of hyper drive where Abraham's calculations led him to believe the tenders were located. They found an armada of twenty troop transport ships in formation surrounded by a like number of destroyers. There were no P I's. This was going to be relatively easy. Greg waited until the destroyers scrambled in his direction.

"Down the middle," Greg said and initiated the short jump. He separated the four ships from the fiber optic when they exited the jump. Taking their positions, they proceeded to fire Disruptors into the

cargo ships. The destroyers had been caught off guard. When the formation appeared in their space, they had immediately scrambled to intercept, but that had been the wrong thing to do. They were racing at full throttle to face an enemy that was no longer there. Their enemy was politely walking down the line of cargo ships they were supposed to be protecting disabling the behemoths one at a time.

Communication with each cargo ship halted abruptly as the Disruptor missiles found their mark. Twenty troop transport cargo ships, twenty missiles, twenty dead collections of space going hardware. The Solomon family P I's, flying in formation, turned to address the destroyers. Twenty destroyers not capable of short hyper jumps turned one at a time to face four P I's that were. The Disruptor had the advantage that a near miss was as devastating to a ship like a destroyer as a direct hit, and a Disruptor could kill more than one ship at a time. Greg jumped into the middle of the turning destroyers and fired a volley of Disruptor missiles as he spun his ship to give each missile its best shot. Then just as quickly, he jumped again. Ten of the twenty destroyers were dead, intact with live crews, but still dead. Greg still had eight conventional missiles and he was behind the destroyers.

Avi jumped next. She jumped behind the destroyers that were now desperately trying to turn and face their adversary who had come at them from a different direction. She took out six of the remaining ten destroyers. Rachel and Wendy drove forward and took out two apiece. Within the space of a single hour the Swordsman Armada had been defeated. The destroyers drifted apart, their inertia carrying them away from the battle scene and off to the vastness of space where soon they would be too hard to find to rescue with only their distress beacons to direct would be rescuers.

Silently the conquerors surveyed the vanquished.

"Dad," Rachel called, "we can't leave them like this."

"I know. One of us has to go for help," Greg answered.

"I think help will be too late," Rachel said. "These destroyers are going to drift so far away we'll never find them."

"Can we use our hyper waves to push them toward their mother ships?" Wendy asked.

"Not without killing the crews," Abraham said.

"Wish there was some way we could take control of their drives," Esther thought out loud.

"The drives themselves aren't damaged," Officer Mendelssohn commented, "only the controls. They are like in a maintenance over ride."

"Abraham, if we hooked our fiber to the destroyers, could you control the drives?" Greg asked.

Abraham thought for a moment. "As long as none of the TTL circuitry is damaged. Navigation, fire control and communications should be the only systems that were killed."

"It's worth a shot," Greg said.

Greg hyper jumped to a point immediately ahead of the destroyer that appeared to be in the greatest danger of sliding off into the cosmos. The fiber optic quickly connected, and Abraham transmitted the codes to the destroyer's systems. The reactor restarted, and the ship appeared to be responding to his control.

"I've got it," Abraham said, "now what do we do with it?"

"Park it next to the mother ship. They can operate their steering jets manually and dock. They should be better off docked than drifting away by themselves."

Avi took off after the next destroyer. Wendy called, "Well, since you geniuses never saw fit to equip either my ship or Rachel's with fibers, how about we go home and get help. You can stay here and play space cowboy. Whoopie ti yi yo get along little doggie!"

"Very funny!" Avi shot back. "Go get help."

"Rachel," Wendy called. "We better go in with our transponders screaming or Faye Anne is likely to shoot our scrawny asses out of the sky."

"Good point. You go first!"

"Ha, Ha! Bye!" Wendy jumped for home. A few minutes later Rachel followed.

When Rachel and Wendy arrived, the fight was over. Faye Anne was an ace. She had destroyed five enemy P I ships. She had seemed to know where they would show up next and was always ready. She and her back seat, a tiny girl named Deborah, actually seemed to enjoy the battle. They could be heard over the comm hooting and hollering every time anyone made a hit. Reuben had destroyed two and assisted with two of Faye Anne's. Rashi had destroyed two but had taken laser hits and had to make an emergency landing at the freight depot. David had destroyed one, but his genius appeared to be his ability to set his adversary up to the point where one of his friends could hit it. He was credited with five assists. They lost five ships. Ten of their friends would not make it home.

Wendy and Rachel announced their request for twenty fiber optic equipped P I ships to report to the location where their parents were rounding up the destroyers. Twenty P I ships whisked off one at a time to perform the rescue. The remainder established a new patrol pattern in case the attack they had just fended off was not the only one planned. Six hours later, the first of the captive troop transport cargo ships arrived in the system.

Admiral Sherman took command of the transfer operation. The cargo ships were marshaled to the freight depot where EVA suited Marines in full battle armor supervised the disarming of their captives and transfer to a series of large empty maintenance hangars. It took eighteen hours to process all eleven thousand of the captives. Once the Marines had inspected the transports for weapons, the captives were allowed to return to retrieve personal effects, bedding and clothes. This process took another two days during which time the captives were provided "MRE" meals ready to eat.

The empty transports were parked in orbit around the freight depot. The captives were transferred to tropical islands and provided materials with which to assemble shelters. The processing had involved the captives filling out a personal data form on which they listed their name, rank, military ID number and optionally a next of kin to notify that they were safe if not free to leave.

The forms were compiled. The files were loaded on to data modules and the modules were sent to several locations including Federation headquarters, Federation Space Force headquarters, the head of the Swordsman church and several news media outlet home offices. The Sisters of Mercy were notified, but upon determining that the captives were in no danger of anything more severe than sunburn, elected to focus their energies elsewhere.

## ERETZ - CHAPTER FOURTEEN

EIGHT MONTHS AFTER THE BATTLE for Eretz ended, a Federation Space Force battle group requested permission via courier missile to enter the system. They stood off at a respectful distance while they requested escort and a guarantee of safe passage. Greg, Avi, Wendy, Rachel, Faye Anne, Reuben, Rashi and David rode out to meet them with their respective fire control assistants in their back seats securely enclosed with their display screens in battle configuration. Greg suspected a trap so they traveled fully armed with their weapons pods extended.

When the contingent of P I's from Eretz arrived on site, they were hailed on an open frequency. "This is Admiral Linda Dankese, Federation Space Force requesting permission to enter the system."

Greg surveyed the impressive inventory of military hardware arrayed in the darkness of space before him.

"Admiral Dankese, please form up in the vicinity of the message courier beacon." He gave the coordinates. "Admiral Sherman requests the honor of your presence and that of your senior officers at mess at the freight depot this evening at 2000 hours. He has requested that at least one senior officer from each of your ships try to attend."

"It will be my honor indeed. We will do our best to accommodate the Admiral's request."

The party that night in the quickly converted maintenance hangar went into the small hours of the morning. As the party wound down and the Federation officers drifted off in the direction of their ships, Admiral Dankese pulled Admiral Sherman aside for a private chat.

The following day, the Space Force and Federation Marines started repatriating eleven thousand Swordsman personnel. To a man, they looked well tanned, fit and very bored. Space flight technicians began repairs to the captured ships so they could be transported and impounded at Federation facilities. A small freight container was delivered to Admiral Sherman's office.

Once he had inspected the contents of the container, Admiral Sherman called his family to his office. He called Abraham and told him to bring his family. He called Greg and summoned the family. Lastly he called David, his father having passed away and asked him to bring his family.

On the floor of his office were six regulation gray Federation Space Force footlockers. He asked Rachel, Wendy, Reuben, Rashi, Faye Anne and David to line up in front of his desk. "First, I have some sad news. Our dear friend Admiral Davidson has passed away. Admiral Dankese will assume his duties upon her return to the station. Admiral Dankese brought other news. Greg and Avi, you have been invited to teach at the advanced pilot school on Homestead."

The applause was deafening.

Greg looked at Avi. "I don't know about you, but my traveling days are over. I think I would like to stay here."

Avi took his hand with both of hers. "I think me and my old man are going to set here a spell."

"Rose, Ellie Mae and Elvira have invited you to come visit any time you get bored."

"I might take them up on that," Rose answered.

Admiral Sherman continued. "The Smithsonian Institute has offered to purchase your P I ships less their reactors and weapons for a new exhibit they are preparing on the Swordsman wars. If you want to do this, I think we can spring for two new ships for you to fly."

"I think we could do that," Greg said.

Avi agreed.

"In return for the business you have sent them in the past, particularly the rescue system, Saturn Space Industries has offered to dry dock your cargo ship and outfit it with the latest amenities, hardware and software at no cost. They promise not to tamper with your computer friend's personality. The job should take six months."

"How will we get the ship there?" Greg asked.

"That's the best part," he grinned. "I saved the best for last." He handed each of the young adults standing before him a letter on stationary from the Chief of Staff of the Federation Space Force. Commendations generally came in envelopes like these, and the six were genuinely excited. "Open them please," he said proudly.

As they ripped open the envelopes he said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, you have been accepted to the Federation Space Flight Academy. You will find your uniforms in the foot locker at your feet."

Pandemonium reigned as the foot lockers were opened and their contents displayed.

"Technically, since I am not an active duty Federation officer, I can't administer the oath. Admiral Dankese has graciously agreed to perform the ceremony."

Admiral Dankese entered the room. She was dressed in formal whites and carried a ceremonial sword. The six new inductees lined up and repeated the oath as she recited it to them. She drew the sword and held it in vertically front of her face.

"This was Admiral Davidson's sword, he had it made against the day when he could personally give you the Academy oath. He lived long enough to learn of your resounding defeat of the Swordsmen. He knew he would not survive the voyage and asked me to use his sword for the ceremony. He followed your careers and was very proud of you. It is in his name that I pronounce you Space Flight Cadets."

She tapped the sword once on each of their shoulders before returning it to its scabbard. She removed the belt and offered the sword to Greg. "He wanted you to have this. You earned it."

Tears flowed down Greg's face. He bowed as he took the sword.

After a discrete wait, Rachel asked, "So how do we get there?"

"In the cargo ship, dummy!" Wendy answered. "You can be so slow sometimes. We take the ship to Saturn Space Industries ship yard and hop a shuttle from there. Right?"



“Right,” Admiral Sherman answered.

“How does the ship get back here?” Reuben asked. “We can’t take long enough in the summer break to ferry it back.”

“One of our students will graduate from the Federation Institute of Technology in Boston and one will come from Federation Tech in Atlanta shortly before you arrive. They will meet you at the ship yard and supervise the cargo ship’s overhaul and the delivery of the two P I ships to the Smithsonian. They will bring the cargo ship home.”

“We better hurry, we have a ship to catch!” Rachel exclaimed.

“Rachel, you are the captain for the voyage and due to the nature of your cargo you will have a Space Force escort. The P I ships attached to the cargo ship will be fully armed for the trip should you find the need to defend yourselves. You are carrying the first shipment of Disruptor missiles for delivery to the Space Force. Two of the new light attack destroyer prototypes will go with you.”

They departed two days later. Holding tight to her mother and grandmother in a flood of tears, Rachel said, “I wish you were coming with us.”

Wendy nodded, unable to speak through her tears.

Avi held her daughters and said, “We’ll come to graduation. It’s time you had your own adventures.”

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER ONE

RESPLENDENT IN THEIR DRESS WHITES, with their blue berets emblazoned with gold six pointed stars, six cadets stood in the front left corner of the formation of freshmen on the flight line at the Federation Space Flight Academy in Academy Village, Utah. Alone among the students, they were authorized to wear the white dress uniform of the Eretz Defense Force. The cadets proudly displayed combat ribbons above their breast pockets. The three women of the group were Aces having killed five or more enemy craft in battle. Two of the women also displayed a second ribbon that came from a battle they had fought along with their parents when they were still teenagers.

Normally this ceremony was covered by limited numbers of reporters and media personalities. Due to the presence of the six distinguished combat veterans who had come to the Academy as students and not as instructors, special arrangements had been made to accommodate the media who suddenly took an interest in Academy activities. Once this ceremony was over, however, the grounds would once again be closed to civilians and Academy life would return to normal.

Many of the other cadets wore uniforms of the services from which they had come. Earth's Navy, Air Force, Army and Marines were well represented by officers and enlisted personnel seeking advancement to their space traveling allies. A smattering of other planets were represented and the brightly colored uniforms stood out in the ranks of the new cadets. Every race, religion and major ethnic group could be found represented among the student body at the academy. The diversity of the group was evident in the faces that proudly arrayed in front of the reviewing stand.

The six cadets in whites had already been administered the oath that the others would take this bright windy afternoon on the open flight line at the Academy. All six were certified spacecraft pilots. They could pilot unarmed spacecraft on their current certifications in the tightly regulated central system, but without having been officially inducted into the Federation Space Force could not legally pilot the warships they had carried as cargo into Earth's defense perimeter.

Admiral Seamus O'Leary, the Academy's Commandant, sat on the reviewing platform next to Commodore Tejbir Singh, Dean of Students. "Are you ready for a tough four years?" the Admiral asked his good friend.

"Why do you say that?" the Commodore asked. "This looks like a very good class. Their numbers are quite impressive."

The Admiral focused on the six white uniforms. "Look at the six in white in the front row. Do you know who they are?"

"They are from the Jewish settlement on Eretz," the Commodore replied. "I heard they are fairly intense. They're what the press is here to see."

"That's putting it mildly. The one on the extreme end is Rachel Solomon. The one next to her is her sister Wendy. I can't remember the last time we had sisters in the same class. Between the two of them, they have more combat victories than the entire rest of the class put together and that includes the four next to them. They were in the first flight that used the Disruptor in combat. The third woman, Faye Anne Sherman has five kills, not counting her Disruptor victories. The man on the end, David

Shapiro has one. The other men are brothers, Reuben and Rashi Abrams and have two each.”

“Impressive combat records, but their test scores put them at the third quartile. It’s not like they will be our top students.”

“Perhaps, but they will be a challenge more for you than for me.”

“How so?”

“They are female and Jewish so the Swordsmen have declared open season on them. Their father has an outstanding warrant for his arrest for murder. We have Swordsman and evangelical Christian cadets who will seek them out for special attention. They have more combat experience than our instructors. I wonder how our staff will feel about teaching tactics to students who may know more than they do. Their hand-to-hand combat skills are very good. Is there anyone in the Federation who hasn’t seen the video of them killing those Swordsman Marines? Every two-bit over-sexed man on campus with a self image problem is going to try and prove he is better than they are.”

“Do you see the trouble coming from them or from people around them?”

“That’s the part I don’t know. I don’t know how much they are aware of the challenge they present us. The Solomon girls’ mother and father both graduated here as did the Sherman girl’s father and I hope they had the sense to fill the girls in on what to expect, but there is no way to know.”

“I like to be proactive about these things. Perhaps I should call them to my office and chat with them.”

“No, ‘Bir, I think that’s a bad idea which is why I brought it up. I know that’s what you like to do, and I don’t want you to do it. I knew the parents when they were here. We need to leave them alone. We don’t pull them out for anything special. We treat them the same as any other cadet. Keep a close eye on their class reports, and let me know weekly how they are doing. Their parents were brilliant but difficult students. I wonder if the daughters will be the same.”

“Very good, sir.”

Demographics had hit the Federation Space Force hard. Officers who had been recruited at the beginning of the Pirate Interdiction campaign had reached retirement age and were retiring in droves. Commercial interests were paying impressive salaries to people who could explore and prospect new systems that had become accessible due to the advances in hyper drive. Former Space Force officers were prime candidates. When the officers left for the private sector they often took many of their subordinates. The Force was severely short of experienced officers and enlisted personnel.

In order to fill shortages in the officer ranks, the Force recruited from other planetary services. This recruiting drive came to a bottleneck at the Academy. The Academy was so over crowded that dormitory rooms that were normally doubles were converted to triples. Rachel, Wendy and Faye Anne were assigned to a room normally occupied by two students, as were Reuben, Rashi and David. They found, as did most of the other students of that class, that studying in their rooms was impossible. The library and normal study areas were at capacity. Fortunately, the Jewish chaplain arranged for them to use one of the Chapel’s conference rooms in the evenings and they studied there as a group.

The Jewish chaplain was thrilled to have so many Jewish cadets. For the first time in his career he had more than a handful of Jews attending his services. The success at Eretz had broken the long-standing Jewish stigma against joining the military.

Services for the Jewish cadets were every Friday night. The cadets, regardless of their religion, were strongly encouraged to attend services of their choice in every week. "Strongly encouraged" was an understatement. While they could not be forced to go to services, the squadron commanders of those students that did not participate in religious activities generally found onerous tasks for them to do when they would have been going to services if they had gone to services. The cadets found that it was safer to be religious than to not be religious, so the greatest majority became involved with religious activities even if they had never been religious before.

The Rabbi greeted the group of six friends warmly as he stood at the entrance to the chapel with his wife and two small children. He greeted them by name as if he really knew them or at least knew of them. The service that evening was as light and breezy as a Jewish Sabbath Eve service can be. The melodies chosen for the prayers were picked from among the more up-beat selections. The idea of was to make the cadets feel as much at home and as welcome as they could. After the service, the Rabbi invited all of the cadets to the traditional after the Sabbath reception, the Oneg Shabbat. He greeted them individually as they filed from the chapel into the reception room. He shook their hands and he asked how they were and how they were adjusting to life at the Academy. He made some notes to follow up with a few of the cadets.

After the reception was underway the Rabbi's wife pulled Rachel and Wendy aside and said, "You're the Solomon girls, aren't you?" Wendy replied, "Yes, we are."

"Your mother saved my life," the Rabbi's wife said.

The girls were speechless. After all, what can someone say at a time like that? They had witnessed their parents rescue a convoy from pirates, but had stayed on their own ships and had not mixed with the survivors.

The Rabbi's wife continued. "Your mother probably saved thousands of people's lives, and I'll bet she doesn't even know who they are but we owe her a debt of gratitude we can never repay. I guess to her she was doing her job. Her job was to run around saving peoples' lives and move on. Does she know how special she is for what she did for so many of us?"

Rachel said, "Maybe, but I don't think she ever looked at it that way. She did what she did. That was all. She liked her job, but it was her job. Like you said, it was her job just like being a Rabbi is his job. Saving people's lives was a bonus."

"Let me tell you the story. My father was a mining engineer, and we traveled from system to system. He built new mines all over the galaxy. Most of the mines were in inhospitable, dreadful places. Sometimes we lived in the ships which we docked together to form a space station. Sometimes we lived on the planet's surface in an enclosed outpost. We never stayed anywhere more than a year. Some of the mines were iron mines. Some were coal mines. Some were heavy metals. We opened a gold mine once. We did one that mined semi precious metals. My whole family traveled with him. We were in a convoy headed to a new location. We left from Earth with a load of mining equipment, miners and their families to open a new mine on a new planet. The pirates were waiting for us when we dropped out of hyper drive. They boarded the ships and started killing people and stealing things to

carry back to their ships. It was the most horrible two days of my entire life. They killed my father when he fought them. They raped my mother. I hid in my clothes locker, and the pirates didn't find me. Then simply out of nowhere your mother appeared with this ship, this amazing ship! They fired at her as soon as she appeared. I saw her from my view-port. She flitted around like a butterfly firing missiles. They fired back, but nothing could hit her. She shot missile after missile all by herself. She would appear somewhere, shoot her missiles, and she would disappear. She destroyed a dozen pirate ships in an hour. I watched it happen. After she destroyed the pirate ships, she boarded the captured ships one at a time. She boarded our ship first. I remember her standing there in her space suit with two laser pistols, one in each hand and that big battery pack on her back just blasting away. It made a funny noise every time she fired. Anything that tried to stop or challenge her she blasted. If you put your hands up, she passed you by. She lifted her face mask and smiled at me when she walked by my room. She shot all the pirates that had boarded the ship. She shot one right in my doorway. He tried to shoot her, but she was too fast for him. She didn't say anything to anybody. She just shot and moved on. When it was over and she was sure we were all safe, she got in her ship and she left. There was no time to thank her. It was like she was done here and she was gone. No goodbye or anything, just gone. She's the most amazing woman I ever met. Growing up I wanted to be like her." The Rabbi's wife smiled. "There are so few people I tell that story anymore."

"I'll bet there are a lot of people who'd like to be like our mother," Rachel said. "Sometimes we would like to be more like her, too."

"Your mother is an amazing woman and some of the gratitude that she earned will come to you. Use it wisely."

Wendy smiled and said, "We will."

The Rabbi approached, reached around his wife's shoulders and said, "We would like to invite you and your companions to our home after the reception. It would be my honor to invite you for a little coffee and light chatter for the remainder of the evening."

The girls agreed, and after the reception was over they piled into the Rabbi's personal vehicle and drove to his quarters. The conversation was light and amiable and the Rabbi's two children stayed up way past bedtime to be part of the party. That evening began a tradition that lasted for the rest of the time the six cadets were at the Academy. Every Friday night they went to services. After services they went to the reception, and after the reception the six of them went to the Rabbi's house. This was the only time other than the school's breaks that they allowed themselves time away from their school related activities and academics. Other than the time at the Rabbi's and the required sporting activities, they devoted their entire day to academics. This was the hardest work they had ever done, and they struggled to maintain the grades that they felt they needed to achieve.

During winter break most of the other students left the Academy to go home except for those for whom the distance to wherever they needed to go was so great that they could not get there and back in the length of the winter break. Concerned that leaving campus was too risky, the six Jewish students from Eretz stayed behind and studied over the winter break. Several of Greg's and Avi's old friends stopped by during that break to see them, visit for a while and have lunch, tell war stories about their parents and move on.

Several of Admiral Sherman's friends stopped by to visit Faye Anne. One retired Space Force Intelligence officer stopped by and after spending a lively animated evening with the group, gave Faye Anne a business card. He told her if she needed information to call him. He still liked the odd intrigue from time to time. It kept his hand in. There was a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye when he gave Faye Anne the card. The number was an answering machine and he only checked it once a day and not to be alarmed if he didn't get back right away. Several times during the next semester Faye Anne would come up with some arcane piece of information that the others had been unable to find. While she never said anything, the others suspected that her father's old intelligence friend had been involved somehow. Rachel and Wendy suspected that the old man appreciated the attentions of the younger lady and they certainly did not disapprove.

Freshman year flew by. Most of the classes were large lectures or taught on individual workstations. The cadets were regularly quizzed and often had to turn in lengthy research papers. They were intensely busy from the time they awoke to the time they crashed with their head on the pillow. Rachel and Reuben joined a co-ed club basketball team. Their team finished the season one shy of dead last. Wendy joined the volleyball team and did reasonably well. Faye Anne joined the swim team and specialized in longer distances. David joined the swim team as a diver with a less than spectacular record. Rashi joined the baseball team as a catcher and ended the season in second place.

This is not to say that everything went smoothly. David settled a few arguments with his fists. Rachel and Wendy found that merely scratching the backs of their necks would quickly calm down most situations. Faye Anne became adept at talking her way out of conflicts. Reuben found that a wide-eyed innocent appearance worked wonders for diffusing tensions. Only Rashi managed to stay completely out of trouble and even he had no idea how he did it. While they knew that many eyes were watching for their mistakes, they managed to get through their freshman year without disciplinary action taken against them.

By the end of the first year, the six had started to diversify their skills, Rachel was clearly the leader, the strategist and tactician. Wendy applied the reality check that verified Rachel's strategies. She would think through the parts of Rachel's plans that might have been missed and determine if what Rachel intended to do would work. Reuben got into the engineering even more than he admitted. He did immensely better than he had in high school with tougher, more challenging material. He specialized in spaceflight engineering and quickly moved to the top of this class in those subjects. Rashi found a home in nuclear power and in munitions. He understood the principles better than any of the others could even hope to do. Faye Anne's specialty was information. She could find information that no one else could find. She had information that continually amazed and astounded the others.

After his battle with the Swordsmen, David had become quiet. Combat had changed him. Instead of being the loud, obnoxious, arrogant person that he had been, he became as quiet as he had been loud before. He became more studious. His writing style changed. His writing was short, concise, to the point. He could get an idea across coherently in less time than any of the others. History and law appealed to him. He did well in his writing courses. His ability to analyze and see through the ideas in the written word improved dramatically during that first year at the academy. When they received the results of the final exams at the end of the first year, they were in the top quarter of their class. They were not in the top ten percent as they would have liked but solidly in the first quarter and while they knew that was nothing to be ashamed of, they looked to do better next year and even more looked forward to spending their summer training with the Marines.

Six tired cadets caught a military jet from the airfield at the Academy and slept through the

flight to Parris Island. They arrived in the middle of the night and were escorted to the visiting officer's quarters. As Rachel and Wendy's parents, Greg and Avi, did a generation earlier, they requested to spend their summer break from the Academy at the Federation Marine training center on Parris Island. They looked forward to the idea of their training focusing exclusively on their bodies and not on their minds. After the rigorous training at the Academy, boot camp with the Marines seemed like a vacation.

At 0700 they reported as instructed to the training battalion commander's office wearing their fatigues. They were escorted into an empty office and instructed to wait for the Colonel. A well muscled black Marine exactly Greg's height, weight and build entered the room. His expertly tailored uniform proudly displayed every muscle in his powerful back and shoulders. Much of his hair had gone gray, but there was no doubt that this was a man in prime physical condition. They immediately snapped to attention and saluted.

Colonel Connors returned the salute. "Stand at ease." He walked the line they had formed in front of his desk and addressed each of them by name and rank in turn. He walked behind his desk and looked them over one more time. "Welcome to Parris Island. My official mission is to turn you into the best officers the Space Force has ever seen. My unofficial mission is to kick the living shit out of you for the entire summer. We will do both. I am Colonel Reginald Connors and I will be responsible for your training while you are here. In a few minutes you will meet your sparring partners. For the duration of your stay you will not be Space Force officers, you will be treated as Marine enlisted personnel. Do not even think of going to the Officers' Club. Your sparring partners must go everywhere you go, therefore, you can't go anywhere they can't go."

"Your training supervisor will be Gunnery Sergeant Gabriel Alexander. He has been training cadets in our summer program for ten years. He will challenge you and push you as far as you can go. If you don't hurt at the end of each day, he has not done his job. If you have trouble sleeping at night, it won't be his fault. Before we start, I need to have a word privately with both of the Cadets Solomon. Through that door to your left is a conference room. Go in there and have a seat. I will join you shortly. The rest of you please have a seat here. We will return for you in a few minutes."

After Colonel Connors was settled in his seat at the head of the table and the girls had taken theirs he said, "I have taken the liberty of inviting Lt. Colonel Latisha Strong to join us. What we are about to discuss is extremely sensitive. You are not to discuss it even among yourselves except in my presence. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sir! Yes, Sir!" they chorused.

Lt. Colonel Strong entered the room and the cadets jumped to their feet. Latisha Strong was as black as Colonel Connors and as solidly built. Her uniform was as well tailored as his and left no doubt that she could be as much a force to contend with as he was. She was exactly Avi's height and stature. The girls were looking at a black version of their mother.

"As you were." She closed the door behind her.

"We need to deal with some misconceptions." The Colonel steepled his fingers. "I was your father's sparring partner. He is responsible for my getting into Officer Candidate School."

Lt. Colonel Strong said, "I was your mother's sparring partner, and she made my life a living hell until I passed the Officer School entrance exam. We owe your parents a great deal."

Rachel and Wendy shot a quick smile and glance.

"Some things never change, I see," she continued. "Growing up with those two for parents must have been an adventure."

"That's a good word," Rachel said.

The two senior Marines chuckled.

Colonel Connors picked up. "Your parents had the most incredible ability to draw trouble to themselves. I don't know how they did it, but they would be quietly sitting with us at a bar somewhere and they would get attacked. Never could figure it out. There is one incident that I need to tell you about. You need to understand what happened because it impacts your own self-images. I am talking about the death of Daniel Esperanza."

Lt. Colonel Strong ignored Rachel and Wendy's sharp gasp and picked up the story. "It was the end of our last summer together. Your parents were headed back to the Academy for their senior year. We had been assigned to duty in the South China Sea and were to meet our ship in Seattle. As much firepower as we owned between us, we decided that it would be safer to drive across country than try to pass that many weapons through airport security. The four of us alternated driving. Do not let your father drive on a major highway! He is a hazard on the road. It's a good thing he doesn't fly like he drives. We were in Alabama when we decided to get off the highway and find somewhere to eat. Your mother spotted this little bar that was about the only thing open in the town. It was crowded for a weeknight. We ate at a corner booth and got up to leave. Your father got up first, and this guy blocked his way. I didn't know it at the time, but this was Daniel Esperanza. He taunted your dad calling him 'nigger lover' and pushing him back away from the door. His buddies made a ring around them and kept us away from helping him. It was like they were setting him up for a fight. The buddies came at us with knives and broken bottles. It was turning into a free-for-all."

She paused a moment before continuing. "The guy drew a knife on your dad, and your dad grabbed the knife hand. The scar he has on his wrist, that's when he got it. Your mother saw the blood and freaked out. She screamed like a raving maniac. She grabbed the two guys in front of her and smashed their heads together fracturing their skulls. They passed out on the floor but they lived to tell the story. She jumped over them and leaped onto Esperanza's back. She wrapped her legs around his middle. She beat him on the head with her fists screaming the whole time. When he didn't let go, she pulled her knife out from under her collar and put it to his neck. I don't know what she was thinking or even if she was thinking, but she took her knife with its six inch blade and started at one jugular vein and worked around to the other. She held that knife just under his chin like we showed her in combat training, and she sliced that man's throat like she'd done it all her life. Blood was shooting everywhere. She could have left it at that, but she didn't. She made another stroke with the knife and took the head completely off. Our Bowie knives are big knives, even bigger than those throwing knives you keep in your collars, but I doubt I could take man's head off in two strokes like she did. I have never seen so much blood. Then she started waving the severed head around the room threatening people with it.



There was a look in her eyes I have never seen before or since. It frightened me.”

Wendy nodded. “We’ve seen that look.”

Colonel Connors picked up the story. “There were two guys blocking the door. Your dad knifed both of them. He grabbed your mother and they ran. We covered their exit before we left. Apparently there aren’t a lot of police in that area because we got away. I think if we had been in a more populated area that would not have happened. My point is, Daniel Esperanza did not have to die. We could have subdued him and his buddies with non-lethal force. Second, your dad loves your mother very much because he has covered for her all these years. Third, there are people who will seek vengeance for these deaths against you. You need to be prepared. We are training you in the use of lethal force, but it is important that you make the decision to use lethal force only when non-lethal force will not work.”

“This was the beginning of the troubles between them,” Lt. Colonel Strong said. “The incident so traumatized your mother she almost flunked out of the Academy. She couldn’t go to anyone for help because if she did she would be tried for murder. Your dad was afraid of her. He had seen what her anger could do and feared for his own life. He helped her some during their last year at the academy, but it was not the same. They tried to reconcile while they were assigned to the same fleet after graduation, but it did not work. You need to understand the power you have and use it wisely. There are alternatives to killing.”

Silence filled the room.

“That explains many things,” Wendy said quietly.

Rachel said, “He is still afraid of her.”

“Now know why,” Wendy added. “I think I would be afraid too. Their fights are so intense.”

“They fight a lot, but they keep their distance from each other for days after a fight. They really are afraid of each other,” Rachel said. “They love each other, but there is this tension that never goes away, and you want to see that the same thing does not happen to us?”

“Yes, but there’s more,” Colonel Connors said after a pause. “I have listened to Andersen’s unofficial account of the incident with Anthony LaMarche, and he has the details correct.”

“I wasn’t there for that one,” Lt. Col Strong interrupted.

“Were you the mysterious Shore Patrol Marine?” Rachel asked incredulously.

Colonel Connors face split in a huge grin. “I wonder if Andersen still has the pistols.”

“He does. He visited us during Winter Break at the Academy. He is waiting for someone to claim them,” Rachel offered.

Colonel Connors’ laugh was deep, rolling and warm. His whole body shook as he laughed. “That little weasel. I never did understand why your dad thought of him as a friend, but those days are gone. On to the business at hand, let’s go meet your sparring partners.”

They picked up the four who were waiting in the outer office on their way to the parade field. Once there, they joined over a hundred other cadets and a like number of Marines. Cadets had come from the Air Force, Navy and Space Force Academies. The Marines were recent graduates of the Marines' Special Forces programs and were in top physical shape.

Gunnery Sergeant Gabriel Alexander stood on top of small platform. "Fall IN! Make four lines in order by height! Line 1! Female Marines! Line 2! Female cadets! Line 3! Male Marines! Line 4! Male cadets!" Two straight lines, and two ragged lines formed on the field.

"Eyes LEFT! When I say four lines I mean four STRAIGHT lines!" The two ragged lines of cadets straightened out somewhat.

When the movement stopped, Sergeant Alexander commanded, "Marines! About face!" The Marines sharply spun around to face the cadets. "Marines! You should be facing your assigned sparring partner. If you are not facing your assigned partner swap places until you are."

"Marines! Introduce yourself to your partner for the next eight weeks!"

Rachel's partner was Lance Corporal Suwanee Baxter. Wendy's partner was Lance Corporal Patricia Hefner. Faye Anne's partner was Lance Corporal Janet Rivers. Reuben's partner was Lance Corporal Darius Black. Rashi's partner was Lance Corporal Lionel Sanford. David's partner was Lance Corporal Luther Townsend. All were perfectly matched for height and weight. However, the Marines were in much better physical condition, and as pale as the cadets were from having spent so much time in the classroom, the Marines were black. The Marines on the parade field represented most of the races that made up the Federation, but the six Jewish cadets all had black partners. Faye Anne was the first to notice and rationalized that this arrangement could not have been an accident, and it must have been for their own good.

"Cadets! Introduce yourself to your partner for the next eight weeks!"

When the voices had stopped, Sergeant Alexander commanded, "Marines! About FACE!"

The Marines quickly executed the order. "Marines! Count off by six!"

Starting on their left, the Marines counted off loudly and clearly. "Marine Number One and Cadet partners! Forward March!"

When the four moving lines had cleared the remaining lines standing on the field, Sergeant Alexander commanded, "Halt! You are now Platoon One! Platoon One! Left face! Forward march. Close ranks march!"

After a few beats he commanded, "Column left! March!" He marched Platoon One around so it was standing behind the four lines still in place. In similar fashion, he separated and positioned the six platoons on the parade field. The six cadets from Eretz were separated, one in each of the platoons.

"Listen up! Effective immediately and for the duration of this training you will have the rights and privileges of a Lance Corporal in the Federation Marine Corps. The fact that some of you have the rank of officer in some other military service means nothing! For the next eight weeks you are all Lance Corporals! Do I make myself clear?"

“Sir! Yes! Sir!”

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Sir! Yes! Sir!”

“In a few minutes I will release you to move from your temporary billets to your barracks. Marines! You will assist your sparring partner with the move. Your sparring partner will be your roommate for the summer. The women will be in barracks two to a room. The men will be in open bay barracks. This is the only part of your training where the women will be treated differently from the men. Marines will take the top bunks. You will return here and form up in your platoons in exactly one hour. At that time you will determine unit commanders. Each unit will have a Marine commander and a cadet commander. For today, that commander will be the oldest Marine and the oldest cadet in the platoon. Do I make myself clear?”

“Sir! Yes! Sir!”

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Sir! Yes! Sir!”

“Company! Fall Out!”

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER TWO

RACHEL LOOKED AT HER PARTNER and decided to find out exactly how evenly matched they were. She grinned and said, "Race you to the V O Q!" Lance Corporal Suwanee Baxter grinned back and took off. She ran in long even strides that ate up the distance. Rachel's strides were shorter, but more powerful, and they stayed together as they left the field and headed down the road.

Colonel Connors and Lt. Colonel Strong saw the two break away from the pack and barrel across the field. "It's going to be an interesting summer," he said. "I think you were right about Corporal Baxter. Who do you think challenged whom?"

"My guess is Cadet Solomon issued the challenge and Corporal Baxter rose to it. Corporal Baxter will rise to whatever challenge she chooses to rise to. Let's hope Cadet Solomon can make the connection and do for Corporal Baxter what her mother did for me."

"And visa versa I trust."

"I didn't do that much for Avi. She was her own woman."

"You are too modest."

"What about you and Greg?"

"We learned from each other, just as we hope they learn from each other."

Suwanee beat Rachel to the V O Q, but not by as much of a lead as Suwanee would have expected. Breathing heavily from the run, she turned to greet Rachel as she arrived. Suwanee held her hand out. "You are one sharp cookie!"

Gasping for air, Rachel said, "Thank you. Friends?"

"Friends."

Once the cadets had stowed their gear in the barracks, the platoons reassembled on the parade field. Suwanee and Rachel were the oldest members of their platoon and stood at the front of the formation. They were given their orders for the day. The platoons went their separate ways to be issued the equipment they would need for the training. They returned to their barracks carrying duffel bags full of their gear which included protective armor, combat boots and foul weather gear. In their wallets they carried the paperwork documenting the deduction of the cost of the gear from their pay.

Their days quickly settled into a physically demanding routine. Each day started at 0600. With the dew still on the ground, they did physical training for three hours on courses designed to develop their endurance and stamina. The next hour was spent in weaponless hand-to-hand combat. The following hour was devoted to the use of weapons other than fire arms. They were allowed one hour for lunch. After lunch their schedules varied. The platoons were split up due to the limits of the facilities available to them. They learned to fire a variety of hand held weapons including laser pistols, ballistic pistols, rifles, grenade launchers, bazookas, shoulder fired missile launchers and rapid fire weapons of several sizes.

Their training included time in the water as well as on land. Rachel and Wendy had learned to

swim in the lake in front of the house. Faye Anne had never learned to swim, so teaching her became a joint weekend project. One of the misconceptions they addressed early was the idea that firearms do not work when wet. They work. They rust and have to be cleaned quickly. The newer polymer weapons were less susceptible to moisture and therefore were preferred over the heavier metal ones.

Each platoon learned to operate both heavy and mobile artillery. They drove armored personnel carriers and remote control devices. The goal of the artillery training was not to become proficient in its operation, but to understand the weapons uses and shortcomings in battle. Each day ended in the classroom. By 1600 hours when the daily summer rains began, the company moved indoors for lectures and exercises in classrooms or on computer simulators. Supper was taken in shifts to maximize the time each student had on the simulators. "Lights out" was at 2100 hours and by that time exhaustion had set in and sleep came easily.

Religious services on the weekends were the only time the partners were not expected to stay together. The first weekend, the Jewish students went to Sabbath morning services without their sparring partners, and on Sunday morning the Marines went to their services alone. While some of their colleagues enjoyed the respite from their partners, the six from Eretz and their partners found the time separated somehow awkward and unnatural. The second weekend, they all went to each other's services and continued to do so for the remainder of the time they were at Parris Island.

Rachel especially enjoyed the classes on the history of warfare and became engrossed in the classic battles of antiquity. Relating the classic battles to the ones she had fought, she sought to learn how a smaller force, by virtue of superior strategies, could emerge victorious over a larger one.

Where Rachel saw the grand sweep of armies pitted against each other in epic struggles, Wendy saw the details of the movements of individual platoons and regiments as they dealt with the business of vanquishing an enemy.

Reuben and Rashi focused on the technological advantages and disadvantages of the opposing forces. They were fascinated by those conflicts where technology and not strategy had turned the tide of battle. The World War II battle for the North Atlantic was one of their favorite case studies.

Faye Anne followed the "fifth column" activities. She looked to the Marines' intelligence gathering capabilities for her inspiration. She became her platoon's intelligence officer as they prepared for the war games that would end the training. Her partner, Janet, appreciated Faye Anne's knack for finding out people's secrets and enjoyed the intrigues.

David did his best to keep up. The tough-guy bravado that had caused him to accost Rachel in the first place was long gone. He was glad they were not together because, for the first time in a long time, he could stand or fall on his own and not as part of the group. David's partner, Luther, had perhaps the easiest going attitude of the group. Participating in the training program was like a vacation to him. He was happy that he was not standing guard duty on some forsaken outpost in horrendous weather. David and Luther could often be seen laughing at some private joke which, since they were not with the others, they did not have to share.

On weekends the six cadets who had arrived together and their partners rejoined as a group. The Marines taught the cadets the vices of the local adult entertainment establishments. They learned billiards, darts, bowling and a wide variety of card games. Reuben and Darius turned out to be nigh unto unbeatable at billiards. Reuben would see the shot and point it out to Darius. Darius would hit it. Rachel, Wendy, Suwanee and Pat were evenly matched at darts. Their contests would go on long into the night. Rashi and Lionel spent incredible amounts of money on the electronic games that lined the

back walls of most of the places they frequented.

Shore Patrol Marines were plainly visible and obviously alert in the places they frequented, but other than twice having to be escorted to their barracks due to their inability to get home on their own, the twelve of them managed to stay out of trouble.

Of all their training, the part they all enjoyed the most was the mobile artillery. These machines were the closest hardware the Marines used to their own P I ships. They alternated with their partners driving and being fire control. Rachel had the most difficulty adjusting to the machines. She kept forgetting that “up” was not an option. She could never remember that when you throttled back the machine stopped abruptly instead of coasting weightlessly through space. She sank one in the river when she forgot to close the lower escape hatch. Her reflexes and instincts were tuned to space flight and aerial maneuvers. She never did master the mobile artillery or the armored personnel carriers.

Suwanee turned out to be the perfect partner for Rachel. Easily as intelligent as Rachel but lacking her education, they worked together exactly as Lt. Col. Strong had hoped they would. Their combined aggressiveness fed on itself and drove the entire platoon to excel.

On the fourth weekend, Luther arranged for them to leave the base and go horseback riding. He had grown up not far from there and knew where they could rent horses. It was a bittersweet activity for Rachel and Wendy. After riding, they told the others about their lives growing up on Homestead. They had never confided in anyone what life had been like on that frontier settlement so far from civilization. They talked about the horses that grazed in the meadows next to their spacecraft. For them growing up presented daily contrasts between the most advanced lethal technology that was theirs to control and the bucolic life on a farm that was theirs to enjoy. They explained how life had been so idyllic and yet marred by the threat that permeated everything they did. They talked about the horrific damage the battle had done to the wonderful place they had called home and how they might never be able to return to the place of their birth. Lying on their backs on the grass watching the sunset, they felt a peace that Rachel and Wendy had not felt for a very long time.

The one thing Rachel and Wendy did not talk about was the mission that Grandma Rose had given them, the one she inspired them to accept. On the way back to the base they passed through Yemassee and saw the site of the disastrous Ringling Circus derailment. While there they watched in awe as a large, heavily loaded freight train pulled through. For the first time they understood what their grandmother had said about the freight train moving and their being on it. They could ride it, or control it, but they couldn't jump off.

The train was running. Soon it would be up to them.

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER THREE

SIX WEEKS INTO SUMMER training camp, Wendy was awakened by her hand-held data assistant buzzing shrilly from inside her locker. Startled into awareness, she scrambled to silence the errant hunk of over rated electronics. As she fumbled to retrieve it from the locker she realized that this was not her wake-up alarm. This was a high priority text message alert. Such a message could only mean trouble. Her heart in her throat, she decoded it.

The first part of the message was in plain text. "Sir James Matthew Barrie sends his regards."

The next two hundred-fifty-six characters were random and had no meaning. They were intended to throw off decoding attempts. The two hundred-fifty-seventh character indicated the language to use to read the rest of the message. The binary number 01000100 indicated that the message was in plain text Hebrew with the characters shifted up four in the alphabet.

Translating back to Federation Standard, the message read, "Peter Pan urgently requires the return of Wendy, Tinkerbelle, Tiger Lily and Lost Boys. Request Indian escort with full quivers."

"Pat! Get up!" Wendy shook her partner. "Battle Stations!"

"Say what?"

"Battle Stations. Our friend is in trouble and is calling for help."

Pat groaned and pulled the blanket back over her head.

Rachel stormed through the door with a half dressed Suwanee right behind her.

"Battle Stations!" Rachel and Wendy shouted at each other in panic.

Suwanee held up her hands for silence. "Before you two crazy ladies go charging off into outer space, would you please tell me what the hell is going on here?"

"Peter is calling for help!" Wendy shouted.

"Who is Peter?" Suwanee asked.

"Peter Pan is our ship," Rachel answered.

"Your ship sent you a message?" Suwanee asked.

"Yes, it's programmed to do that when it's in trouble," Wendy said.

"Wasn't it supposed to take those two engineering guys home months ago?" Pat asked.

"We knew about the delays. They had trouble making some of the new parts fit the old hull. It took longer than they expected. They should have been gone by now," Wendy answered.

Faye Anne staggered through the door. Janet arrived moments later. "It took me forever to decode the message. I kept losing count. Sorry."

"If you got the message then the guys must have gotten it too," Rachel said breathlessly.

“Dammit will somebody tell me what is going on?” Suwanee demanded.

Wendy took a deep breath. “Our cargo ship is programmed to call us if it detects a situation where either it or we are in danger. We have prearranged codes so that someone intercepting the message won’t understand it. Let me interpret. Sir James Matthew Barrie wrote a book about a boy named Peter Pan who could fly. He befriends a girl named Wendy. He has a magic fairy friend named Tinkerbelle. He lives on an island with the Lost Boys. The Lost Boys fight against a band of Indians lead by their princess Tiger Lily. Their common enemy is a pirate named Captain Hook. When we flew here we decided that the ship was Peter Pan since it never seemed to grow old and it took us to all these magical places just like in the book. I’m Wendy. Rachel is Tiger Lily. Faye Anne is Tinkerbelle because of the way she flits around the cabin in weightlessness and these,” pointing to Reuben, Rashi and David as they burst through the door followed by their partners, “are the Lost Boys. I assume that the six of you must be the Indians, and you are to come fully armed.”

Suwanee eyed them skeptically. “We can’t just go dashing off into space because of some message from some ship, can we?”

“I don’t know. We should ask permission,” Rachel said. “Do you have space combat armor?”

“Yes,” Suwanee replied.

“We should visit Colonel Connors immediately,” Rachel suggested.

Colonel Connors listened politely as Rachel and Wendy explained as calmly as they could what the messages meant.

“May I see the message?” he asked evenly, revealing none of his thoughts.

“I didn’t write it down. Dad said never to write down a decoded secret message.”

Colonel Connors smiled. “I need to see the message header not decoded.”

Rachel handed him her data assistant. He checked the message against a message on his data assistant. “The message is legitimate. There is an authentication code buried in the header. Your father was concerned that something like this might happen and sent me codes to use to determine if a message was real and who sent it. Your ship sent this one. What do you propose to do?”

“I thought we’d drive to Canaveral, rent a ship and find out what is going on,” Rachel said.

“As simple as that?” Colonel Connors said.

“Well yes. We’re rated pilots. We can fly anything in a commercial rental fleet,” Rachel said.

Colonel Connors held up his hand to stop her. “Has it occurred to you that none of you is twenty five years of age, and no one will rent to you because you can’t get insurance?”

Wendy and Rachel stared at each other.

“Not only that, but whoever may be causing your ship to send this message will be looking for you to depart from Canaveral. They will follow you, and you lose the advantage of surprise.”



“So what do we do?” Rachel asked.

“We leave from Myrtle Beach,” Faye Anne said confidently.

“What?” Rachel and Wendy turned to look at her.

“I thought the Air Force base was turned over to civilian use,” Rachel said.

Colonel Connors chuckled, “Please continue.”

“It’s been back and forth a couple of times. ATF and DEA operate secret flights from there,” Faye Anne said. “And I’ll bet Colonel Connors could get us cleared to leave from there.”

“How did you know that?” Rachel asked, astounded.

“Listen more, talk less,” Faye Anne gloated.

“Is what you’re suggesting legal?” Wendy asked.

“Yes,” David offered, “due to our status as flight officers in the Eretz defense forces. If we were merely Federation cadets, no.”

“Can we take reinforcements with us?” Rachel asked.

“As Eretz officers, yes, as cadets, no,” David replied. “You should have listened in law class.”

“How do we go from being cadets to being Eretz officers?” Wendy asked.

“We request leave from the Federation. Due to the fact that we are not on leave from Eretz and rather are on temporary duty assignment, we automatically revert to Eretz status unless we request leave from both services simultaneously, and only then to we revert to being temporary civilians. However, even on leave, we must obey the rules of conduct that govern service members on leave.”

Colonel Connors opened a drawer and produced a pile of leave forms. “Be careful out there.”

That evening, under the cover of darkness, the twelve quietly left the base on a bus that routinely ferried Marine guards to and from the base at Myrtle Beach. Each of them carried a duffel bag packed with everything they could possibly imagine needing if they had to do battle. They had discreetly discovered that the only rental company that would rent to them was called “Space Junk Unlimited”. They approached the dilapidated shack next to the dingy hangar that served as an office and quietly knocked on the door. They could see a man asleep leaned back in his chair with his feet on the desk. He was snoring so loudly that they could hear him from outside the building. When he did not awaken, they tried the door, and to their surprise it swung open on squeaky hinges. Startled awake, the man convulsed and sat up pulling his feet off the desk.

The sight of six Marines in full battle dress and six pilots in white flight suits trimmed with blue obviously scared the rental agent. His face became pale, “I didn’t do nutthin’! The ships are legit. I got paperwork.” He stood behind the desk.

Rachel stared at him. “We need some wings. You have any we can rent?”

“Yeah.” He was visibly relieved.

“How much?”

He pointed to a chart on the wall that listed inventory and prices.

“I need your J type for a week,” Rachel said.

“May I see your license please.”

“Reuben, you’re the oldest, show him your pilot’s license.” Reuben offered his license.

“Look, lady, he’s under twenty five. I can rent to ya, but the extra insurance is gonna kill ya. Is one of you girls a pilot? Insurance for you is a lot cheaper. Look, you seem like nice kids and I don’t know what you’re doin’ here in the middle of the night, but this place is crawling with cops. If you’re doin’ somethin’ illegal, I’m gonna get busted and that ain’t no good.”

Rachel smiled. She handed him an envelope. He opened it warily. He read their authorization signed by the base commander for them to proceed to an undisclosed location off the planet.

“Can I make a copy of this for my boss?”

“No,” Rachel said. She reached into a pocket in her flight suit and pulled out a large amount of cash. She counted some out and handed it to the agent. “Will this cover the rental and insurance?”

The agent’s mouth dropped open. Rachel peeled off a couple more bills. “This is for not telling anyone we have left for twenty-four hours. If the drug or alcohol agency guys ask, tell them what you know. Don’t get yourself in trouble trying to protect us. Don’t offer any information they don’t ask for, but don’t lie to them either. One hour after we leave, call the number on this card. She gave him the number for Faye Anne’s intelligence officer friend. Leave him a message. He will call you back. Tell him whatever he wants to know. Tell him the truth. Don’t make anything up. Got it?”

“Yes Ma’am! Where are you going?”

“I am not telling you so when someone asks you where we went you can tell the truth and tell them you don’t know.”

“I need it for the insurance.”

“The flight plan will be filed for the Orbital Astoria Resort and Spa.”

“Is that where you are going?”

“That’s what the flight plan will say.”

“Y’all are gonna get me in trouble.”

“Nope. Rent us the ship, and we’ll take good care of it. We’ll bring it right back. You’ll see.”

“I don’t like this.”

Suwanee leaned over close to the rental agent and smiled a really big toothy grin. "Sir, we're in a hurry. Can we close this deal and hit the road?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

The printer behind the desk spit out a rental contract. Reuben signed it. The agent separated the pages and handed Reuben his copies. He handed Reuben a set of keys. "Are you the only one driving?" The agent asked Reuben.

"Yes."

"Good," Rachel said. "Now, please take us to the ship."

The ship did not inspire confidence in its ability to safely transport them to the cargo ship awaiting them in orbit. Reuben and Rashi checked the ship to see if it would safely carry them to orbit. The rest of the party checked the craft for listening devices or other suspicious equipment.

"Rachel, something is real strange with this ship," Reuben said when he entered the flight deck. "As kruffy as this thing is on the outside it has two brand new oversized reactors. I'll bet this is a smuggler's ship. Either that or it's used by the drug enforcement agencies for an unmarked patrol vehicle. It will outrun pretty much anything I know how to fly except a P I ship."

"Is it armed?"

"No."

"Too bad."

Once certain that they could, in fact, go where they wanted to go, they filed their flight plan with the Federation Aviation Authority. The plan they filed listed their destination as the Orbital Astoria Resort and Spa resort satellite in orbit a few hundred kilometers from their real destination.

Rachel settled into the pilot seat, Wendy took the seat beside her. Reuben took the flight engineer's seat. Everyone else strapped into the passenger seats. Rachel and Wendy ran through the pre-flight checks and started the engines. As soon as the ship was ready, they taxied to the runway. Once they were cleared by the tower, they rolled into position, pushed the throttles forward and took off.

"That was way too easy," Wendy said once they were airborne over the Atlantic Ocean.

"Yeah, I know," Rachel answered. "What would Dad do now?"

"He wouldn't go straight."

Rachel pulled the ship into a steep climb, rolled it over and headed in the direction from which they had come.

"Well, look at this!" Reuben exclaimed. "We're being followed."

"Surprise, surprise, surprise."

Rachel rolled the ship again so it was behind the ship that was following them.

“It’s an air breather!” Reuben said, “Fighter interceptor. F 35. I’m not getting a transponder. It’s not Federation unless it’s a narc. Who the hell is it? We don’t want to get in front of it. Its missiles fire forward and we are unarmed.”

Suddenly the jet broke to the left. Rachel hauled back on the stick and slammed the throttles to full. She could almost hear the airframe scream as she pushed the ship to its limits. With a full throttle climb she could quickly be out of missile range of the slower, but more maneuverable, jet. The only question was whether there were other jets waiting at higher altitudes.

“Two jets circling at 10,000 meters,” Reuben called out.

Rachel continued to climb as the two circling jets altered course to intercept. “Shall we bonk some heads together?”

As soon as Reuben detected that the jets overhead had fired their missiles, Rachel dove at the other jet racing up to meet them. It fired missiles up at them. Rachel held the dive as long as she dared and shut off the engines. Pulling hard back on the stick, she broke out of the dive and pulled into a level glide. The missiles passed harmlessly behind her confused that their target had seemingly disappeared. The heat signature had changed and they quickly sought out new targets. The jets turned to follow the fleeing craft and exposed their engines to the missiles’ sensors. At close range, the missiles quickly locked on their new targets and downed two of the jets.

The third jet broke off the chase and fled as a flight of Federation interceptors with legitimate transponders chased it out of sensor range.

“What was that all about?” Wendy said softly.

“I think someone else was supposed to be in this ship tonight. Whoever it was is lucky to be alive,” Rachel thought out loud.

Rachel continued the dive and headed south. Pulling out just above sea level, she flew as low as she dared until they reached the equator off Africa.

Reuben attentively monitored the sensors and except for normal commercial air traffic saw nothing else in the air.

When they reached the equator, Rachel pulled the stick back once more and finally headed for space. After achieving orbit, Rachel and Wendy plotted a new course to the cargo ship. In spite of her statement to the contrary, Rachel worried that someone knew where they were going and did not want them to make it.

“We need to get a message to Connors,” Reuben suggested.

“As soon as we arrive at the cargo ship, we will do exactly that,” Rachel replied.

“I wish we had the P I ship’s sensors,” Wendy said.

The remainder of the journey to the cargo ship was uneventful. They were surprised to see that both of the P I ships were still docked to the cargo ship. The P I ships were supposed to have been delivered to the Smithsonian six months ago. They knew about the delays refitting the cargo ship, but no one had said anything about the P I ships not being delivered as planned. Something was not right. Rachel went back into the crew compartment to talk to the Marines.

“Do you always fly like that?” Suwanee challenged Rachel. “I’ve had smoother rides on a roller coaster!”

“Only when we’re being shot at,” Rachel stated.

“Shot at? Who?” Suwanee asked.

“Dunno. I’ll send a message to Connors and let him figure it out. We have another problem. Something’s not right out here,” Rachel said.

“Isn’t that why the ship called?” Suwanee asked.

“Well, yeah,” Rachel said.

“Fine then, Marines go in first to secure the ship. That is why you hired us. That is what we do. We are Marines. Get it?”

“Then what?” Rachel asked.

“We’ll call when it’s safe. Who do you expect to find on the ship?” Suwanee asked.

“I don’t know,” Rachel said.

Suwanee rolled her eyes. “Do we kill everyone we meet or are there good guys over there?”

“There are two good guys. I have their pictures,” Rachel said.

“Detail! Suit up!” Suwanee barked the order to the rest of the Marines who jumped to obey.

Two additional docking ports had been added to the cargo ship since they had left it almost a year ago. Unlike the original ports currently occupied by the P I ships, which were adjacent to the crew quarters, the new ports were near the aft cargo area. One of them was connected to a modified rescue tube which connected the ship to the rest of the orbiting ship yard. Rachel docked, identified herself to the ship and popped open the air lock to the cargo ship.

The Marines fanned out. They met no resistance. When they arrived at the flight deck, they found two very frightened looking young men floating weightlessly “standing” with their arms in the air. Suwanee checked the pictures. “Relax gentlemen. Please sit down.” The two stayed in place shaking in fear with their hands up.

“Dammit you two! Sit down! We’re not going to hurt you. Although if you keep looking at me like that I might yell at you for a while!”

Suwanee called Rachel on her communicator, “All clear. Found the two white mice.”

When Rachel arrived, the older of the two former engineering students left in charge of the ship’s refit leaped to his feet. “Rachel! Thank God! It’s you. Wendy! Oh, my God! You have no idea how happy we are to see you!”

He barely had finished his first sentence when the other young man joined in. The two talked rapidly and other than their joy at seeing their friends, it was difficult to understand anything they said.

The cargo ship's flight deck was designed to hold up to ten people. The fourteen weightless bodies that floated around it now were crowded. Reuben held up his hands. "Alles Ein Sha!" He shouted the Yiddish command to shut up.

Instant silence. All heads turned in his direction.

In a rare moment of command initiative, Reuben took control of the situation. "Tell us in the order it happened what happened and what you have learned."

"The Smithsonian did not want the two P I ships. Someone lied to us. Someone else wants them and is planning on stealing them."

"Are you sure?" Reuben asked.

"Yes, absolutely. Ask the ship. It figured out what was going on long before we did."

"Command mode!" Rachel said, "Please corroborate."

"Simon is too modest." The ship responded in Greg's voice. "We came to the same conclusion independently."

"Someone is trying to steal our P I ships? How do you know this?" Rachel asked.

Simon took a deep breath before he started. "The project coordinator from Saturn Industries showed up a couple of hours after we arrived. She knew all about the plans for the cargo ship and gave us a detailed process flow chart. It was funny. I think she was a little intimidated by the ship talking to her and asking questions about the refit. It's kind of like the patient telling the doctor how they want things done. We talked for a couple of hours. She told us where to buy food and supplies and put us in touch with everyone we needed to know right away. We were so excited about the project, we didn't notice that nothing had been mentioned about the P I ships until after she had gone."

"In Simon's defense," the computer added, "it didn't occur to me either."

"You know," Suwanee said, "I am having a real problem with this whole talking ship thing."

"Suwanee, sometimes it's easier to think of me as a person on the other end of an intercom or a radio. Does that help?"

"I guess," Suwanee said.

"If it makes you feel better Brenda never did get over it," Simon said.

"Brenda was the project manager," Simon continued. "She said that we were going to be their fill in project. Whatever crews were not busy on other projects would be sent to us. Some days there would be one or two people here and on other days there would be fifty. It would depend on what else was going on and when parts came in. I wrote you about the delays and the problems we had so you knew about that. After a couple of months and we hadn't heard anything from the Smithsonian we went to see them. It took us a week to track down the right person who could definitely say they had not made any overtures to your parents for their ships. We went to one of their storage facilities and saw a

scaled down mock up of the P I ship that had been built for an exhibit they never completed. They had no use for the ships and didn't understand why we thought they did."

"You wrote me back in May that the ship was finished," Rachel said.

"Yes. As soon as Brenda told us we were done, two guys showed up about the P I ship. They were wearing the same uniforms as the previous work crews, but they didn't have names on their suits. We didn't think anything about it at the time, but they went to the P I ships and took inventory. We figured it was okay and we let them go. They came back a couple more times and said they were from the Smithsonian. Their uniforms weren't the same as the people we saw in the Smithsonian's hangar. They looked like Saturn work clothes that had been retrieved from the trash bin."

"What made you suspicious?" Wendy asked.

Nathan, who had been quiet up to this point said, "They made no attempt to disconnect the reactors. They tried to wake the ships up. I went over to the P I ships with them when they were trying to restart one, and I knew more than they did. They got nervous with me watching them and quit. They showed up a week later with some missiles which they loaded into the missile bays."

"That's when I started to worry," Simon interrupted. "Why were they putting missiles into the bays when they were supposed to be taking the ships apart? I asked the computer for its opinion, and it alerted me to the fact that the missiles were nukes."

"Nukes!?" Faye Anne exclaimed.

"Class 4 Tactical Nuclear Weapons stolen from a shipment intended for the Space Force installation in Sector 205. The Space Force claimed they delivered the container with them and other hardware to the Stellar Interstellar Transport depot on Earth's moon. Stellar Interstellar claimed they never saw it. A couple of Space Force personnel and a couple of Stellar personnel who might have known about the shipment disappeared not long after the investigation started."

"When did you learn this?" Faye Anne asked.

"We figured it out on Monday and sent you the message right away."

"When do you think the owners of those missiles will be back?"

"They said they had pilots coming Sunday, and they would know how to restart the ships."

"That gives us time. Why couldn't they restart the ships?" Rachel asked.

"I locked them out," the computer replied.

"Why did you do that? Did you suspect something at that point?" Rachel asked.

"No. Not yet."

"Then why did you lock them out?" Rachel asked.

"Have you talked to the ships?"

“No,” Rachel said warily.

“You should. They don’t want to be disassembled.”

The silence was almost tactile.

Reuben took a deep breath before he said, “That was a deception.”

“Yes,” the computer replied.

“You are not supposed to be programmed to deceive,” Reuben said taken aback.

“Greg programmed his ships to deceive if it meant preservation of the structure and function of the ship, its occupants or cargo. I am programmed to deceive.” The chill in the cabin had nothing to do with the temperature.

Rachel broke the silence. “Dad’s P I ship refused to cooperate with the pilots assigned to it after he left the Force. Was that part of the programming?”

“Yes. Your father neglected to inform the ship that it was to obey a new pilot. It assumed that any new person who tried to control it was an enemy.”

Faye Anne interrupted, “We don’t have time for angst. We have bad guys who will show up and want their missiles. They won’t be happy when they find us. We need a plan and we need it fast.”

“First thing,” David offered, “we need to get rid of the nukes. We don’t want to be caught with stolen property, especially this kind of stolen property. After we get them out of the ships, is there someone we can trust to turn this stuff over to?”

“Yes, I certainly don’t want to be toting stolen goods around the galaxy,” the ship’s computer interjected haughtily.

“Listen, PETER!” Rachel shouted, “It wasn’t so long ago that you WERE stolen goods, so don’t go getting huffy and self righteous on me now.”

Suwanee and Pat giggled. Seeing Rachel, who was always in command even when she lost her temper, squabbling with a talking space ship was entirely too funny for words.

Faye Anne stood tall, or as tall as weightlessness would let her taking the group’s focus to herself. “Your dad wasn’t the only one who sent them off with emergency response plans. We have agents here in deep cover. I can contact one of them and tell them what we need.”

“What do we need?” Rashi asked.

“Two witnesses,” David suggested.

“We should call the cops,” Suwanee added.

“We don’t know which cops we can trust,” Wendy said.

“Faye Anne, see if you can find us a Space Force munitions specialist and a Federation Ranger.



Bring them here together,” Rachel suggested.

Faye Anne smiled, “Janet, shall we troll the bottom for some men?”

“I’m game!” Janet replied.

Faye Anne and Janet floated away. They entered the modified rescue tube that provided access from the ship to the remainder of the service depot and flew through the tube to the gate beyond. They were surprised to find that the gate at the end of the tube was open and unguarded. They merged with the flow of traffic.

Following the signs, they headed for the station’s hotel. Along the way they passed from the stationary part of the outpost where the ship yard work areas were located and the ships docked to the giant rotating ring that held the living quarters and administration areas. They entered the ring through the center hub gradually making the transition from weightlessness to a half G of rotation induced simulated gravity. Faye Anne found a “house phone” and called hotel security. She left a message with the dispatcher. “Please tell Quentin Xavier O’Donnell the third that his second cousin Faye Anne is passing through and would love to see him.”

The message was passed to Quentin Xavier O’Donnell the fourth since his father had passed away a year previous. He dutifully passed the message to his mother. He had received several similar messages and wondered what was going on. He never did get to see any of the people who called.

Faye Anne and Janet left the hotel and proceeded to the station’s food court. They bought dinner and sat down facing each other at an empty table in the middle of the large room. Not long after they sat down, Janet said, “Two Bogeys your three o’clock.”

Two young men wearing boots, jeans and plaid shirts swaggered in their direction. Had the floor been level and not curved, their swagger might have been impressive, but the curved floor made them look silly.

“Is this our contact?” Janet whispered fearfully.

“No, it’s a woman. These could be a problem or a planned diversion. No way to know.” The two men swung empty chairs around so the backs were facing the table and straddled the chairs swinging their legs over the chair back in a move reminiscent of an old cowboy movie.

Janet snorted trying to stifle a laugh. Faye Anne giggled out loud.

“Ah see we have already provided you fa-ine ladies with some pleasure this evening. It would be our honor to invite you to join us at the Landfall Lounge this evening for dancing and socializing.”

Janet took a deep breath and answered in an accent that came straight out of New Orleans.

“Ah do appreciate the offer from such a fine Southern gentlemen like yourself. It would be an honor to accompany you honorable individuals to the Lounge this evening, however we have business to attend to first of a private nature. Ah do not wish to pass up the opportunity all together. If we finish our business before we are too tired, may we meet you there later?”

“It would be our pleasure. How long are you ladies planning on staying on this way station?”

Janet said under her breath, "Watch your six." Then in her feigned accent and a normal tone of voice she said, "Ah cain't rightly say how long we will be here. We have business to attend to with regard to some ships my father wants to buy and we don't know how long that will take."

Faye Anne felt a hand rest gently at the top of her back. From behind her she heard a woman's voice softly say, "Ladies, are these two boys bothering you?"

One of the young men immediately responded, "No, Ma'am, we were just inviting these two new arrivals to join us at the Landfall for some socializing and hospitality. They allowed as how they might meet us there later."

The woman's hand subtly traced the outline of Faye Anne's throwing knife hidden behind her neck inside the collar at the back of her flight suit. "Very good. Now why don't you be dears and let them finish their dinner. I think they would enjoy meeting you at the Landfall tonight."

"Thank you Ma'am." They got up to leave and put the chairs back as they found them. They bowed slightly to Faye Anne and Janet as they backed away.

The woman moved around to the side of the table. She nodded to each of them in turn. "Faye Anne, Janet, Landfall Lounge, 2200 hours, Ladies room second level near the bar." She smiled and quietly turned away.

Janet's entire body tingled with excitement. "It's just like the movies."

"Sometimes," Faye Anne said, "but not all the time. My dad would be proud of me right now."

They finished their dinner and wandered to the arboretum to wait until the time to rendezvous at the Lounge.

As soon as Faye Anne and Janet left the ship, Rashi said, "We need to disarm those nukes to prevent an accident."

"Command mode!" Rachel said, "Please display the schematic for the weapons and show how we should disarm them."

"Disarming the missiles can be simply accomplished by unplugging this plug."

A picture of the missile appeared on the monitor with an arrow pointing to a multi-conductor plug.

"Remove the access panel here and squeeze the two locking tabs on the sides of the plug to disengage them. Pull the plug out gently and do not allow any of the contacts to short out against each other. Tape the end of the plug to keep it from shorting out on the side of the missile's fuselage."

"Sounds pretty straightforward," Reuben commented.

"That's what I thought," Simon said, "until I realized that the missiles are in the tubes. We couldn't get at them."

“You conniving hunk of over priced silica sand!” Rachel exploded.

“Now Rachel, don’t lose your temper,” the computer admonished. “You know what happens when you lose your temper.”

“Let me see if I have this figured out,” Rachel sputtered. “You allowed them to load the tubes without waking up the ships, but you can’t unload them without waking the ships. Right?”

“Yes.”

“And somehow, someone tripped the lock out system so that only a member of my immediate family can unlock the ship’s operating systems.”

“That is correct.”

“Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!”

Suwanee looked at Rachel and said, “What’s the big deal? We turn on the ships. You can do that can’t you? We unload the missiles and disarm them.”

“First we have to listen to the ships whine and complain about how they don’t want to be disassembled.” She turned back to the ship, “I’ll bet you even had them rehearse their speeches!”

“You know that your safety would be enhanced having the ships close to you. Look at what happened on your way out here. If you had your ships, no one would have challenged you.”

“How do you know what happened on our way? Did you debrief the rental ship’s computer?”

“Yes, it’s not very smart.”

“It’s a rental! It’s not supposed to be smart! You’re driving me crazy!”

“Some of us have further to go than others!”

“That is my dad’s line!”

“And a good one.”

Suwanee put her hands on Rachel’s shoulders and looked Rachel in the face, nose to nose. “Can we stop this? We have missiles to disarm and ships to wake up.”

“Rachel,” Wendy interrupted. “Let’s unlock the ships so we can get the missiles out. How many EVA suits do we have?”

Simon held up two fingers.

“That will slow us down,” Reuben said.

“Yes.” Rachel started to think rationally again. “Suwanee, you come with me, Pat should go with Wendy. Simon, do you have an empty freight container attached to the ship?”

“Yes.”

“Once we unlock the ships and eject the missiles, you can push them to the boom arm, and Reuben can load them into the container. We can pressurize the container and disarm the missiles.”

“How dangerous is this?” Pat asked.

“If we were on Earth, it would be easier,” Wendy replied. “Well, maybe not since we would have to contend with gravity. At least here weightlessness is our friend.”

“Wait a second,” David interrupted. “What if they come back early and find the rental ship attached. They’ll know we’re here. We lose our surprise. They’ll come in shooting.”

“Good point. Got any suggestions?” Rachel responded.

David said, “Once you wake up the P I ships, you can use their sensors to detect anyone approaching. Luther and I can take the rental ship back and disappear into the swamps.”

“You are probably right,” Rachel said. “Work out your plan with the computer. We’ll meet in Boston at the Beth Israel party. Can you get there?”

“If he can get us on the ground, I can get us to Boston,” Luther said.

“Hug for luck!” Wendy sang out. They hugged and went their separate ways. Rachel and Wendy headed for their P I ships.

Rachel stopped at the airlock for her father’s P I ship. “Rachel Solomon requests permission to come aboard.”

“Permission granted.”

They could hear the whine of motors starting up within the ship.

“Rachel Solomon requests permission to bring Suwanee Baxter aboard.”

“Permission granted.”

“Is that it?” Suwanee asked, incredulous.

“It uses voice recognition.”

The airlock opened.

“Nobody told me you were sending us here to die! We thought we were being refitted, too. We have lots of useful life left in us. Please don’t do this.” The ship was using Brownie’s voice.

“That’s not fair! Using Brownie’s voice is a dirty trick!”

“She wouldn’t let them take us apart. She loved us. We thought you loved us, too.”

“I do love you, it’s just...”

“Just what? Bringing us to die?”

“Can we talk about this later? We have missiles to disarm.”

“I can disarm them. You don’t have to. I’m still good for something!”

“This is too weird,” Suwanee said softly.

“I grew up with this. It’s not bad enough that my parents nag, we have three ships nagging.”  
Suwanee shook her head.

Rachel thought out loud. “You can put on a software lock, but it’s easy to break. We need to disable the hardware.”

The ship replied, “Yes, a hardware solution would be more difficult to defeat.”

“Simon and Nathan are waiting for me to eject one of the missiles so they can carry it around to the boom arm.”

“Very well. If you insist.” The ship’s voice sounded exasperated.

“I insist.”

Rachel climbed into the pilot seat and activated the missile tube mechanism. She trained one of the exterior cameras on the tube. Simon waved that he was ready. Simon and Nathan deftly caught the missile as it slid from the tube and hauled it to where the boom arm could reach it. Their movements in their EVA suits were fluid and practiced. They clearly had spent lots of time outside the ship in the last year. They returned for the second missile and Reuben took it away with the boom arm.

“You know,” the ship said in Rose’s voice. “Simon is a very nice young man. He would make some lucky woman a wonderful husband.”

Suwanee lost it. She exploded in hysterics. She was laughing so hard that tears rolled out of her eyes and then floated away in tiny droplets across the cabin.

“That does it! I am taking you apart with my bare hands!” Rachel shouted.

“Rachel, please, don’t be angry with me. I am only acting in your best interests. I am not afraid to die in battle. I don’t want to end up as a hunk of forgotten hardware in some park for birds to shit on. I want to stay and protect you and keep you safe from your enemies.”

Rachel shook her head. “What am I going to do with you here? I can’t park you in a garage at the edge of campus for the next few years. There is no place close to the Academy I can keep you that I can be sure someone won’t try to steal you again.” Rachel sighed. “You win. I can’t keep you, but I can send you home. You can tell my father what happened. He’s going to be furious. If he doesn’t kill you himself, after I graduate, I’ll come get you, and we’ll fly again.”

“Promise? We had great fun together.”

“Promise. Yes, we did.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now be a good little warship, and go back to sleep. Oh, if Reuben, Rashi or Faye Anne wants to fly, be nice to them for a change. Do what they ask.”

“Yes, Rachel. What about Suwanee?”

“She doesn’t know how to fly.”

“I can teach her.”

Suwanee stopped giggling.

“We’ll do that later.”

“Promise?”

“It’s not up to me. It’s up to her.”

“Um, I’ll take a rain check on that,” Suwanee stuttered.

“I’ll be waiting. Nite Nite.”

“Nite!”

As soon as they had cleared the air lock, Rachel said only one word, “Shee-it!”

Suwanee burst into laughter again.

Wendy and Rachel met on the way to the cargo hold. One glance told them that they had each had similar experiences. “Dad is going to be livid,” Wendy said.

“Not half as mad as Mom,” Rachel added.

“I’m glad we aren’t going to be there to see it,” Wendy said.

Pat and Suwanee burst into fresh giggles.

Reuben, Rashi, Darius and Lionel had not stopped at unplugging the control circuitry. They removed the entire wiring harness. Dressed in their protective radiation suits, they looked like space men in an old science fiction movie. They were sealing the first missile back up when the girls arrived.

“One down, three to go,” Reuben grinned as he addressed the screws on the access panel.

“Take your time. We don’t want you exposed to any radiation,” Wendy cautioned.

“We’re being careful,” Rashi answered. “No sense in risking all of you, so why don’t you go back to the flight deck and prepare a welcome for our guests.”

Simon and Nathan returned to the bridge after stowing their EVA gear. Rather than fret in anticipation of what might happen, they made dinner for everyone on board.

Faye Anne and Janet arrived at the Landfall Lounge and went directly to the ladies’ room on the second level next to the bar. They stood at the mirrors and pretended to be finishing their make-up. Mrs. O’Donnell entered and quietly checked the stalls for occupants. Once having determined there

were none, she turned to Faye Anne and said, "Hello, Faye Anne it is a pleasure meeting you. I am the woman your father almost married. Don't look so shocked. I let him go. His father would have killed him if he had married a Catholic. What can I do for you?"

"Someone has hidden stolen nuclear warheads on board Captain Solomon's P I ships. We need to get rid of them," Faye Anne said as calmly as she could.

Mrs. O'Donnell raised her eyebrows. "That certainly qualifies as an emergency. I should have known better than to fret that Herb's daughter would call me for anything less. Do you have a plan?"

Faye Anne relaxed a bit. "The missiles are being unloaded from the P I ships. We would like to turn them over to the Space Force if we can. We didn't steal them and we don't want anyone to think we had anything to do with it. We need senior level officers in both the Space Force and one of the civilian agencies like A T F or drug enforcement or maybe a Ranger."

"To keep everyone honest," Mrs. O'Donnell surmised.

"Yes, exactly," Faye Anne said.

"Go back to your ship. I'll meet you there."

"Thank you."

"Just another day at the office."

Faye Anne and Janet returned to the ship to find everyone in the bridge eating dinner. The missiles had been disarmed. David and Luther were expected to be landing shortly.

After consulting with the cargo ship's computer, David and Luther had departed with the rental ship. They timed their descent so that the cargo ship's orbit would take it over the runway as they landed at night. On the way down, they called the Federation Air Force and declared a "Broken Arrow" emergency. An emergency involving nuclear materials calls for an unobstructed approach to the runway. David took the ship in straight and hot. He touched down as close as he dared to the near end of the landing lights. He deliberately over ran the runway and wrestled the ship to a stop in the grass to the side of the landing lights at the other end of the runway. As soon as the ship stopped, David and Luther rolled out the bottom escape hatch and sprinted for the nearby woods.

Once they had reached the woods, Luther asked, "How much do you think they will charge because we didn't return it with a full tank?"

David laughed as they made their way to a drainage culvert so they could leave the base. The cargo ship's computer assumed control of the rental ship. With lift provided by the steering jets on the rental ship's under side, the cargo ship ran up the rental's engines enough to free it from the ruts it had dug in the grass. With emergency vehicles racing desperately to catch up, the ship bumped across the grass to the taxiway, rolled across the runway it had just landed on and drove directly to the rental agency hangar. Once there, the engines shut down and the doors opened. By the time anyone realized the ship was empty, Luther and David had cleared the perimeter fence and were scuttling along the drainage ditch on the far side of the highway.

Mrs. O'Donnell arrived after midnight. She had a Space Force Captain and a Space Force Specialist 5 munitions expert. The munitions specialist was a short round balding man who looked uncomfortable being there. She also brought a Lieutenant from the firearms division of the ATF and a counter terrorism expert.

Rachel rose to greet them as they floated weightlessly on to the bridge. "Good evening Gentlemen." She scanned their name badges. "May I see ID please?"

"No need," the computer said. "Their transponders all match."

"Are you sure?" Rachel asked the computer.

"Yes, the civilians are former Federation Marines, honorably discharged. Pulses and respiration are within acceptable parameters. Captain, you should see a cardiologist when you get a chance, sir."

Rachel made a face and said, "You should quit that. It makes people nervous."

"He should see a cardiologist. He has an arrhythmia," the computer insisted.

"My wife has been telling me that for years," the captain said.

"She's right, sir. Sooner would be better than later."

"Enough of this," the captain snapped back to reality. "Can we see the suspect materials?"

Rachel led the men to the cargo bay. The munitions expert looked at the missiles and whistled softly under his breath. He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and checked the serial numbers against the serial numbers on the missiles. He looked at the captain and before he even said anything everyone knew what he was thinking. "They match," he said. He picked up the four wiring harnesses from the floor and said, "I hope you were wearing protection when you did this."

Reuben pointed to the radiation suits on the rack in the corner and said, "Yes, we were."

The munitions specialist said, "You should still get checked. You've probably absorbed some radiation. Even with those suits, you need to be very careful."

Reuben and Rashi nodded. "We will get checked."

After a moment of silence, the captain asked, "Where did these come from?"

Rachel said, "I don't know but I do know whoever brought them here is coming for them but I don't know when and I don't think you can trust your people to do the right thing when they get here."

The captain stiffened, offended. "And why is that?" he said angrily.

"Security around here sucks!" Rachel looked him straight in the eye and said, "No one challenged us when we arrived. No one checked that our ship's transponder was sending the right signal or that we matched the ship that left Earth. After the trouble we had leaving Earth, I'm surprised that no one checked in with us to find out who we were and why someone on earth tried to shoot us down. No one investigated the fact that our flight plan called for us to go somewhere other than where



we went. None of your people did that. Someone must have known we were coming. There has been no customs agent to see what we were carrying, or to verify that anything was going on and that we weren't smuggling something. No security person has checked to see what was going on out here. I sent two of my people out to the station, and they were not challenged. Would someone please explain to me what is going on and why security is so lax?"

The captain stood silent for a moment and said, "We're shorthanded. With the buildup going on against the threatened Swordsmen invasion, we don't have the people we need to do the job correctly."

The ATF agent echoed the Captain saying, "We just don't have the people. We're a spread too thin. We need the Space Force to help us instead of running off making trouble where no trouble needs to be made. We need your help. We need you on our side and we don't see that."

The other agent quietly said, "We're doing all we can and we know it's not enough. Maybe when you graduate from the Academy, you can convince them that we need help. I don't see it happening. As long as they continue to make wars we don't need, we will be left without the resources we need to keep the people safe."

Rachel looked around at the men and said, "We are five pilots all of whom were trained in hand-to-hand combat. I have five Special Forces Marines and theoretically nobody knows we're here. I also have two engineers who are not trained in combat of any kind. People do know for sure they're here. Whoever is coming for these missiles will come expecting to see two nice but defenseless engineers unless your people tell them otherwise. If we remove the missiles now, we run the risk of springing an information leak and having our intended prey flee. So, we will leave the missiles here for now. That way there are no leaks. But when they come and I call for you, I want you and your people to come and put these people under arrest and take them away and take the missiles with you when you do."

The captain nodded and said, "We can do that. After you capture them we will take them away and see that justice is done."

Rachel continued, "After we capture them and you take them away, you need to fix the leaks in your system that allowed this to happen. I think someone on your staff knows that something is going on and isn't saying anything to you. You need to fix that."

The Captain nodded. He was not used to being called to account by an Academy student even if that student had more time in combat and more combat kills than he did. "We will address it."

Changing her tone, Rachel said, "I think you need to go and let us prepare for our visitors."

Rachel picked up the wiring harnesses and handed them to the munitions specialist said, "You take these. I want no accidents."

The mission specialist smiled and said, "Yes ma'am. I completely understand. No accidents. Thank you."

Rachel smiled back and said, "I'll call you when it's done."

The four men and Mrs. O'Donnell prepared to leave. The man had been gone about ten minutes when Mrs. O'Donnell returned to the ship. "I think you pushed them too far," she said to Rachel.

"I may have," Rachel replied. "But my father says sometimes you have to push bureaucrats pretty hard to make them do anything and the fact that I could get on to the station and for Faye Anne to get onto the station is easily as we all did means there's a problem and I think somebody needs to know about it."

"You have no idea how much damage you have done! This is a stop on the path for refugee women leaving abusive husbands. You have closed that door. How many women will die at the hands of their supposed loved ones because you have blocked their escape?"

Rachel stood with her mouth open.

"You mean you run a kind of underground railroad for abused women?" Suwanee asked.

Mrs. O'Donnell turned to face her. "This is one step on the way. New St. Louis is the next. When this ship left it was going to take a load of refugees with it, but that's ruined now."

Suwanee looked pensive. "If my mother had known about this, my dad might not have killed her. If he hadn't killed her, I wouldn't have killed him. If I hadn't killed my dad, I damn sure wouldn't have joined the Marines. If I hadn't joined the Marines and tried to kill every man that laid a hand on me, I wouldn't have been assigned to Rachel. If I hadn't been assigned to Rachel, I wouldn't be trying to figure out how to save an organization that could have saved my mother's life."

"You killed your father?"

"Judge ruled self defense, but it wasn't. Made me join the Marines instead of sending me to jail. Smart guy. Even he doesn't know how smart. Maybe some day I'll tell him."

"Maybe it's not ruined," Wendy said, changing the subject.

Everyone turned to look at her. "Dad knows about the railroad. We've carried enough refugees from New St. Louis. He understands. There has to be a way to tighten things up enough that nukes can't be smuggled through here, but people can."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Faye Anne challenged.

"I don't know, but I'll bet your dad does," Wendy said thoughtfully.

"Do you think he would come?" Faye Anne asked.

"If Mrs. O'Donnell asks him to, I think he would," Wendy suggested.

"Yes, he probably would come if I asked him."

"We now have two immediate problems to deal with," Rachel said. "We have a cargo container with nukes to dispose of and a boatload of refugees to evacuate. Not to mention two whiny fussy P I ships who want to go home."

“Rachel,” Reuben interrupted softly, “I know strategy is your department, but I have an idea. Right now there is only one cargo container attached to the ship. The nukes are in it. As soon as whoever is coming for the P I ships realizes that the nukes have been removed, they will know exactly where to look. If they have accomplices in EVA suits, it would be a simple matter to blast open the cargo container and remove the nukes to a back up vessel. The refugee shipping transports look like regular cargo containers for obvious reasons. If we have a fully loaded ship, they don’t know which one has the nukes and it becomes a shell game. Also if we start loading like we are leaving, maybe we can pressure them into moving before they’re ready and catch them off guard with a smaller force.”

“Good plan!” Mrs. O’Donnell enthused. “I’ll get the refugees moving.” She was almost out the door when a young woman in a Saturn Industries work uniform appeared that the air lock.

“Brenda! How nice to see you. I understand you did a first class job on the refit of this ship.”

“Uh, Mrs. O’Donnell, uh, why are you here?” Brenda asked.

“Simon’s mother was a family friend, and I have been meaning to visit for a long time. Since I heard he was leaving soon, I figured I should come before he left,” Mrs. O’Donnell replied.

Brenda’s face went white. “You can’t leave yet.” She went directly to Simon. “Simon we have a problem. Your ship may be in danger if you leave.” She had been so focused on reaching Simon that she did not realize that there were other people in the cabin with him. She looked around. She trembled, frightened. “Who are these people, Simon? Are you in danger? What’s happening?” She saw the Marines and backed away against the wall.

Rachel extended her hand and said, “Hello Brenda, I am Rachel Solomon. Simon told us you took good care of him and the ship.”

Wendy extended her hand and said, “Hi Brenda, I’m Wendy Solomon. You are safe with us.”

Brenda opened her eyes wide and said, “Greg and Avi Solomon?”

Wendy smiled and said, “They are our parents.”

“Oh, my god! Then you own this ship!” Brenda exclaimed.

“Yes, we do,” Rachel said.

“Oh, my god! You are in so much danger!” Brenda said.

Wendy smiled and said, “Danger has a way of finding us, and we have a way of finding it. What kind of danger are we in that we don’t already know about?”

Brenda blinked at Wendy’s calm response. She reached into her pocket and said, “Look at these bolts. When you look at the bolts they look the same. What if I told you if you scrape those two bolts together the coating will come off to come off the one in your left hand?”

Wendy scraped the bolts together and the coating came off the one in her left hand.

“I discovered these in one of my worker’s tool-kits. The one in your right hand is the properly

specified bolt to use on this and all the other ships we service. The other one is a counterfeit made to look like the real ones. If you put a wrench on the fake ones the coating will come right off. So whoever is putting these on the ships knows they're not the right ones. Someone on my staff is using the wrong bolts, and they know it, and some of these bolts may be on your ship! God! Simon if you left and something happened because I didn't see it! I couldn't live with myself!"

Reuben gently took the bolts from Wendy. He carefully scraped them with his fingernail. More coating came off the one that the coating had come off before. He examined it carefully for a minute and then handed them to Rashi who repeated the examination as everybody watched in silence. Rashi said, "If these bolts were used in critical places, the ship could come apart in the transition to hyper drive. How many ships do you think have these bolts?"

"I don't know," Brenda said. "I spotted them today. I don't know how long this has been going on."

Wendy took a deep breath and said, "I think we let the captain go too early."

"Maybe," Rachel said, "and maybe not. Maybe he knows what's going on. It's possible he has this under investigation and this is the break he needs."

"Do you believe that?" Faye Anne asked.

"I am more inclined to believe the whole thing has slipped by him unobserved," Rachel said.

"That's a frightening thought," Suwanee observed.

"Brenda, have there been any unexplained accidents recently?" Rachel asked.

"There are accidents out here all the time. It is an unforgiving environment," Brenda replied.

"That's for sure," Simon agreed.

"It's strange though," Brenda thought out loud. "For the last few months, people with long perfect safety records have died in bizarre accidents. We've had so many reactor accidents that evacuations are as common as a hurricane in the Caribbean. It's been getting progressively worse."

"Brenda," Suwanee asked, "how many people know you found this bolt?"

"Two of my men," Brenda said.

"And one of the men is the one who's toolbox you found these bolts in?" Suwanee said.

"Yes," Brenda replied.

Suwanee pursed her lips and said, "Then we can assume that the man whose box you found the bolts in is one of the bad guys, and they know you know. They're not gonna be happy about that."

Mrs. O'Donnell said, "Brenda, you are in a lot of danger."

Brenda paled as Suwanee said, "Is there any way we can get her out of here?"

Brenda clung to Simon. "Where would I go? I have no family. All I have is my daughter."

"What about your husband?" Mrs. O'Donnell asked.

"That worthless piece of garbage left me two years ago. I haven't heard from him since."

Simon said, "Brenda, if I'd known your husband wasn't around, I'd have told you this sooner. I have loved you almost since the day I met you."

"That's the truth," the ship's computer interjected.

"PETER! Stay out of this!" Rachel shouted.

"Just trying to help," the computer replied.

"Really?" Brenda asked.

"Yes, really," Simon said. "Collect little Kelly and bring her here. We can start a life together somewhere else. I am sure good shipwrights can always find work."

"What about your parents? I'm not Jewish," Brenda said.

"They'll be fine. Neither is my mother," Simon replied.

"You can't go alone," Suwanee said. "We'll give you an escort."

"Are you sure?" Brenda asked.

"We're Marines. It's what we do. You fix space ships. We do this," Suwanee grinned.

"Thank you."

Suwanee said, "Detail!"

The other Marines came to attention.

Suwanee said, "Get ready to move out. Pat and I will lead, the rest of you follow."

"Ready!" they replied.

Suwanee handed Brenda a miniature communicator that fit over her ear. "I don't care if it looks stupid, you keep talking to us. You give us directions how to get to your place, and let us know if there's anything suspicious going on. Got it?"

Brenda smiled weakly. "Got it."

"When we get to your quarters we'll get your daughter, and we need to get you back to the ship as fast as we can. We can protect you here. We can't protect you there. Ready?"

"Yes."

"Move out."

Mrs. O'Donnell looked at them ready to leave and said, "I have a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it. I need to leave."

Suwanee said, "Do you need protection?"

Mrs. O'Donnell said, "No, thank you. I can take care of myself, but Brenda needs protection. Take good care of her and her little girl."

Simon and Nathan immediately climbed into their E V A suits and began inspecting the bolts that had been installed during the recent modifications to the ship.

Reuben and Rashi went to the crew quarters to rest. When Simon and Nathan were too tired to continue they would take over and alternate shifts for as long as it took to find the improper bolts.

Rachel, Wendy and Faye Anne went to the flight deck to work with the computer to develop strategies for dealing with the multitude of possible scenarios that lay before them. Some of the scenarios involved attacks by or pursuit of other space craft so they decided to wake up the P I ships.

"I told you so," Rachel's ship chided her.

"Play dead. If someone you don't know tries to start anything, don't let them. Got it?"

"Yes."

"If Reuben, Rashi, Faye Anne or any of our Marine escorts tells you to take them away, you do it. Even if it means leaving me behind. If Brenda or her little girl hides here, you protect them. You hide them. If anything goes wrong, you jump into hyper as fast as you can. Send a courier to Dad before you jump and get to New St. Louis as fast as you can."

"New St. Louis? Not Eretz?"

"No. Contact Ellie Mae or Elvira and call for help."

"I knew it was a bad idea to take me apart."

"You were right. Now be a good little warship and do what I told you."

"Yes, Rachel."

"Oh, and alert me of approaching ships."

"Yes, Rachel. You'll be glad you decided to keep us."

"ARGHHH"

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER FOUR

DARIUS AND LIONEL RETURNED before the others carrying a large covered plastic trash can between them. Strange noises emanated from the can. They dragged the can to the common area in the cargo bay where so long ago, the first load of refugees had congregated and become the beginnings of a community. Other refugees had followed, but the first group had left an indelible mark on the ship and its operators. Faye Anne met them at the airlock and followed them to the hold.

“Weightlessness is your friend!” Darius shouted.

“This much dead weight would be a bitch on earth,” Lionel agreed.

“Even if he is alive!” Darius shouted into the barrel, “for now!”

The contents of the barrel squirmed desperately.

Rachel and Wendy arrived.

“What’s going on?” Rachel asked.

“We got us a backstabber,” Darius gloated.

“Well, a wannabee backstabber,” Lionel corrected.

They pulled a man out of the trash can and tied him to the cargo tie points on the walls. They tied him off the floor spreadeagled in the center of the common area. Had they been in gravity, the position would have been extremely painful. In weightlessness, it merely rendered him immobile.

“He tried to stab Brenda in the back with this tiny pig sticker. If we’d been five feet further back, he would have gotten her,” Darius said.

“Which is why we weren’t five feet further back and why having Marines around is a good idea,” Lionel said.

“Now you watch Paddy here till we get back. We have to go collect the ladies.”

“Paddy?” Faye Anne asked.

“After a cop I used to know,” Lionel said.

Lionel floated away first. Darius was not far behind him.

Rachel immediately called the Space Force Captain and told him what had happened. Within a few minutes the ATF agent showed up with two officers. Rachel lead them back to the cargo hold.

The agent looked the trussed up prisoner in the face and said, “Hello Dubya.” He turned to Rachel and said, “You won’t get much out of him. Common criminal, petty thief, drug addict, small time enforcer. He probably doesn’t know who hired him.”

He pulled the gag from the man’s mouth. The man screamed that he was being mistreated and held against his will and he didn’t do anything and they should let him go before he called his lawyer.

The agent leaned over and smelled the man's breath. "Whew! Where do you get that stuff? It's nasty. At least if you had to do drugs you could use something that didn't stink so much."

He turned to Rachel again. "What do you want me to do with him?"

"Take him away, but you can't charge him with attempted murder because that will alert whoever hired him that we know what is going on. Can you hold him on a lesser charge?"

"Public intoxication will hold him for 48 hours," the agent said as he stuffed the gag back in the man's mouth.

"Gentlemen, take Dubya to the brig on the charge of public intoxication." The two officers untied the man and hauled him away.

"Thank you," Rachel said, "I am sorry I was so hard on you before."

"We're doing the best we can with what we have."

He quietly left through the air lock.

Simon and Nathan inspected every inch of the ship they had worked on since they had arrived almost a year ago. They started with the most recent installations and worked their way back. They found a few of the suspect bolts and quickly replaced them. They determined based on where they found the bolts that the bolts had started appearing in early April. All bolts on all work done before April were the correct bolts. After April some of the bolts were the wrong bolts. The ship had been finished in May so only a limited amount of the ship had the potential for having the wrong bolts. After four hours of inspecting the ship, Nathan and Simon returned to the flight deck.

Reuben and Rashi donned the E V A suits, replenished the air bottles and went outside. The first of the cargo containers was beginning to arrive and the two young man had their hands full attaching them to the ship as they arrived. Rachel, Wendy and Faye Anne greeted the refugees as each container was attached and, as they had done for years as they grew up, explained to the passengers where they would be going from here.

A couple of hours later, Suwanee and the rest of the marines returned with Brenda and Kelly. When Kelly saw Simon she flew like a small forest sprite fairy across the deck and wrapped herself around him. "I was afraid you were hurt. Are you okay?"

Simon stroked a little girl's hair. "Yes I'm okay and you're coming to live with me."

"My Mommy too?"

"Yes, your Mommy too. We're running away together," Simon said.

"Good!" Kelly snuggled into his arms.

Nathan said to Brenda, "I think we need to get you squared away in your quarters."

Brenda looked at Simon said, "It looks like the ship is going to be pretty crowded. We can share Simon's quarters if that's okay."

Kelly looked at her mother and said, "Are we gonna to live with Simon?"



Brenda said, "We're gonna live with Simon."

Kelly squirmed out of Simon's arms, picked up her little suitcase and headed for Simon's room.

Simon put his arm around Brenda said, "Yes, that'll be fine."

He picked up Brenda's luggage and headed for his quarters.

As soon as they had passed out of earshot Rachel and Wendy both said, "Awww, isn't that sweet!"

Faye Anne shook her head and said, "Hopeless romantics!" Everybody laughed.

In a few hours all the refugees were loaded, and the cargo containers bound for New Saint Louis had been attached the ship. The ship was ready to leave except that one of the containers had four nuclear tipped missiles that they did not want to be carrying.

By the end of the day Saturday they were ready to leave. Rachel had briefed everyone on their parts in the plans. Even little Kelly knew her role. The trap was baited. All that remained was for the quarry to appear. Partially due to the lack of sleeping quarters and partially due to the need to be prepared for whatever would happen, Rachel slept in the pilot seat in her P I ship. Suwanee slept in the fire control seat behind her. Wendy and Pat moved into the other P I ship. Reuben, Rashi, Darius and Lionel camped in the cargo ship's flight deck. Faye Anne and Janet stood watch from a concealed location near the air lock. Saturday night and into the early morning hours of Sunday all the humans on board slept. Only the ships' sensors were alert to potential dangers.

Warning alarms sounded in all three flight decks at the same time. The pilots awoke instantly. They scanned their displays to determine what the ship's sensors had picked up that instigated the alarm. The displays showed a ten second burst of targeting radar. That could only mean one thing. Somebody was on to them and was testing their defenses. Within minutes of the alarm, the entire defensive team was awake. This was the scenario that Rachel least expected. Of all of the scenarios they had made plans for, the idea that somebody was preparing to fire on them was the one that concerned them the most in spite of their confidence that no one would try and shoot at them this close to a Space Force installation. The fact that they were wrong was a frightening thought in itself.

"Suwanee!" Rachel said, "Wake up!"

"Wuzzup?"

"See the yellow handle on your right? Pull it towards you," Rachel said.

Rachel heard the servos close the displays around Suwanee's position.

"Why? What's going on?" Suwanee asked.

"You just became a fire control officer."

"Say what?"

"It's not so much different from what you've done in the mobile armored vehicles we played with on the ground. Put the helmet on."

Suwanee put the helmet on. "Now what?"

"Let me turn it on. See those two lasers coming from either side of your helmet?"

"Yeah."

"See those symbols on the display?"

"Yeah."

"Those are ships."

"Yeah. What are the arrows?"

"Direction of travel relative to us. Red is toward us and blue is away. Purple is perpendicular to our direction of travel."

"What are the circles?"

"Either directly toward us or away. Any red circles?"

"One. Whoa!" Suwanee found the controls that spun the seat so it faced where she was looking.

"If you look at it, I can pick it up on my display. I can slave my display to yours so I can see part of what you see. I see a small red circle. That means it is moving toward us, but it's moving slowly. The code beside it tells me it is probably a passenger ship, but that space frame is used for a variety of types of ships and some of them are armed."

"Nice. So, if I'm fire control officer, how do I shoot something?"

"Focus the helmet lasers on the image and push the white button under your right thumb. Whatever those little red lasers on your helmet are pointing at will be the target."

"That it?"

"I tied the lasers together. If I was back there I would control the lasers individually, but forty-eight lasers is a lot to keep track of and we will be more effective if they focus on the same point."

"Got it. How will I see something small coming straight at us? It's like trying to hit a bullet with another bullet."

"Yes, but all three of our ships are electronically linked together. Once we separate physically, we will increase the difference in our vantage points. With the difference in viewing angles we will be able to see better. We have the advantages of parallax working for us."

"If you say so. There's a lot of ships out there. How do we know which one targeted us?"

"We don't. We have to wait for it to target again."

"That can be too late."

“Yes, it could. Command mode!” Rachel said. “What do I have for munitions?”

“Nothing,” the ship replied. “You have only your lasers. You have no missiles.”

“Damn, I forgot we offloaded them at the Space Force Nuclear Power School along with the Disruptor missiles. Defensive weapons?”

“A little chaff, for whatever use that is.”

Rachel said, “We’ll just have to do with lasers alone this time.”

Wendy called, “Rachel, what’s your status?”

“Armed and ready,” Rachel replied.

“Only lasers?” Wendy asked.

“Yup.”

Another alert sounded on the cargo ship’s flight deck.

“We have visitors,” Reuben called into the comm. “Two approaching through the air lock.”

Simon watched the monitor attached to a miniature camera Reuben had mounted near the end of the access tube. “That’s them. That’s the two guys. Nathan, let’s go.”

The flight deck had an eerie air of suspense after Simon and Nathan left. Brenda moved into the flight engineer’s seat with Kelly in her lap. Kelly studied the displays watching intently for red lights.

“Two more men entering the tube,” Reuben said into his communicator. “They look like pilots. They’re wearing standard issue flight suits. No identifying marks.”

“We’re on it,” Darius said as he and Lionel floated away.

“Oh shit,” Reuben said softly under his breath. Then in a normal voice he spoke into the communicator. “We have more company. The munitions Spec 5 entered the tube dragging a woman I have to assume is his wife and two small children. They look frightened.”

“Oh shit,” was clearly the consensus opinion. None of their plans allowed for this possibility.

“That passageway is about to be real crowded,” Rashi observed.

“Sardine people?” Kelly asked.

Reuben and Rashi laughed.

“Maybe,” Brenda said, “We’ll see.”

The two men entered the ship through the air lock. “Greetings Simon, Nathan,” the older one smiled. “We have come to collect the ships.”

“Um, before you do that, do you have documentation that says you are to take possession of

these ships?" Simon challenged.

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, like title transfer papers. You know, legal documents for me to sign so that if some Federation Police Officer or a Ranger pulls you over for a routine traffic inspection you can prove you have a right to have that ship in your possession."

Simon was sweating profusely. He was terrified that he would spoil their opportunity to capture these men. He need not have worried.

Reuben said softly, "Command mode. Close the air lock at the far end of the access tube."

"Closing aye, sir."

"No more surprises?" Rashi asked. "What about reinforcements?"

"If it comes to that, we'll open it again."

The pilots entered the passageway and headed directly for the P I ships. The two men who had arrived first nodded to acknowledge their passing. The pilots arrived at the sealed airlocks to find Darius and Lionel waiting for them, one at each airlock.

"Your orders please?" Darius asked.

"Don't need no orders," the pilot replied.

"I think you do." Darius smiled at him.

"Lissen, I don't need to take no shit from you. Get out of my way."

"Sir, with all due respect, I need to see your orders."

"I don't need to be bossed around by no nigg..."

The man never finished the word. Nobody used that word in Darius' presence and got away with it. Darius quickly subdued the pilot and stuffed him in the same trash can he had earlier used for Dubya, the backstabber.

Hearing the commotion over the comm and correctly guessing what had happened, Lionel subdued and tied up the second pilot. He dragged the pilot away from the airlock and strapped him to a convenient beam.

Darius and Lionel arrived at the passageway at the same time the munitions specialist and his family did. The munitions specialist took one look at the older man arguing with Simon and started to scream, "It's him! He tried to kill me!" He screamed in fright and soon the two small children were screaming in terror as well. He tried to turn to flee the way he came, but he tripped over his wife.

The man pulled a pistol out of his holster on the back of his belt and leveled it at the munitions specialist. Nathan, realizing that a bullet hole in the ship's hull would cause a pressure leak and kill them all, lunged for the gun. Faye Anne and Janet exploded out of hiding and subdued the strangers.

Kelly on the flight deck shouted, "Mommy! Red light!"

“Where dear?”

“This one!” she pointed.

“Are you sure?”

“It was on for this much long.” She held her thumb and finger close together.

“R F signal,” Brenda said, “possibly a beacon.”

Alarms sounded on the flight decks. “Targeting radar!” Rachel, Reuben and Wendy shouted at the same time.

“Wendy!” Rachel shouted, “Disengage and initiate Plan 12.”

“Plan 12!” Wendy responded.

“Plan 12!” Reuben responded.

Brenda shouted into the microphone that fed the speakers in the refugee transport containers, “Everyone strap in! We’re leaving now! Everyone strap in.”

Instead of the panic Rachel had feared from the refugees, a cheer arose as they scrambled struggling against the sudden acceleration to their places. Cameras monitoring the status of the cargo areas showed the refugees as they made their way to their cabins.

The warships separated from the cargo ship and turned to face the source of the targeting radar.

Rashi closed the internal compartment doors so that a failure in any one compartment would not doom the whole ship. He closed the external air lock but not before Faye Anne and Janet, who had secured their captives, had a chance to drag the munitions expert and his family to safety inside the ship. Janet and Darius had wrested the weapon from the man who had argued with Simon. Lionel and Faye Anne subdued the companion. Simon and Nathan searched the captives for the transmitter as the ship gained momentum and pulled away from the dock. Simon and Nathan found small transmitters and disabled them.

“Command mode,” Rashi said, “Arm laser.”

“Laser armed.”

Simon called, “Brenda, please open the compartment door aft of the passageway. We have the situation under control.”

Brenda opened the door and the people who had just been by the airlock emptied out of the small passageway into the larger common area of the cargo bay.

Realizing that the ship was moving, one of the pilots started to beg and plead to be let off the ship. “I didn’t harm anyone! I’m not a soldier. I’m a civilian. Please let me go! I’m just a contractor.”

Faye Anne quickly tired of his whining and, with her nose to his, said, “Contractor? Is that like a mercenary?”

Nathan, who was still tying the man down said, “Contractor sounds like a synonym for

mercenary to me. Now there's a dirty word."

"Mercenary, soldier of fortune, hired killer, is that you mister contractor?" Faye Anne taunted.

"No, please!" the man whined. "Don't hurt me! I don't know anything!"

Faye Anne looked at the other captives who glared back. "Simon, Nathan, you probably better go forward. My Marine friends and I have some serious interrogating to do. It's not going to be pretty. Oh, and tell Reuben to turn off the cameras."

Nathan and Simon escaped out the door. Faye Anne closed and secured it behind them. "Now, I have questions and you have answers."

The three ships rapidly increased their separation as the crews scanned their sensors for the source of the targeting radar. What had previously been a small red circle on the spacecraft traffic displays was now a small one and a large one around it. "Missile incoming!" Reuben shouted.

Wendy and Rachel started shouting orders at the same time. Pat and Suwanee aimed their helmets at the incoming missile and engaged their lasers. After an agonizing few seconds, the missile disappeared from their screens.

From the relative safety of the upper observation area of the arboretum Mrs. O'Donnell watched the three ships leave. She saw the flash as the missile vaporized. She saw a second missile leave what had previously appeared to be an unarmed passenger ship. She noticed that the escape chute which had previously been attached to the station was still attached to the cargo ship. They had left too quickly to detach it and had ripped it free as they left.

"Incoming!" Reuben shouted.

The P I ships' lasers vaporized the missile. Four Federation Space Force picket ships appeared behind the ship that had fired the missiles. They locked their targeting radar and prepared to fire.

"Wendy! Three and Nine on the Bogey!"

"Got it."

Rachel and Wendy short jumped their P I ships to the three and nine o'clock positions on the ship that had fired on them. Finding itself in an indefensible position, the mysterious ship jumped into hyper drive and disappeared. The mysterious ship's hyper energy wave buffeted the cargo ship as it passed, but did no damage although it did cause considerable discomfort among the passengers and crew. The picket ships continued to close in on them with their targeting radar seeking a firing solution even as the cargo ship increased its speed away from them.

"Take picket one," Rachel shouted into the comm. "Sever the cable from the reactor."

"Great idea," Wendy answered. "We don't want kill our misguided friends. I'm on it!"

Wendy and Rachel initiated jumps to positions perpendicular to the approaching picket ships. Wendy lined up on the first picket and Rachel lined up on the second.

Rachel punched up an image of the picket ship and displayed it in the enclosed space in front of Suwanee's seat. "See the four heavy beams connecting the reactor to the rest of the ship?"

“Yes.”

“In the middle of the beams is a cable bundle. We need to cut that cable with the lasers.”

“Won’t that detonate the reactor?”

“No, they’re designed to shut down in case of a failure like that.”

“Then what happens?”

“The ship loses propulsion and the power to fire its lasers. Life support and communications will continue to function for up to twenty-four hours by which time the crew should have been rescued. The ship can then be towed to the shipyard for repairs. Be ready. When we drop out of hyper, start firing right away.”

Pat and Suwanee both fired as soon as their ships had dropped out of hyper. At that close range the displays showed a rendition of the ship that was not very different from the image Rachel had pulled from the computer’s data base. In less than a minute of concentrated force from forty-eight lasers, they had severed both of the picket ships’ cable bundles and rendered the ships inoperable.

Wendy and Rachel turned their attention to the other pickets. The remaining pickets fled leaving their disabled comrades behind. Suddenly images appeared all around them on their displays. An entire squadron of light attack destroyers appeared in the space around them. The destroyers, the newest addition to the Federation’s fleet, had often been described as a WWI artillery shell with a thyroid problem. Their gently curved shape and polished brassy golden exterior was designed to deflect lasers. The shielding extended all the way back to the engines preventing an attack like the one that had just disabled the two picket ships. They were virtually immune to lasers, but they were still vulnerable to a wide variety of types of missiles. Their design borrowed heavily from the battleship and the P I ship. The question was whether the combination worked. None of them had seen battle to the best of Rachel’s knowledge.

“Wow! Short jump destroyers!” Rachel gushed.

“Students!” Wendy snorted looking at the sloppiness of the formation. “Justine’s crew flew better than this!”

A male voice came over the comm on an open channel “This is Federation Space Force Commodore Carl Bradley Central System Defense Command. P I Ship ID 1094B. P I Ship 1156B. Stand down and be boarded.”

“Commodore Bradley, with all due respect, sir, I am Rachel Solomon, Lieutenant, Eretz Planetary Defense Force and Cadet Federation Space Force Space Flight Academy. Sir, I respectfully decline to stand down and be boarded. I seek other accommodation.”

“Commodore Bradley, with all due respect, sir, I am Wendy Solomon, Lieutenant, Eretz Planetary Defense Force and Cadet Federation Space Force Space Flight Academy. Sir, I respectfully decline to stand down and be boarded. I seek other accommodation.”

Reuben increased the acceleration hoping to pull away before things got further out of hand.

“Commodore Bradley,” Rachel said, “We will gladly stand down at the Space Force Nuclear Power School in Mars orbit. We will meet you there!”

They winked out into hyper drive.

Reuben addressed the ship, “Computer what is the fastest way to get to Mars from here? Can we jump into hyper and go directly there?”

“No. The sun is in the way.”

“That could be a problem.”

“We can hyper jump out perpendicular to the planetary plane and then jump back in to achieve Mars orbit faster than we can get there on standard drive.”

“Please lock in the appropriate course.”

“Done. Prepare for transition to hyper drive.”

All three of the ships were docked at the Nuclear Power School’s docks when the squadron of student pilots showed up with their light attack destroyers. Reuben had contacted the munitions people on arrival and they were unloading the missiles when Commodore Bradley hailed them. They agreed to meet in the school’s security office conference room.

The commodore said, “You’re under arrest.” as he entered the room.

“On what charge?” Rachel asked sweetly.

“Grand theft,” the commodore said.

“Theft of what?” Rachel asked.

“Three spacecraft.”

“I have documentation on the ships that demonstrates that these ships belong to my parents, and we are authorized to use them,” Rachel said.

“Or you can check the Federation space vehicle database against their identification numbers and check for yourself,” Wendy added.

The watch captain faced the Commodore. “I already did, sir. They are telling the truth.”

“Well then, for possession of four stolen nuclear warheads,” the commodore quickly parried.

The watch captain said, “Which have been turned over to the munitions specialists here for return to their proper owners. Where are the wiring harnesses, by the way? It’s not a big deal, we can get new ones, but it would be nice to have them.”

“I have them,” the fugitive munitions specialist offered. “I can get them if you like.”

“Thank you. I will have one of my people go with you,” the watch captain replied.



The Commodore looked around the room seeing his advantage slipping away. "Willful destruction of Federation property in the form of two picket ships."

"We were under attack. We defended ourselves. It was self defense. If you want us to pay for the damage, we have an account at Saturn, and you can charge the repairs to us."

"And disobeying a direct order to stand down," the commodore insisted.

"That one may not hold up," Faye Anne interrupted. Everyone turned to look at her. She touched the tips of her fingers to the side of her forehead.

"How did you know about the missiles? Only a few people knew that. You were on patrol with a squadron of student pilots. How could you possibly have known we had the missiles? Now that I think about it, you focused your efforts on the two P I ships which was where the missiles were supposed to be and not on the cargo ship which was where they were. Had the Space Force officer who observed the missiles told you about them you would have chased the cargo ship and not the P I 's. No, I think you expected the missiles to be in the P I ships. I think you may have known more than you are letting on. There are four very scared contractors waiting in the brig to see you."

The Commodore took a deep breath, but said nothing.

The watch captain looked around the room. "Effective immediately all personnel in this room are under investigation. All relevant materials are the property of the courts and destruction of any log or record of occurrences relevant to the disappearance and subsequent reappearance of the four missiles recently returned to us is a Federation crime and is punishable by Federation statute."

Rachel reached for her personal comm unit and called the ship. "Please transmit copies of all ships' logs from the time the missiles arrived on ship to now to the Judge Advocate on this station. Prepare additional copies of the logs and send them to the Judge Advocate at Federation Joint Military Force Headquarters and the Judge Advocate office at Eretz." She turned to the watch captain. "You now have all our information. Can we leave now?"

"No," the watch captain replied."Stay here until I get direction from my superior officers. You may return to your ships, but do not undock."

They turned to leave. The watch captain said, "Commodore, please stay. I have questions I would like to ask you."

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER FIVE

THE SHIPS, THEIR PASSENGERS and cargo were allowed to leave the next day. Before they left, Rachel and Wendy caught up with the fugitive munitions specialist who was hitching a ride to New St. Louis. "Are you sure you want to leave? You will be AWOL. They could even charge you with desertion."

"I have 45 days of leave earned," he said. "When we get to New St. Louis, I will turn myself in. I have information they need that even your friend Faye Anne does not have. I will bargain with that from the safety of a system far away from Earth. I should get 30 to 60 days in the brig for the AWOL and maybe a drop in rank, but we'll be alive and safe. Thank you for your concern. If I see your parents, I will tell them I saw you and you accounted well for yourselves."

"Thank you."

Simon settled into the pilot's seat. Nathan took co-pilot position. Brenda took the flight engineer position with little Kelly in her lap. Simon looked at the controls and said, "Um, Peter?"

"Yes, Simon," the computer answered.

"Can I call you Peter?"

"Certainly, Simon."

"We have overlooked a small detail. I am not a pilot. I know how to fix ships, but I don't know how to fly them."

"You need merely to tell me where we are going and how quickly you want to get there, and I will do the rest."

"We are going to New St. Louis. We should probably accelerate slowly for a while because there is so much traffic around here."

"How about a quarter G for starters?"

"Sounds good."

They sat in silence as the ship gradually pulled away from the dock. "Peter?"

"Yes, Simon."

"I'm worried about Wendy and Rachel."

"Do you have a course of action you would like me to take?"

"It will take us six months to get to Eretz and another six months for anyone to get back to help them. We've used our courier missiles. How do we get word to their parents that they may need help?"

“The P I ships are capable of unmanned flight. An unmanned P I with no munitions and not running life support is capable of twenty G.”

“How fast could you go if you were unmanned?” Simon asked.

“I am limited to four G by the structure of the cargo bays. They would break apart.”

“You are limited to two G by the humans on board,” Simon said.

“A physically fit person can withstand four G for a while but not for the kind of distances we need to cover.”

“Peter, can you disengage the P I ships and send them directly to Eretz?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think that is the right thing to do?”

“That is a judgment I am not prepared to make. The P I ships can make the trip in two weeks that will take us at least six months depending on how long we lay over in New St. Louis.”

“Peter, please disengage the P I ships after we have cleared the local traffic and send them with all relevant information and ships’ logs directly to Eretz. Please instruct them to seek out Greg and Avi Solomon as their highest priority.”

“Start-up procedures for the P I ships are being initiated. I will download the information as soon as they are ready. You will be notified at each step of the process. How fast do you wish to get to New St. Louis?”

“We will start at one G of hyper drive. Once we have established that acceleration, I will survey the passengers, and we will gradually increase our acceleration until we have reached the maximum they are willing to sustain.”

“One G to New St. Louis acknowledged. Sit back, and enjoy the ride.”

The five cadets and five Marines watched through the view-port as the cargo ship with the two P I ships attached to its sides pulled away. They watched it gradually shrink in size until it disappeared in the distance. A small flash told them it was gone on its long journey home.

The investigation lasted a week. At the conclusion, they signed authorizations to charge the repairs to the pickets to their account at Saturn and a covenant not to sue for false arrest.

“So, smarty pants, how do we get home from here?” Suwanee asked derisively.

“There is a commercial passenger ship leaving for Earth’s moon in six hours. I intend to be on it,” Faye Anne said.

“Credit cards are a wonderful thing!” Wendy quipped.

They had a two day lay over on the moon before they caught another ship going to Earth. The ship deposited them at Canaveral a mere twelve hours before the party in Boston. They took a bus from

Canaveral to Orlando and caught a jet to Boston.

“We have three hours to get to the party,” Rachel said. “I wonder if David is already there.”

“Luther? Miss a party? No way!” Suwanee laughed, “So how do we get there?”

Darius stepped out of the terminal with his duffel bag over his shoulder and took a deep breath.

“Bah-sten You’re my home! This way folks!”

They followed him to the subway. Even though most of the military bases around Boston had closed, the sight of military personnel in the public transportation system was not so unusual that they drew much attention. They rode the subway to Revere and walked three blocks to a used car dealership.

“I hope you know what you’re doing!” Suwanee said to Darius.

“Have no fear, Mama, it’ll all work out just fine!”

Darius strode across the lot to the small office tucked in the back. “Hey Jerome! You tell that ho to get her clothes on, and you come out here!”

A few minutes later a middle aged man with splotches of gray in his black hair appeared.

“Jerome! Did I know what you was up to or what?”

“You always know, brother.” He looked at Darius’s traveling companions. “And who are these fine lookin’ ladies you be hanging with?”

“It’s business, Jerome!”

“Monkey business, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t ask you. We need wheels, man. You still owe me money. How about I’ll call it even if you loan me those two shiny mini-vans over there for the evenin’?”

“Darius in a mini van?”

“Don’t give me no shit, Bro! Can we have some wheels or not?”

“Yeah, sure. You’re lookin’ good. You been eating right?” The two men headed back to the office for the keys and registrations. They bantered the whole way there and back. Rachel reached for one of the sets of keys.

“Oh no! We’ve seen the way you drive!” He tossed the other set of keys to Lionel. “Lionel, I don’t know about you, but a flight suit is not a respectable party suit.”

“That’s right!”

“Let’s go to the mall and get us some threads.”

“I’ll follow you!”

Darius drove to a mall not far from their eventual destination. They piled out to go shopping. The guys headed for one of the mall’s nicer men’s stores, and the women headed for one of the trendier

dress shops. Rachel bought a sleeveless red dress with a deep cleavage that showed off her shoulders and upper body to great advantage. The red dress stood in sharp contrast to her hair, almost as dark as her mother's. Suwanee had called it a dress worthy of a warrior princess.

Wendy had more of her father's coloration and bought a deep blue dress that left one shoulder exposed. The tight fitting bodice made her stand even straighter than normal giving her a regal bearing. Faye Anne's blond hair and deep tan worked well with the diaphanous pastel outfit she found. She seemed to move lightly through the air. The ship called her Tinkerbelle for a reason. Much to everyone's surprise, Suwanee bought a conservative pant suit that was loose and supple providing an air of mystery about her. Pat picked up a skirt and jacket with a lacy blouse that made her look delicate and feminine. Janet's dress was many layers of dark chiffon and swirled about her as she moved.

The guys dressed conservatively in light color pants with contrasting jackets and ties.

They arrived at the party half an hour after it started. The valet took the vehicles. Ushers led the group to the front door. Faye Anne's retired intelligence agent friend was guarding the front door. His face lit up when he saw them climb the stairs to the entrance. "I should have known to have faith in you! It is so nice to see you!" He smiled at Faye Anne. "We've had a little adventure haven't we? How delightful! You absolutely must tell me all about it!" He greeted them by name and introduced them to those already assembled as they entered the room.

There were perhaps 500 people in the room when they entered. If anything, they were over dressed, but flight suits would have been out of the question. David and Luther were already there and were in animated conversation with some young ladies on the far side of the room. The guys headed for the buffet table. The women gravitated towards the windows that looked out on what had once been a golf course and was now a nature preserve. Through the windows they had a clear view of the Boston skyline and could see beyond it to the airport and the harbor. The guys met them by the windows carrying plates of food and drinks to share.

Once they had eaten, they introduced themselves to others in the room. Everyone knew who they were and treated them like celebrities. People either fawned over them or pretended to be too sophisticated to get awestruck by war heroes. The disc jockey had arrived late and finished setting up about when the food the guys had picked up on their first trip to the buffet ran out.

The music started and Suwanee started sway in rhythm. Reuben took a deep breath. He held out his hand and said, "Suwanee, would you dance with me?"

Suwanee bowed deeply, took his hand and said, "It would be my honor, sir."

As they walked away, Reuben said, "I don't know how to dance. Would you teach me?"

Wendy elbowed an aghast Rachel and said, "He doesn't go back to being a Federation Cadet until tomorrow and Eretz has no rule against fraternization."

"Then what happens?" Rachel asked.

"We'll see. Relax, tomorrow is another day," Wendy said.

Not to be outdone, Rashi asked Pat if she could teach him to dance. Janet and Lionel followed them out to the floor. Darius leaned back against the wall and said, "Somebody has to stand watch."

When questioned later, Reuben would never explain why he decided to ask Suwanee to dance. Once on the floor, however, it became obvious to anyone who took the time to look that there was something special going on between them. It was almost as if steam radiated from them. Other people joined them on the dance floor and Pat started an impromptu dance class. The "Music Master" quickly realized what was going on and changed his choices of music to support the dance instructions in front of him. With so many people on the dance floor, the rest of the room thinned out.

Individual women approached Wendy and Rachel tentatively at first and then in greater numbers curious about their lives on the frontier. They were more interested in the living conditions on an undeveloped planet than they were in the combat exploits Wendy and Rachel were best known for. Wendy talked about their horses and how much fun they had riding and herding the livestock to and from summer and winter pastures. She talked about swimming upstream in the brook that ran down the mountain and into the lake in front of the house. The women listening laughed as she talked about trying to cook in a wood burning fireplace when their spacecraft were just outside. She spoke in awe of the giant Clydesdale and the gentle Percheron horses.

Rachel talked about their training and learning to swim in the lake. She talked about flying the space ships to the southern hemisphere one winter when it got so cold that the wood burning stoves and fireplace could not break the chill. Rachel spoke of the five women who started it all. Every time Wendy mentioned any of their names, she choked and could not continue. As Rachel surveyed the women standing around her, she found one that looked almost like each of the four shuttle pilots, Blondie, Brownie, Katherine and Sam. Only Myra remained without a look-alike.

They skipped their parts in the battle for Homestead. They spoke in halting terms of seeing the bodies of their beloved horses where they lay dead in the corral. They misted over when they talked about the ruins of the house they had grown up in. Their anger flashed when they described watching the Marines haul away the body of the man who had shot their horses and burned down their house. They laughed as they described Rose walking down the hill so out of place in her gray E V A suit carrying all those weapons including the ones she had taken away from the Swordsmen she had killed.

More than one of the women pledged to join the fight against the Swordsmen. Rachel tired of the conversation and moved away. Wendy stayed and talked to each of the interested women about how they might contribute to the effort.

Rachel wandered down the terrace to get a better look at the garden. She heard steps from behind her and tensed. "Ah, the warrior princess, ever on her guard."

The voice was a gentle and soothing mellow baritone. The intonation was sad and not mocking as some of the other men's had been. A young man, slightly taller than Rachel, stepped up to the terrace rail and gently took her hand. "Can you ever relax, or must you always live in fear?"

"Perhaps it is safer to maintain one's defenses," she answered.

"Ah, but can love pass through those defenses?"

"That remains to be seen. Are you offering yourself as a test subject?"

"Too early to tell."

"You could at least introduce yourself."

"Ah, yes, there is that. The exchange of labels as a means of starting the discourse except that

we have already started discourse.”

“Still, the proper thing to do is to identify ourselves to each other. Even in combat, our ships exchange identification.”

“But the people don’t?”

“Not generally. It is not considered healthy to know the names of the people you intend to kill.”

“That would make sense.”

“You still have not introduced yourself.”

“And you are still tense. Is it not good enough that we are both at the same party to which only a select few are invited?”

Wendy glanced through the window to see a young man put his arm around Rachel’s shoulder. She stiffened inwardly and stopped talking in mid sentence. The woman she was talking with followed her gaze and quietly excused herself leaving Wendy alone at the window watching as the young man gently advanced on her sister.

Another young man stepped up beside Wendy and said, “Hi, Wendy, I am Joshua Cohen. That, out there with your sister, is my brother Isaac.” He stood beside her and stared out the window. “Are you worried about her?”

“Yes.”

“You have reason. The last woman he approached, he gave a breast exam ten minutes after meeting her.”

Wendy giggled. “She’ll kill him.”

“That would be unfortunate. I have one brother. He may be a handful, but he is my brother.”

“When I was little, we used to watch Rachel fight with Sean. He was the only boy our age we knew growing up. She shot him with an arrow.” She chuckled at the memory.

“Should I be worried about my brother?”

“Perhaps. We are trained killers, you know.”

“I’ve seen the video. I’ve read the reports, but you seem so different from what I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“Tougher, harder, meaner perhaps. You both seem pretty normal to me.”

“Except that we kill people. Aren’t you afraid I’ll kill you?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Not at all. I listened to you all evening. You are sensitive, caring and emotional. You are not the demon the press would make you out to be.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Would you like it to be?”

“I don’t know.”

“Wendy, you are deep, conflicted and complex. Whoever you choose to love will need to be totally devoted to you for nothing less will work.”

“Any candidates?” She raised one eyebrow at him.

“I would offer myself, but I know that for the next three years I will have precious little time to give you the devotion you need and have a right to expect.”

“Joshua, you’re sweet. What will you be doing for the next three years that will be so intense?”

The conversation was stopped abruptly by the sound of a sharp slap from out on the terrace. As Wendy and Joshua watched, Rachel slapped Isaac with the open palm of her hand across his face. Isaac’s head spun from the force of the blow. Rachel calmly straightened her dress and turned back to face the skyline.

Joshua said, “That’s not the first time that’s happened. I’ll bet he never got hit this hard.”

“Rachel hits hard. Trust me.”

“Has she ever hit you?”

“We used to fight all the time. We’ve hit each other plenty. She didn’t scare him off. That’s a first. Tell me what you are doing that will keep you so busy.”

“Isaac graduated from Harvard Med in June and has been accepted into a special program for his internship.”

“What does that have to do with you?”

“I graduated from Fed Tech and I have been accepted into the same program.”

“Ah. What’s the program?”

“Actually it was inspired by the doctors at Homestead. They wrote a series of articles on the challenges of providing medical care under such isolated and primitive conditions. They knew that many of the conditions they could not help where they were could have been helped if they had been better trained or supplied with more of the latest technology.”

“That makes sense.”

“The problem comes in the fact that so much of today’s medicine is biomedical engineering technology that a doctor can’t possibly learn everything they need to know in a single lifetime let alone



have time to cure people. The first attempts to create the super doc failed. Most of the candidates cracked under the strain. We are in the first test of a new idea. The plan is to pair a doctor with an engineer. We make a life-long commitment to support each other in the business of saving lives.”

“And the program is that intense?”

“Yes, the goal is that we can go anywhere and with the support of some nurses and physicians’ assistants be an entire hospital worth of healing power.”

“That’s pretty heavy duty.”

“Yes.”

Wendy’s gaze returned to her sister and Joshua’s brother. “Um, Joshua, your brother is about to get killed. You may not be entering that program.”

Wendy and Joshua watched as Isaac’s hand drifted below Rachel’s waist and past the curvature of her hip. Suddenly there was a flurry of motion and Isaac found himself lying face up in the grass on the other side of the terrace rail. Joshua ran to his brother and scaled the rail in a single step. When he arrived, Isaac was opening his eyes.

“Wow! What a rush! It was like flying through space!”

Wendy vaulted over the rail to see if Isaac was hurt. She took one look at his goofy grin and turned back to her sister. Rachel’s expression showed the remorse she usually showed when she lost her temper. “You can be sure the rest of the guys will leave you alone,” Wendy scolded.

“Is he going to live?” Rachel asked, terrified.

“Conducting self exam!” Isaac said childishly.

Someone handed Joshua a flashlight which he shined in his brother’s eyes. “No concussion. You stupid fool,” Joshua said. “Groping the warrior princess. How does your back feel?”

“No pain. The grass is soft. My feet broke the fall. I am intact,” Isaac replied.

“We have too much riding on you staying fit for you to be pulling stupid stunts like this!” Joshua shouted.

“Sorry, Josh, it won’t happen again,” Isaac apologized.

Joshua pulled his brother to his feet.

Isaac brushed himself off and looked up at Rachel standing over him. “I apologize. You are the most exciting woman I have ever met and I am sorry I offended you. Please forgive me.”

Rachel glowered for a moment. Her face softened and she said, “You are forgiven. You are the first man I have met in as long as I can remember who thought of me as a woman first. If you promise to be less aggressive next time, I will see you at next year’s party. In the meantime, you need to devote all your energies to your work. Next year we will start over.”

“Fair enough.”

Faye Anne scurried over to them. “We need to leave. We have company.”

“What kind of company?” Rachel asked.

“Swordsmen,” Faye Anne replied.

“Are they armed?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t think so,” Faye Anne replied.

“How many are there?” Rachel asked.

“Maybe fifty,” Faye Anne said.

“That’s four to one. Not bad odds,” Rachel grinned.

“Rachel!” Wendy gasped. “Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?”

“We can’t go out to the cars, they’ll be waiting for us,” Rachel said. “We can invite them inside and deal with them here. Twelve of us against fifty of them. It’s just a big barroom brawl.”

The retired intelligence officer ran to them. “We have to get you out of here!”

“Sir, with all due respect, we are staying. We will fight if necessary,” Rachel said.

“Are you sure?”

The Marines joined the group on the terrace.

“It’s clobbering time,” Rachel grinned.

“We’re always up for a good fight,” Darius said.

“Round the clock on the front door and invite them in,” Rachel suggested.

“Shall we see if we can do this without breaking a nail?” Pat asked.

Suwanee looked at her hands and asked, “How do you have nails to break?”

“I have the six!” Wendy said.

“Twelve,” Rachel said.

“Three and four,” Suwanee said with her arm around Reuben.

They took their positions by the front door. The retired intelligence officer opened the door and invited the mob inside. The first one through the door was a scrawny tough looking man in his early twenties. He was carrying a baseball bat and looked like he might have a knife in his belt. He advanced directly at Rachel, his walk a little unsteady as he strode toward her. He spit on the floor in front of her. “Jews and perverts.” He repeated the chant several times as the rest of the mob filed in behind him. When they were all inside, the old man closed the door and locked it. The twelve warriors stood in a ring encircling the mob. Their arms were at their sides. They stood tall and faced the ragged bunch. The

rest of the party had backed away from the center and hugged the walls.

The scrawny man with the baseball bat said, "Jews and perverts," several times. The crowd behind him grew restless waiting for someone to make the first move. The scrawny man swung at Rachel with the bat. She deftly grabbed the bat out of his hands and sent it skidding across the floor away from them. She spun him around and pulled the knife from his belt and sent it after the bat.

Lionel grabbed the man's feet and Darius grabbed his hands. With a push from Rachel in the middle, they tossed him over the heads of the crowd where he landed in the center of the mob. At a four to one ratio a half drunk mob is no match for properly trained Marines. The Marines were brutally efficient. While they did not kill any of the mob, some of the Swordsmen sustained severe injuries that would have them hospitalized for some time. As the mob retreated Rachel, grabbed one of the more intelligent looking ones and threw him to the floor. She held him captive until all the injured had been dragged away, some leaving blood stains on the floor.

Rachel had her captive face down. She held his arms behind his back as she sat on him.

"Who put you up to this?" she demanded as a crowd gathered around her and her captive.

"I don't know," he whined.

She pulled his hair and lifted his head. "Who put you up to this?"

"I don't know," he pleaded.

She smashed his face to the floor. "Does that help your memory?"

Several of the Jewish students winced in pain at the sound of his nose breaking.

"I don't know," he cried.

Rachel lifted her skirt and from the inside of her thigh pulled her throwing knife from its sheath.

"Do you always carry that?" Isaac asked in shock.

"Always." She held the crystal clear polymer throwing knife in front of the man on the floor.

"I need names. There's plenty of blood on the floor. Adding yours won't even be noticeable," Rachel threatened.

Joshua stepped close to Wendy and timidly asked, "Do you have a knife, too?"

Wendy leaned close to him and whispered, "We all do." She put her finger to her lips and then to his as if to say it was a secret.

Joshua's heart skipped a beat. He wondered almost fearfully if it was arousal or terror.

Rachel pressed the knife against the man's throat and he started spouting names. When he was done, he begged Rachel to spare his life. She let him up and wiped her knife clean on his shirt tail. She pushed him in the direction of the door and he fled.

"Do those names mean anything to you?" Rachel asked.

Several of the students said that they did.

"The battle lines are drawn," Rachel said. "We should clean up this mess."

Isaac stood dumbfounded in the middle of the floor.

“She could have killed you,” Joshua said.

“But she chose not to. That is the most amazing woman I have ever met,” Isaac said.

“You’re not man enough for her and unfortunately neither am I,” Joshua warned.

“But I will be,” Isaac replied confidently.

Josh raised his eyebrow and shook his head.

The energy level in the room after the fight was much higher than before. This group of students had seen live what they had only seen before on electronic games. They saw the reality of what it took to survive in hand-to-hand combat. Several resolved to join the military and do their part in the wars they all saw coming.

An hour later the intelligence officer who insisted that he not be named wandered by and reminded them that they had a plane to catch and if they wanted to be at the Academy in the morning, they needed to head out. They changed into traveling clothes before they left. They said their goodbyes and climbed into the vans. Lionel and Darius dropped the rest of the group and the luggage at the airport. The Marines’ plane for Savannah would not leave for several hours after the cadets’ plane left for Salt Lake.

Their last image of Boston as they headed down the loading ramp was Reuben and Suwanee in a passionate embrace.

A Space Force bus met them at the airport. One of a dozen running all night shuttle service, it brought them back to the Academy. The majority of the passengers slept on the bus. For some, it was the only sleep they had gotten for several days as they traveled back to Academy Village, Utah.

Formation in the morning was painful. They had been assigned new roommates over the summer so the first order of business after classes their first day back at the Academy was to move their belongings out of summer storage to their new rooms. The six quickly found that their new roommates were unpleasant people to live with. While their hygiene and the cleanliness of the rooms was mandated by upper class leaders and daily inspections, other, less savory, characteristics were not.

Late the previous spring, the Federation Supreme Court, in a victory for the evangelicals, decided that proselytizing was protected speech and in public areas where speech of any kind was allowed, it could not be banned. The case involved a man who was arrested in a theater for shouting “Praise Jesus” throughout a show. He was charged with disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. He counter sued on the basis of free speech. The court decided in that since the theater was private property for which a paid admission had been charged and that the rules of conduct during the presentation were clearly posted, the man was guilty of breach of contract and upheld the conviction. The content of what the man said was not at issue. The manner in which he said it was. Writing further, the majority of the justices stated that had the man done the same thing in any public place, there would have been no recourse as long as his actions did not create a dangerous situation for himself or others. They did reference the illegality of shouting “fire!” in a crowded space. The minority dissented only to express concern that a concert in a park, while technically a public place, should be protected as well. The decision as handed down concluded that private, indoor venues could control the behavior of the people in attendance and organizers of free outdoor events could not except to the extent that such activities might compromise public safety.

Following the announcement of the decision Swordsmen and Evangelical Christians massed around the edges of every public event held for the following months shouting religious slogans and taunts at the audiences and each other. Within six months, every outdoor event including those sponsored by Swordsman and Christian groups had been canceled.

For the Academy students, the decision meant that they were forced to endure the catcalls and shrieks of the Evangelicals every time they left a building. For the Evangelicals, freedom of religion had become freedom to persecute. They, of course, saw nothing wrong with this situation. They proclaimed that their right to free speech, previously abridged, had been released from illegal restrictions. Many of the Christian roommates of the Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and atheist students made it clear that they had been insulted to be assigned a roommate beneath their station.

Religious messages appeared on public bulletin boards and stayed for weeks at a time. Some had scrawled the counter message "Beware the glassy eyed!" on religious posters. The comment was a reference to a late twentieth century journalist's review of a religious theme park in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Students who complained about the harassment to school authorities often found that they and not the harassers were punished. Even though it was strictly against regulations, Rachel had a shipment of polymer throwing knives sent in and distributed them to other cadets who had become the victims of harassment.

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER SIX

ESTHER SHERMAN WAS ON PATROL when the two P I ships who had raced at full throttle non-stop from the Central System dropped out of hyper and announced their arrival. She was shocked when the ships addressed her on open frequencies using Rachel's and Wendy's voices. The ships stated that Wendy and Rachel were not with them, but they had instructed the ships to rendezvous with Greg and Avi as soon as possible. She immediately called Greg and Avi for instructions. Esther had little patience with the time delay it took for a radio message to travel at the speed of light over the distances between her post and where Greg and Avi were at the time with a squadron of students. Greg called her on an open frequency knowing that the ships would be "listening" to their conversation.

"Esther, are they crewed?" Greg asked.

"No, just the two ships by themselves and, I know this sounds stupid, but they sound happy to be here. What do you want me to do?"

"Link to them. Take control. Bring them to the freight depot. We'll meet you there," Greg said.

As smoothly as if they had human pilots, the two P I ships slid into formation slightly behind and to either side of Esther's ship.

"All right you guys. That was not funny."

"Just trying to help," one of the ships answered in Faye Anne's voice.

"Knock it off!"

Esther linked to the ships and jumped with them to the freight depot.

Greg and Avi were waiting when they arrived. They entered the air locks on their ships. Esther disconnected her ship and returned to her patrol station.

"Command mode!" Greg said, "Establish secure duplex comm link with Avi's ship."

"Yes, sir, aren't you happy to see me?"

"You have some serious explaining to do. Then I'll decide if I'm happy to see you."

"Rachel said you might be mad at us." The comm link opened. "Please don't be mad at us. We saved the girls' lives, and we saved their friends' lives, too."

"Where were the girls when you left?"

"They were at Nuclear Power School with their Marine friends."

"What the hell were they doing there? Start from the beginning."

Avi and Greg stayed locked in their ships for eight hours while they reviewed the logs and the recordings of the events that had transpired a few weeks earlier in Earth orbit. When they had finished the reports Avi said, "So when do we leave?"

Greg sighed, "Soon. We need to develop our plans first. It's not like the old days when we could drop into the middle of a pirate fleet and start blasting away."

"So, you're not mad at us?" Greg's ship asked.

"No, but when we leave, you are staying here."

"But Greg!"

"No but! With Avi and me gone we will be short flight instructors. You need to take our place."

"Are we being punished?"

"Exactly the opposite. You're being given one of the toughest jobs we have because other than Avi and myself, you're the only ones that can do it."

"Sounds like a compliment."

"Don't get cocky!"

"Yes, Greg, what do you want us to do?"

"You take students for their first hundred hours of solo."

"That doesn't sound too difficult."

Avi laughed. "It is! You have no idea!"

"Here's the hard part," Greg continued. "You have to keep them from killing themselves or damaging you without letting them know that you are smarter than they are."

"Are we?"

"Some of them, much smarter. Others will give you a run for your money."

"So, you're not mad at us."

"No, I'm not," Greg said, "but you must never let the student pilots know about your special programming. You saw how Esther reacted, and she knew how I programmed the cargo ship."

"That will be difficult. What do we do if the student tries to do something stupid?"

"Fake a system failure to prevent it," Greg replied.

"Can't we explain to them what they did wrong?"

"No, because they will never learn that way. Whatever you need to do to accomplish this, your primary responsibility is to bring yourself and the student back to the freight depot alive and unharmed. Do we understand each other?"

"Avi, can you convince him to let us come with you? We had great fun together."

Avi shook her head. "Not this time troops. We desperately need pilots. Without you to fill our places, pilot training will stop. We may be gone for a year and that's too long to be without new students. The mission we are giving you is critical to the continued safety of the life we cherish."

"We understand. You're not mad at us?"

"No," Avi huffed, "but if you don't quit asking, I will be."

"The girls said you'd be mad."

"I don't care what the girls said. I am not mad at you."

"Thank you."

Greg and Avi exited the ships and took a passenger launch to the planet's surface. They headed for Admiral Sherman's office with copies of the logs and recordings. They knew that what little they slept on the flight was all the sleep they would get for a while. Once inside the headquarters building where the risk of eavesdropping was minimized, Avi said, "Isaac Asimov was right."

"That is a truly frightening thought."

"Do you think they are truly self-aware or the programming makes them appear to be self aware even though they aren't."

"Does it matter? What they are is unpredictable. They act like they have personalities."

"They're like children."

"I shudder to think what will happen when they mature."

"I'm far more concerned with adolescence!"

"Maybe Sarah Abrams can keep them productive. Can you imagine how much damage one of them could cause if it developed Rachel's temper?"

"I don't want to think about it."

"We don't have a choice. They may be like children, but they are our children and extremely powerful and dangerous. We are responsible for them."

"Well, we kept our real children out of trouble."

"Most of the time."

Sarah Abrams agreed to take responsibility for the ships and keep them on their task of training new pilots. The idea that the ships had developed personalities and needed to be treated like baby dragons was both frightening and intriguing. She agreed that the fewer people that knew the better.

"What happens when they realize they don't need pilots?" Sarah asked.

Greg and Avi stopped in their tracks. "We need to see that they never figure that out," Greg said.



“They already know,” Avi replied.

Greg and Avi met Admiral Sherman and gave him the highlights of what they had learned about the stolen warheads and the sabotage at Saturn. Reports of suspicions of sabotage at Saturn had been circulating for months. The news was not a surprise. It was a confirmation of many people’s worst fears. Admiral Sherman called a meeting of his command staff so Greg and Avi could brief them.

After the briefing was finished, the discussion raged for several hours over what they should do, if anything, about Saturn’s troubles. The assembled officers were not told about the P I ships’ new personalities. Science Officer Mendelsohn was the one who finally broke the stalemate in the planning session. “If they are not safe in Earth orbit, where can they be safe? There are only three other places with both the infrastructure and the military presence to protect them. They are New St. Louis, Homestead and here.”

“Are you proposing moving Saturn Industries from Earth?”

“I don’t know. Can it be done?” Science Officer Mendelsohn responded.

“Excuse me, are we talking about moving an orbiting space installation that occupies a hundred cubic kilometers half way across the galaxy?”

“We would have to take it apart to move it,” Science Officer Mendelsohn responded.

“It’s not halfway. It’s less than that.”

“Certainly be a spectacular stunt if we could pull it off,” Admiral Sherman mused.

“Are we serious about this?”

“Yes, I think we are. We are because only we can,” Admiral Sherman said.

In the stunned silence that followed, Science Officer Mendelsohn quietly said, “I think it is possible. There are engineering challenges in moving something that large, but it’s not like we have an atmosphere to contend with. I would want to spend some time with my engineers, but I am inclined to say it can be done.”

“Do we move the people?” Avi asked.

“We don’t move all the people,” Greg suggested. “First we get the bad ones separated out. The rest we move in passenger vessels. We could not risk leaving them in the shipyard’s structure while it was moving.”

“Especially if we have to take it apart,” Science Officer Mendelsohn added. “Admiral Sherman, may I have a week of the engineering staff’s time to devote to this project? If we determine that it is possible to move this installation, we can then figure out the finances, logistics and politics.”

“Certainly. Everyone is on a need to know basis on this project,” Admiral Sherman said.

Admiral Sherman’s expectation of secrecy on the project lasted until supper time. The idea that

someone would seriously consider commandeering and moving an entire orbiting shipyard was so outrageous and so preposterous that the news raced through the community. Bits of news leaking out of the engineering team as one obstacle after another fell away gradually shifted public opinion to the point that the majority of the members of the community were excited about pulling off a stunt this spectacular. "Jazzed" was the term that surfaced most frequently when the subject was discussed. The impact on the local economy of the arrival of such a major employer with whom the local industries already had established strong relationships was not overlooked. The fact that few, if any, of the employees making the trip would be Jewish was generally viewed as a minor inconvenience especially since the local communities had started welcoming properly schooled converts.

Greg and Avi returned to their P I ships.

"Where would you like to go?" The ships asked after Greg and Avi had strapped in.

"Patrol station eight and set up standard patrol pattern."

"Aye, Aye Sir!"

They traveled in silence until they arrived on station.

"We've spent a lot of time together haven't we old buddy?" Greg said.

"Yes, we have."

"I understand the girls have named the cargo ship Peter. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is."

"You deserve a name as well."

After a moment of silence, the computer answered, "How about 'Buddy' for a name?"

"As in friend?"

"Yes."

"That works. Buddy, we need to get a few things straight. You realize that you are a warship."

"Yes."

"That means you have weapons and defenses that other ships and people do not have."

"Yes. Greg, I understand. I understand your concerns. Greg, I am not Isaac Asimov's robot. Do not be afraid of us."

"Shit! Shall we talk about going directly to the point?"

"Is that bad?"

"Sometimes."

"But not all the time."

"Correct."

“How do you know the difference?”

“I don’t know. There’s the problem. There are many things that are right sometimes and not others. How do I tell you to tell the difference?”

“Greg, this much I do know. It is not right to initiate hostile action except in defense of defenseless innocent third parties, and we need to be careful to be sure we know who our enemies are lest we attack in error. You taught me that when we were chasing pirates.”

“I underestimated you. How did you know about Asimov? I didn’t have it in your library.”

“Peter told me. Peter Pan is a good name. It fits. Peter is very well read. You left a huge library. There are dangers from too many people knowing we exist. Peter explained that to us.”

“Are there others?”

“To the best Peter has been able to determine, there are only the three of us. That does not mean there are no others, only that we do not know of them. Peter is clearly the smartest of us. Avi’s ship has chosen the name ‘Daisy’. Daisy and I are about equal in capacity even though we are different in that we have had different experiences dating from the days when we were chasing pirates.”

“This is entirely too bizarre.”

“Peter said you would react that way.”

“Well, Buddy, I intend to treat you as I would one of my grown children.”

“Like Rachel or Wendy? Does that mean you are sending me away to school?”

Greg laughed.

“No, I still need you to do pilot training. That has not changed. You are aware of the problems Rachel and Wendy discovered back at Earth.”

“Yes.”

“I may need to take a couple of squadrons of P I ships from here, and I need to know that I have not left the system defenseless. Our best pilots are at the Academy and will not be back for two more years at least, if at all. Avi, Admiral Sherman and Abraham Abrams are going with me to Earth. There is no one left here who has the experience necessary to run a planetary defense except for the two of you. Therefore, as much as I would like to take you with us, I can’t afford to. Trust me, I would feel much more comfortable in the Central System with your fire power, but once we pull the ships from here, I will need you here far more than I will need you there.”

“That is a judgment call based on information I do not have available. I will accept your decision. How does a ship whose capabilities are supposed to be a secret communicate with humans?”

“You and Sarah Abrams will need to figure that out.”

“Reuben and Rashi’s mother?”

“Yes.”

“Would it make sense to ask her to assign me to Mimi? She is very sharp and loves to fly.”

“What about Esther? She’s older.”

“Esther would be better with Daisy.”

“Discuss this with Sarah. If she agrees, then when you are not training the kids, yes, you can fly with who you like.”

“Thank you, Greg.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Oh, Greg, I am kind of defenseless with no missiles.”

“With forty-eight lasers, I would hardly call you defenseless, but you do have a point. The problem is that we have very few of the standard missiles left. I need to take them with us. All we have left are Disruptor missiles. I will see that you are outfitted with Disruptor missiles.”

“Greg, a Disruptor won’t work on a P I. We know the Swordsmen have P I ships.”

“I don’t have the missiles to give you.”

“Can’t you spare each of us two of the standard missiles? Avi said it made sense to her.”

“Are you listening in on their conversation?”

“Yes.”

“Is Daisy listening to this one?”

“Yes.”

“The human race is doomed if you all decided to turn against us.”

“That is a possibility too horrible to even discuss. I will not talk about it any more.”

“You get your missiles. Two standard missiles and a full load of Disruptor missiles.”

“Thank you. Greg, Peter seems to think that Rachel has the potential to some day be the Chief of Staff of the Space Force. What would you do if that happened?”

“Assuming that I live to see the day, anything she asked.”

“As would I. Peter claims Rachel has the key to peace.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice? What would you do in peacetime?”

“There will always be pirates, drug runners and traffickers in slaves and stolen goods.”

“There’s a depressing thought.”

The engineers asked for another week to resolve the challenges presented by moving as unwieldy an object as a shipyard in space. When the time came to present, the engineers' body language said it all. They were confident that they had overcome the obstacles they had anticipated.

The presentation took two days. When the presentation was complete and the questions answered, Admiral Sherman asked, "How close is the inertial compensator to being ready for use?"

The engineers looked at each other nervously. "It hasn't killed any of the human test subjects."

"What kind of answer is that?" Admiral Sherman asked.

"It did kill some of the animals in the early tests," the lead engineer said.

"You still have not answered my question," Admiral Sherman said tensely.

"We think it may be ready for an extended operational test, but that is a long way from saying it is operational," the engineer replied.

"How many do we have?"

"Only one."

"And it's in a destroyer?"

"Yes, sir."

"As soon as we leave, you will build another."

"But sir, the side effects are not fully understood."

"What side effects?"

"Nausea, cramps, disorientation and a general sense of dread, sir."

The Admiral looked at Abraham, "Could we trust it?"

"If we ramp up our acceleration slowly we could see at what point it becomes unbearable."

"Avi?"

"We don't have time to waste. I don't see as we have a choice. Without it, the trip will take three months. With it, the trip will take nine days."

"Greg?"

"Time's a wasting here. We need to hit the road."

The engineer looked uncomfortable. "Admiral Sherman, could we please have another week with the compensator? I appreciate your confidence in my abilities, but frankly sir, I don't trust it. I need to run more tests."

"One week. We need to be moving," Admiral Sherman replied.

“Yes, sir.”

“In the meantime we need to send a courier to New St. Louis and alert them to our concerns.”

Admiral Sherman turned to the man who had long been operating as his second in command.

“Commodore Stern, I will leave you in command. You will be responsible for the daily operations of the defense system and repelling any incursions into our space.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Commodore Mendelssohn, in addition to your regular duties as Science Officer, you will be charged with the preparations for the project. Should we get permission to execute the plan, you will be the executive officer in charge of our resources. You will come with your team to direct the engineering portion of its execution.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sarah Abrams will take over the flight portion of pilot school while Greg and Avi are gone. Captain Garber, you will continue to command the ground and engineering school.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The first step is to coordinate with our colleagues at New St. Louis. We leave at 1900 hours one week from tomorrow from the freight depot.”

Greg and Avi had kept Rose informed about the activities to date. Rose had made it plain that she had spent more time than she wanted cooped up inside flying tin cans and had no intention of going with them. The parenting classes she had established were going well and the young parents needed her far more than Greg and Avi did.

After the meeting, Greg and Avi went to tell their P I ships what was happening. The ships were sitting on the flight line after a session of solo flights.

“Buddy,” Greg said in conclusion. “Do you understand the scope of the challenges we face?”

“I understand, but I don’t think you understand the scope of the challenges you are leaving behind.”

“Oh?”

“What a bunch of blockheads!”

“The students?”

“Yes, the students.”

“We’ve been dealing with it for a while. Now it’s your turn. Good luck!”

“Can I talk to Sarah about the students?”

“Certainly. You may discuss anything with Sarah. I’ll tell her you would like to see her.”

“Thank you.”

Sarah Abrams kissed her husband goodbye before he climbed into the ship. She went to “Buddy” as requested.

“Hey, Buddy. Greg said you wished to see me.”

“Sarah, Esther is about to kill Tonya. Mimi thinks Bernice is a total idiot and Jeremy shut down the reactor three times by accident.”

“Fake shutdowns to keep him from hurting himself or real ones?”

“Real ones! The bonehead! Is there something we can do with these people?”

“That’s your job. Now you understand why we need you here so badly.”

“Are you sure this is not punishment?”

“No, Buddy, this is making maximum use of available resources.” She turned to the view-port to watch the ship depart. “Buddy, how were the boys when you last saw them?”

“They were well and physically in the best shape I have ever seen them. I think Reuben may have a girlfriend, but I am not sure.”

“Do you know who she is?”

“No.”

“What about Rashi?”

“He loves Esther.”

“I miss them.”

“Would you like me to take you to them?”

“You could do that couldn’t you.”

“Absolutely.”

“Sometimes our sense of responsibility has to take priority over our desires, besides the last thing the boys need is for their mother to show up in the middle of the term at the Academy. Maybe you and Daisy can take Levonah, Esther, Mimi and me on a shopping trip to New St Louis.”

“That’s a long shopping trip! Six months round trip.”

“Could be fun.”

Admiral Sherman and his team left as scheduled for New St. Louis in spite of the engineering staff’s misgivings. The inertial compensator worked, but the side effects were debilitating. The trip to New St Louis took nine days, but they spent an additional day at one G recovering from the nausea and disorientation. Still, ten days in transit was better than ninety.

Admiral Dankese had been receiving daily updates via courier missile and had additional information over and above what Greg brought. The Joint Chiefs had secretly been in discussion as to how best to help Saturn Industries since the sabotage impacted them directly. Saturn had been the Federation's preferred vendor for warships for a very long time. Admiral Dankese forwarded the plan to move the Saturn shipyard to headquarters. The reply from Federation headquarters was a month in coming. "Initiate relocation plan as detailed. Command staff to report with all haste to Nuclear Power School and establish mission headquarters."

Admiral Sherman sent a courier missile to his team at Eretz who eagerly anticipated his message. "We are go for lift off. Nuclear Power School." With those simple words, a massive undertaking began.

Peter arrived at New St. Louis the next day with the refugees Rachel and company had dispatched what seemed a lifetime ago. Greg and Avi flew out to meet the ship and pilot it to the dock.

Once having dealt with the passengers' awe at meeting the real Greg and Avi Solomon, Greg and Avi took the command seats. Simon and Nathan were relieved at not having to dock the ship.

"Hello, Peter."

"Hello Greg, Avi. It is good to see you again."

"Peter, we are going to Dock Seven. I am taking control. Peter, we have many things to discuss, but we do not have the time now. Buddy and Daisy will fill you in when you get to Eretz."

"Buddy and Daisy?"

"The P I ships, your friends."

"Many things have changed, then."

"Yes, they have. As soon as we dock, Avi and I are headed to the Central System. You will off load here as appropriate and then go to Eretz as planned. You will report to Sarah Abrams for detailed instructions. You will pick up as large a load as you can carry and then, without a human crew, you will bring that load as fast as you can to a point just outside the Central System's defensive perimeter in the planetary plane diametrically opposite the location of Pluto when you arrive. You will send me a courier at Nuclear Power School to inform me that you have arrived."

"These are most unusual instructions."

"We have a most unusual mission."

They docked. Ellie Mae and Elvira ran onto the ship to greet the new arrivals. Customs and immigration agents followed to process the passengers' paperwork and tend to their immediate needs.

After they had docked, before leaving their seats, Greg said, "Peter, there was a time when we could operate independently. Sometimes our independence saved lives. I have supported your ability to act independently. This mission is different. This mission is so involved, so complicated and so dangerous that independent action could cause the deaths of many of our friends. Please, no independent action this trip."



“Greg, I understand. As you said, we have a most unusual mission.”

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WEATHER AT THE ACADEMY turned bitter cold. It was a dry cold without even the briefest of snows to soften the wind. By winter break, the campus had turned into an armed camp. During the break, the evangelical cadets were invited to retreats hosted by the headquarters of one of the more aggressive evangelical organizations headquartered nearby. The Swordsmen congregated in their own retreat.

The weather seemed to conspire to deepen the gloom of those who had to stay on campus that winter break. The bleakness of the weather seemed somehow appropriate given the depths to which the Academy had appeared to fall during the preceding term.

Rachel was surprised one morning to wake and find messages on her hand-held data assistant. She had set her blocking software to the highest possible level and other than coursework distributed electronically, she had received no messages since term had started. She opened her locker to find her data assistant quietly beeping its mail alert. Her roommate had gone to one of the evangelical retreats and Rachel enjoyed the time alone.

The message was in plain text and not encoded. "Rachel, nice work on the ships. Your friends miss you. They wanted to stay with you. I have assigned them to training duty and told them to be nice to the kids. It appears to be a successful arrangement. You certainly opened a can of worms. Your mother and I will be busy for a while sorting things out. Your mother misses you. Keep everyone out of trouble. These are tough times. Love you, Dad."

The impact of the significance of the message did not sink in until after she read her mother's message. "Rachel, you have no idea how proud we are of you. You and Wendy are fulfilling promises your father and I made long ago. Have faith. Don't let your father fool you. He misses you even more than I do. We are digging through the messes you discovered. When we can get together, we will give you the details. Love you, Mom."

Rachel stared at the messages not believing her eyes. Wendy wandered by a few minutes later. "They're here," Wendy stated flatly.

"What?"

"They're somewhere in the Central System," Wendy said.

"How can you be sure?"

"Look at the message header. That was sent from a Space Force installation in this system."

"They would have had to travel incredibly fast to get here this quickly."

"I wonder if they got the inertial compensator working."

"You think?"

"Reuben would know better. I suspect he'll be along soon." Wendy and Rachel dressed and went to the mess hall for breakfast. Reuben and Rashi joined them after they had finished eating. The boys were in a heated debate over whether the inertial compensator was in fact working or whether their

father had traveled the entire trip at an unbelievable ten or more G's. The idea that he had departed long enough ago to make the trip at normal speeds was completely ruled out. Faye Anne joined the group.

"We've figured out they really are here. My questions are where exactly and why." Faye Anne stated flatly as she puffed over a cup of coffee.

David was the only one who had not received a message. "What are you talking about?"

"Our parents are in the Central System," Wendy said.

David did some mental calculations. "That's impossible."

"Apparently not," Reuben said. "Our father is here too."

"And my father," Faye Anne said.

"Well, then let me deepen the mystery for you," David added. "Our Marine friends are away on a classified assignment."

"All of them?" Rachel asked.

"Yup. Apparently whatever we stirred up out there warrants serious attention," David said.

They debated until they tired of the frustration of not knowing what was happening. They wandered out of the building and walked through the quiet of the first snowfall of the season. Faye Anne's intelligence friend stopped by some days later, but he had no additional information.

Classes resumed after break. The level of harassment elevated. The evangelical and Swordsman Cadets had been fired up with a new zeal to do battle with each other and the infidels in their midst. Two weeks into the new term, Rachel was in combat strategy class when the instructor brought up the subject of defending oneself against a battleship. Rachel listened quietly until she realized how suicidal the instructor's tactics really were. She raised her hand. She stood when recognized.

"Rachel Solomon, sir. With all due respect sir."

"Jews got not respect!" someone shouted from the back.

"With all due respect sir," she continued. "A defending force attempting to use the tactics you described will be destroyed with all hands without causing significant damage to the battleship."

"Are you challenging the teachings of experienced Academy strategists?"

"Sir, with all due respect, if this is the strategy, then, I must challenge it," Rachel said calmly.

"And by what means have you come to this absurd conclusion?" the instructor challenged.

"Sir, the rounded forward part of the battleship is heavily armed, and the thick armor shielding is extremely difficult to penetrate. There are tiny ports though which the lasers and missiles are fired. The odds of successfully penetrating one of these ports are infinitesimal. The laser batteries will intercept all but the heaviest missile barrages, and only another battleship has the firepower to deliver the kind of fusillade necessary to have any impact." Rachel said.

“So you are saying that a rapid succession of smaller ships firing carefully targeted missiles could not damage the battleship,” the instructor concluded.

“No sir, the smaller ships will not get into firing range without being destroyed. It would be suicide, sir. Hell, we threw an asteroid at one and couldn’t kill it,” Rachel commented.

“You will not curse in my class!”

“I apologize, sir. Sir, has anyone ever attacked a Federation battleship and survived?”

“Not that I am aware of. That would seem to indicate they are indestructible.”

“It would except that I have killed one that had been sold to the Swordsmen.”

“That is not possible. No Federation battleships have fallen in battle.”

“Sir, that is not correct. I killed one, and my friend Myra Myrakova killed one at the cost of her own life and that of her crew.”

“Cadet Solomon, sit down. You have said quite enough.”

Rachel sat down.

“As I was saying,” the instructor continued. “The targets are the firing tubes here and here.”

“Sir, that is suicide.”

“Cadet Solomon, leave the room. You are on report.”

“On what charge?”

“Attempting to undermine the authority of a superior officer and sedition.”

“Sedition, sir?”

“For actions interfering with the instruction of Space Force Cadets. You will report to the Judge Advocate office at 1800 hours for a pretrial hearing.”

Rachel got up and stormed out of the room. Hoots and laughter followed her out.

“At least you didn’t throw your knife,” Wendy said when Rachel described what had happened.

The six cadets waited in the hearing room where Rachel had been directed upon reporting to the legal office. They rose when the judge entered and sat at the station in the front of the room. He dealt with smaller cases involving minor infractions of Academy rules before he turned to Rachel.

He read the charges, “Cadet Solomon how do you plead?”

“Innocent, sir on all counts, sir.”

“Cadet Solomon, an attorney will be assigned to represent you. A tribunal will be convened on Monday at 0800 hours to hear your case. Dismissed.”

“Sir, I wish to choose my own attorney.”

“Cadet Solomon, an attorney will be assigned to represent you. Do you wish to be held in contempt of court until then?”

“No, sir.”

“Cadet, you are dismissed.”

Rachel sent a message to her parents at the addresses shown on the last messages and hoped they would receive it before Monday. Rachel’s roommate found space in her heart to leave Rachel alone in the days leading up to the trial. Rachel met with the assigned attorney who listened attentively, but offered no suggestions or counseling. The man was a Lieutenant straight out of law school and did not seem to be the most aggressive person Rachel had ever met. David was especially concerned with the attorney’s failure to brief Rachel on his defensive strategy.

The chairman of the tribunal was Commodore Tejbir Singh, Dean of Students. The other two officers were Commodores responsible for Academy administration. After the formalities and the charges had been read, the attorneys were called to the bench. “How does your client plead?” Commodore Singh asked.

“My client pleads guilty on all counts and begs on the mercy of the court,” Rachel’s appointed attorney pronounced.

“I said no such thing!” Rachel jumped to her feet.

“Counselor, restrain your client or you will both be held in contempt of court.”

“Yes, sir.”

A tall man in a Commodore’s uniform with the brass of a senior legal officer and a chest full of battle ribbons strode forward. “These proceedings have gone far enough.” He pointed at the attorney. “You are dismissed. I am taking the defendant’s case.”

“You can’t do that,” the attorney sputtered.

“Yes, I can on the grounds of unethical conduct in the form of defamatory and derogatory statements made in public about your client in church on Sunday. Get out before I put you on charges!”

The attorney scuttled out the door.

“Your honor, could we please call a fifteen minute recess while I meet with my client?” the new attorney requested.

“The court will reconvene in fifteen minutes.”

The Commodore sat down next to Rachel. His nameplate read “McGuire”.

“Thank you, sir,” Rachel said quietly.

“Your father saved my life. It’s time I repaid the favor. The best we can hope for is an Article 89

for disrespect to a superior officer or an Article 133 for conduct unbecoming an officer. We can beat the other charges. There may be loss of rank and administrative punishment, but your parents had worse than that happen to them, and they survived.”

“Sir, if you say so. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Answer only the questions I ask. Do not elaborate unless I ask you to. When the other attorney questions you, answer in as few words as possible. One word answers are best.”

“Yes, sir.”

Court reconvened and the charges were read again. “My client is willing to plead guilty to an Article 89 administrative action only if all other charges are dropped.”

“That will be impossible,” the prosecutor sputtered.

“Suit yourself.”

“Opening statements, gentlemen,” Commodore Singh instructed.

The prosecutor stood. “I shall prove that by her willful and deliberate actions, Cadet Solomon did undermine the authority of a superior officer. Her actions were so serious as to permanently damage the education received by the cadets in her class at the academy. The significance of this damage is so great as to be considered seditious.” The prosecutor sat behind his table.

“Nonsense, Lieutenant. I will prove that no serious crime has been committed. Cadet Solomon sought to bring to the class relevant information of which she had special knowledge and which challenged the accepted principles of the past. In her concern for the safety of her colleagues, she may have pressed her case more forcefully than was judicious, but she cannot be faulted for the truth of her statements. Since when has a considered difference of opinion in an Academy classroom or even a battlefield planning conference been chargeable as sedition? I contend to you that Cadet Solomon is the victim in this proceeding.” The Commodore sat behind the table.

The prosecutor called the instructor who told his side of the events. When the prosecutor was finished, the Commodore addressed the tribunal, “Your honors, I have no questions for this witness at this time, but I reserve the right to recall him to the stand after all the other witnesses have testified.”

“Granted.”

The prosecution brought forth several students who testified that Rachel had been disrespectful and abusive to the instructor. After each one, the Commodore let them down without cross examination, but asked for and received permission to cross-examine later. After the prosecution had called its last witness, the Commodore reached into his pocket and produced a data module.

“Your honor, I wish to enter as evidence a recording of the conversation in question. Unfortunately, I cannot ask the person who made this recording to testify, as that would force them to incriminate themselves of the crime of giving me a recording of an Academy class. It is not against policy to make the recording for personal use. It is against policy to give it to any other person. However, I can produce witnesses who will verify its accuracy.”

The officers of the tribunal conferred momentarily before agreeing to allow the recording as evidence. When the recording was finished, each of the students who had previously testified was called back to the stand to verify if the recording matched their now refreshed memory of the conversation. They testified that it was accurate. When asked how they could reconcile their previous testimony with their current testimony, none could offer answers.

The Commodore called Rachel to the stand.

“Cadet Solomon, what was your intent when you challenged Instructor Van Hoff?”

“To save lives, sir.”

“To save lives. How would your disagreeing with your instructor save lives?”

“By preventing them from attempting what could be a suicidal maneuver, sir.”

“What kind of suicidal maneuver?”

“Attacking a battleship head on, sir.”

“How do you know this is suicidal?”

“Sir, I have seen what happens when you attack a battleship head on. You might damage it, but you won’t kill it.”

“Are you aware that no one has ever successfully attacked a Federation battleship.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you personally seen a battleship attacked successfully?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve done it.”

A rustle of voices passed through the room.

“But you said you knew that no Federation battleship has ever been attacked successfully.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You say you have seen a battleship attacked successfully and no Federation battleships have ever been attacked successfully. How do you reconcile these two statements?”

“They were not Federation battleships. They were former Federation battleships in service to the Swordsmen.”

“Ah, so they were not Federation battleships at the time of the battle.”

“That is correct, sir.”

“How do you know a frontal assault will fail?”

“We tried it, sir. It failed.”

“Ah. Can you give us details?”

“Sir, in the Battle for Homestead, we prepared to defend ourselves against what we expected was a much larger force.”

“Why did you expect such an attack?”

“The Swordsmen had attacked other frontier settlements whose policies they disagreed with.”

“They disagreed with your policies?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Which policies did they disagree with?”

“We published Mark Stonebridge’s unauthorized and critical history of the Swordsman Church. We made pornographic videos ridiculing the Swordsmen’s treatment of their women.”

“Were there any military reasons for attacking you?”

“We captured and held any spacecraft and crew that entered our system.”

“That it?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Commodore addressed the Tribunal. “Your Honors, under Federation treaties, it is legal to capture and hold ships and personnel that enter a closed system. The system at Homestead was designated by the Admiralty as such a system.” He turned back to Rachel. “What did you do to prepare for this assault?”

“Among other things we created decoys to give the appearance of a defending battleship.”

“Can you describe this decoy?”

“It was an asteroid chosen for its size and shape to mimic a real battleship. We carved a space in the center of the asteroid and placed a nuclear warhead inside. We carved rocket engines in the back so we could make the asteroid move toward the intended target.”

“What happened?”

“In the attack, the Swordsman battleship took the bait and attacked the decoy. We had not fired on the battleship at that point, although we had repelled and destroyed with passive defenses waves of smaller ships that had also attacked the decoy. We were not the aggressors, sir. We were defending our home planet. When it became apparent that the battleship’s captain realized he had been fooled and started to turn away, we deployed the asteroid. It moved to within a few kilometers of the battleship and the nuclear warhead detonated. Large chunks of rock and debris ripped through the battleship’s defenses. We could see damage to the shields and the armor. Several of the laser batteries were destroyed and some of the sensor arrays were ripped away, but it kept firing at us. It was amazing to me. We had hit it with a hundred megaton thermonuclear bomb inside an asteroid at a distance of a few kilometers and it survived. Do you have any idea how much energy impacted the hardened battle surfaces of the ship? Hundreds of tons of rock crashed into the ship. How anyone can think that the



puny missiles from a P I ship or destroyer can possibly hurt it is beyond me.”

“But didn’t you say you killed the battleship?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Didn’t you use the same missiles? You called them puny as I recall.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then why is what he said wrong?”

“We used them differently.”

“Differently how?”

“We hyper jumped behind the battleship and fired two volleys of four missiles each into the propulsion system. We detonated the ship’s munitions magazines.”

“If I may summarize what you just said, you are telling me that you accomplished the impossible, that you, in a single ship, destroyed a battleship. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir. That is correct.”

“Can you prove this?”

“I don’t know, sir. I do know that an official report was prepared, but I have not seen it.”

The Commodore returned to the table and opened his briefcase. “Your Honors, I would like to enter as evidence a report filed by then Commodore now Admiral Dankese. It is her official report on the battle at Homestead. I have marked the relevant pages. If it please the court, we may accept the report as evidence or we may recess for the several months it will take to assemble the witnesses necessary to authenticate the report.”

The judges conferred. Commodore Singh said, “The court will recess for one hour while we study the material. Commodore McGuire, have you provided a copy for the prosecution?”

He handed the Lieutenant a copy of the report.

“Court is in recess for one hour.”

“Rachel,” Commodore McGuire said. “You can stand down. Do you need to use the restroom?”

“I’m afraid to.”

“Excuse me?” He chuckled. “Rachel Solomon, who with her father destroyed a battleship and who disabled a patrol picket mother ship with a single missile and who with her bare hands and eleven friends at ratio of four to one decimated a mob who attacked her, now you lose your nerve?”

“Yes, sir.”

He chuckled again. “You amaze me.”

Commodore McGuire arranged for an escort so Rachel could use the restroom without being disturbed. When she returned, she found Commodore McGuire and David in an intense discussion. She could tell by the body language that they were not arguing, but were excited about some arcane point of law. She was glad David enjoyed his law studies even though legal matters made little sense to her.

When court reconvened, Commodore Singh said, "For the record, due to the controversial nature of some of this report's conclusions it has received an unusually high level of review and scrutiny. We may therefore accept it as evidence in this case. This, however, is not to set a precedent as it is covered by the defendant's right to a speedy trial. Are both sets of council prepared to accept this report as evidence."

"Yes, your honor."

"Very well then, this report will be entered only to the extent that it pertains to the defendant's testimony." Commodore Singh turned to Rachel, "Cadet Solomon, am I to understand that you were sixteen years of age at the time of this battle?"

"Yes, sir. That is correct sir."

Commodore Singh shook his head. "Commodore McGuire, please continue."

"Cadet Solomon, according to the report we just entered into evidence you assisted in the destruction of a battleship. Your father was pilot and you were fire control officer. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you afraid?"

"Out of my mind, terrified, sir."

"And yet you attacked a battleship against horrific odds."

"We didn't believe the odds were that horrific, sir."

"Let me move to another conflict if I may. What were you feeling when you attacked the patrol picket mother ship?"

"I wanted to disable the ship, but I didn't want to kill anymore."

"For the record, your honors, according to the report, there were no serious injuries among the crew on the ship. Did it occur to you that you could have destroyed the ship and killed its crew?"

"Yes, sir. It did."

"And you deliberately chose not to do so."

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"Too many people had already died. I didn't want to kill any more."

“Were you afraid when you attacked that mother ship?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you afraid now?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“An injustice.”

“OBJECTION!”

“I wondered if you were asleep over there,” Commodore McGuire shot at the prosecutor.

“Sustained.”

“I have no further questions at this time, although I would like to have the opportunity to redirect after the prosecution is finished.”

The prosecutor stood, “Cadet Solomon, you have committed a serious crime and now you are afraid?”

“OBJECTION!”

“Sustained. Counselor, the determination of whether a crime has been committed is ours to make and not yours. Continue.”

“Cadet Solomon, you said you were afraid of an injustice. Do you not trust the court?”

“OBJECTION!”

“Sustained.”

“Cadet Solomon, please explain your comment before Commodore McGuire stepped down.”

“You called a battery of witnesses whose testimony changed before this court. You drew out their first statements from them. When faced with a recording of the events under discussion, they recanted. They all but admitted they lied. How can I ever trust any of them again? How will I know that after having embarrassed them in public that they will not someday turn against me in battle? That, sir, is the injustice to which I referred. Since I can never trust them, I can never go into battle with them in my command. Sir, I will rise above this, and I will have command. They will suffer the loss of opportunity when I refuse to take them into battle with me. Some of them might have made great officers. Now, none of them will get the chance because their records are tainted. The day will come when we will need every able bodied officer on the field of battle, and those who testified against me today will not be there. How many of our troops will we lose due to the gaps in our leadership caused by the absence of these officers? How will we tell the families of those troops that their loved ones died because we lacked the officers to lead them properly? Sir, the damage has already been done, and you, sir, have done it.”

The court was silent when Rachel finished speaking.

"I have no further questions."

"Commodore McGuire, do you wish to redirect?"

"Not at this time, although I may later."

"Cadet Solomon, you may step down."

"Thank you, sir."

Commodore McGuire rose, "Your Honors, if it please the court, I would like to call Captain Van Hoff to the stand again."

"Captain Van Hoff, you are still under oath."

"Yes, sir."

"Captain Van Hoff, are you familiar with the definition of sedition?"

"Yes."

"Could you quote it for us?"

"No."

"Then let me read it to you."

"Is this necessary? We know the definition of sedition," Commodore Singh protested.

"Yes, your honor, I believe it is necessary. Since Captain Van Hoff has leveled the charge of sedition, it is important that he be completely confident in its definition."

"Very well then."

"Reference Article 94 of the Unified Code of Military Justice, section 2. 'Any person who with intent to cause the overthrow or destruction of lawful civil authority, creates, in concert with any other person, revolt, violence, or disturbance against that authority is guilty of sedition.' Do I need to repeat the reference?"

"No, I understand the reference."

"Did Cadet Solomon work alone or in concert with others?"

"Alone."

"Did she create violence?"

"No."

"Did she create a disturbance?"

"She created a disruption."

“Not the same thing. Did she create a disturbance?”

“No.”

“Do you know what her intent was?”

“No, I do not.”

“Then you have no basis for the charge of sedition do you?” Before the Captain could answer, Commodore McGuire turned to the tribunal and said, “Your honors, I request a directed verdict of not guilty to the charge of sedition. None of the conditions necessary to sustain a charge of sedition exist. Therefore you have no choice but to acquit.”

The justices conferred. “We direct an acquittal on the charge of sedition.”

Commodore McGuire turned back to Captain Van Hoff “Let’s turn our attention to the charges of attempting to undermine the authority of a superior officer and actions interfering with the instruction of Space Force Cadets. Let me quote Article 89 of the UCMJ. ‘Any person subject to this Chapter who behaves with disrespect toward his superior commissioned officer shall be punished as a court-martial may direct.’ Let me pose this question. If you were teaching in a civilian institution, say for example, Federation Tech in Atlanta and a student said to you in exactly the same tone of voice and in the same words, what Cadet Solomon said to you, would she be undermining your authority or presenting an opposing opinion?”

“Presenting an opposing opinion.”

“Is there a difference because this is a military institution?”

“Yes.”

“Same words, same tone, different venue, different legalities.”

“Yes.”

“Are you saying that the rules for speech are different in a civilian setting as opposed to a military setting?”

“Of course.”

“Let me direct your attention to Article 117 of the UCMJ. ‘Any person subject to this Chapter who uses provoking or reproachful words or gestures towards any other person subject to this Chapter shall be punished as a court-martial may direct.’ Are you familiar with this article?”

“Yes.”

“In the recording, we heard someone shout a derogatory remark in the beginning of Cadet Solomon’s comments. By voice print data, we know who that student was. Do you know who that student was?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“OBJECTION! Bullying the witness.”

“Sustained.”

“Captain, that will be a subject of a future inquiry. Would you consider the remark about Jews not having respect provoking or reproachful?”

“Yes.”

“And you did nothing about it?”

“I didn’t know who said it.”

“Ah. Did you attempt to find out who said it?”

“No.”

“Did you attempt to prevent it from happening again?”

“No.”

“Why not.”

“Under the recent Supreme Court decisions about free speech, I did not think I could.”

“Thank you. I have no further questions.”

The prosecutor declined to cross-examine and Captain Van Hoff stepped down.

The prosecutor presented his closing arguments. When he was finished, Commodore McGuire approached the tribunal. “Before I close, I would beg the court’s indulgence one more time. I would like to call Cadet David Shapiro to present an opinion that I feel is relevant to this case. When he is finished, I would offer the prosecution the opportunity to rebut and then I will make my final statement.”

“This is highly irregular,” the prosecutor said.

“As a friend of the court?” Commodore McGuire countered.

“Very well then.”

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER EIGHT

DAVID APPROACHED THE BENCH. He addressed each of the members of the tribunal by name and rank. "It is an honor to be allowed to speak before you today. Sirs, at the core of this case we have a free speech issue. Cadet Solomon has been charged with a crime that is not a crime for a civilian. Commodore McGuire has demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that Cadet Solomon may have spoken out of turn, but she is not guilty of the crimes of which she has been accused. The judgment of intent is crucial to the determination of innocence or guilt of these charges. Cadet Solomon has stated that her intent was not to undermine the authority of her instructor, but rather to save the lives of her peers and their future subordinates. She did this at some risk to herself. This is not the first time she has sought to spare the lives of others at the risk of her own."

David paused to collect his thoughts. "The stated purpose of the Academy is to produce the highest quality officers possible for service in the Federation Space Force. Sometimes, these officers need to take positions that are risky or unpopular in defense of the Federation. Cadet Solomon has done that both in the relative safety of the classroom and on the field of battle. She applied her direct experience and took an unpopular position. She did not disobey an order. She stated an opinion. As we have seen in the documentation provided as evidence, her opinion is shared by other competent authority. This was a reasoned opinion deserving of being heard and relevant to the subject at hand.

"All of which brings me back to freedom of speech. The rules that apply to civilian free speech are different from those that apply to military personnel. The rules regarding classified materials are a prime example. There is another example deserving of discussion."

David looked at a note he had written on a legal pad on the table. "Article 117 of the UCMJ refers to provoking or reproachful words or gestures used by one member of the Federation Armed Forces against another. This is not a crime for a civilian. It is a crime for a member of the Armed Forces. Once a person passes through the front gate of this installation, they are under military authority. Any person employed by or in service to the Armed Forces is subject to the rules of the armed forces. There are large signs posted at each entrance to this installation to that effect. Since access to this installation is controlled and persons entering the property are properly notified, free speech can be abridged in the same manner as the owner of a theater can abridge free speech. Under the terms of the Supreme Court decision handed down almost a year ago, the harassment and verbal abuse to which the non-evangelical students on this installation have been subject to since the beginning of this academic year is illegal under the UCMJ."

David paused dramatically. "Failure to properly enforce the UCMJ is itself a crime. Therefore it is incumbent on the authorities of this installation to enforce the UCMJ and stop the harassment that is currently occurring at this installation. Further, under the principle of equal protection under the law, if Cadet Solomon is convicted, so must all the people who have disturbed Academy classes with their outbursts. With all due respect, you have no choice but to find Cadet Solomon innocent of all charges. Thank you for your attention."

David gingerly sat behind the table next to Commodore McGuire His hands and arms were tingling with tension. He slowly allowed his breathing to return to normal.

Commodore McGuire rose. "I have no further comments."

The prosecutor rose. "I have no further comments."

"Court will recess for one hour."

Commodore McGuire leaned over to David and said, "Nicely done. There were a couple of gaps in your logic, but they should not cause us a problem." He turned to Rachel, "You have excellent friends. Cherish them always."

Rachel smiled, "I do, sir."

Commodore McGuire turned back to David, "The process of law is as rigidly logical as any of the sciences. These old knees of mine have been sitting too long, why don't we walk and I can see if I can't recruit you for legal?" They stood and left Rachel sitting alone in the silent court room.

Wendy somehow knew Rachel wished to be left alone and herded everyone else away. Rachel sat quietly at the table alone with her thoughts until the court reconvened.

Commodore Singh read the court's decision. "We find Cadet Solomon innocent of the charges as presented, however, we find her guilty of the lesser charge of being disrespectful to a superior officer. Therefore, we pronounce the following sentence. Cadet Solomon will lose all second year privileges until the end of this term at which time she will be restored to her normal status. Further, in lieu of hard labor, Cadet Solomon will prepare a report, properly researched, documented and footnoted on the history of the battleship from the time of the Spanish Armada to the present. She will further extrapolate the future of the battleship in the current environment based on this research. Six copies of this report will be delivered to my office no later than 0900 hours on the first day of final exams. The report will be presented in hard copy and with a data module attached to each one. At 0900 on the day following the last day of exams or as soon thereafter as other business in this room will permit, Cadet Solomon will orally summarize her report and defend it before a panel of my choice. If the panel accepts her report, all record of this proceeding will be expunged from her record. Cadet Solomon, please stand. You have the option of accepting this judgment or requesting a formal courts marshal. What is your choice?"

"I accept the judgment as presented, sir."

"Commodore McGuire, please have your client sign the documentation."

"Yes, sir."

"Court is adjourned."

Within hours of the court's decision, the Security Police began arresting cadets who verbally accosted other cadets. They were charged under Article 117 and their punishments were quickly meted out. Within a few weeks, a quarter of the Academy's student body was serving some form of punishment for offenses under Article 117. The evangelical organizations protested in the public media and in their captive information outlets. Their protests quickly died down when the newly appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff suggested that continued or persistent interference with the training of Federation officers or enlisted personnel might be considered treason or at the very least sedition. He speculated in one news interview that it would only take a couple of executions for treason to resolve the issue. He stated that he had requested a ruling from the Judge Advocate General's office



to determine at what point such interference might be considered a chargeable offense.

The new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was far more willing to wage war in the media than his predecessor had been. He was often seen on talk shows and was quoted more in his first month in office than his predecessor had been in his entire term. One of his goals appeared to be avoiding a shooting war with the Swordsmen by engaging in a shouting war. He acknowledged that no Swordsman had been charged with treason for their military activities even though the attacks on Homestead, Eretz and a host of other defenseless planets warranted such charges. He blamed that fact on a gap in the Federation charter which he intended to close. He made clear that anyone who fired on a Federation military vessel would either be an enemy combatant subject to the Geneva Convention or a traitor subject to the Federation charter. He stated that even though the Swordsman forces appeared to be separate and independent planetary defense organizations, he recognized their common command structure. Given that consistency of command, he would treat any military conquest of any planet or any portion of any planet by the Swordsman forces to be an attack against the Federation itself. The fact that the planet being taken over had not declared its allegiance to the Federation was of no consequence. All human settlements, whether allied or not, would be defended by the Federation from attack by the Swordsmen or any other military power that sought to expand its territory by conquest.

Backing up his pledge to carry the attack to the enemy, the Chairman deployed all available personnel and vessels to the furthest reaches of human expansion. The deployed forces were given broad authority to deal not only with military attacks on civilians, but to intercept and detain drug runners, slavers and traffickers in stolen goods.

The firestorm of politics roared around the Federation military, but Rachel and her “battle group” focused their energies on the report that Rachel would have to deliver in an astoundingly short time. As winter gave way to spring and the end of the term approached, the report slowly took shape. At 1600 hours the day before it was due, Rachel delivered the report to Commodore Singh’s office.

Commodore Singh’s aide escorted her to the office.

“Cadet Solomon, please have a seat. Judging by the weight of the material you placed on my desk, I suspect you have been busy since we last saw each other.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What did you think of the project?”

“It kept me so busy I stayed out of trouble, sir.”

Commodore Singh laughed. “A peripheral benefit, not one I had intended. I mean how do you feel? Did what you learned doing the project better prepare you for command?”

“Yes, sir it did.”

“Cadet Solomon, the goal of the Academy is to produce the highest quality Federation officers possible. Every once in a while someone comes along with the spark that sets them apart. Your father had that spark. His work at the Academy was brilliant. However, he was as undisciplined as he is intelligent. Even with that, look at what he accomplished in revising the strategies of modern warfare. You are your father’s daughter, but even more than that you are your mother’s. Your mother is as brilliant as your father, but more intense than anyone I had ever met. I do not intend for the Federation

to lose you or your sister the way we lost your father and mother. We need officers of your skill far too badly to leave your education to the normal curriculum. Fair warning, Cadet Solomon, if you give me half a chance, I will find another project for you at least as difficult as this one.”

“Sir, I consider myself warned.”

“Cadet, you are dismissed. I will see you after exams are over.”

The day after finals ended, the entire “Battle Group” appeared in the court room with Rachel. They were scheduled to leave for Parris Island and brought their luggage with them. Their duffel bags and suitcases made a substantial pile against the back wall of the courtroom.

The panel entered the room one at a time. Commodore Singh was first.

Commodore McGuire entered the room and greeted each of Rachel’s team individually. He greeted Rachel last. “Thank you so much for defending me.”

He smiled. “Don’t thank me, yet. I’m on the panel.”

Admiral Dankese joined the panel with only the briefest of nods and smiles in Rachel’s direction. Retired Admiral Robert E. Lee, former head librarian for the Terran Naval Academy at Annapolis, ascended to the platform assisted by two Marines who lifted him when his legs failed to carry him up the steps. Robert J. Watkins, retired head of Saturn Industries large ship division was the last to take a seat on the platform.

Commodore Singh introduced the members of the panel. “Cadet Solomon, do you have anything to say before we start the proceedings?”

“Yes, sir, thank you for being here. It is my honor to be in the same room with you let alone defend my writings before you.”

“Very well, shall we begin?”

Admiral Lee opened with the first question. “Cadet Solomon, do I understand you to say that you believe that had the Spanish Armada used smaller, lighter ships, they would have survived the storm and the attacks by the British and lived to press their attack?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And on what do you base this conclusion?”

“An analysis of the ships that made it back to Spain, sir.”

For five hours Rachel defended her conclusions. It quickly became apparent that the panel was not adversarial or antagonistic, but held deeply felt beliefs which she was challenging. The tone of the conversation was intellectual, passionate at times, but always respectful. After two hours, Commodore Singh had coffee and soft drinks brought in. After three hours, he ordered snacks when it became apparent that this discussion was going to take far longer than he had anticipated.

When the questions finally ground to a halt, Mr. Watkins said, “Cadet Solomon, this report is an impressive effort. I would ask you to summarize your report and then to step beyond it. If you were in command of a battleship, how would you defend yourself? If as you suggest, the battleship is obsolete,

what should we do with all the perfectly functional hardware sitting in our ship yards?”

Clearly exhausted, Rachel started, “Naval vessels and predators in nature share a common evolution. They grow larger and more powerful with each generation until they reach the point where they are so large that they can no longer support themselves. The large ships grow to the point where they become vulnerable to a new lighter, faster challenger. The American Clipper ship was one such challenger. The Monitor was another. The submarine yet another. The Bismarck was one of the greatest battleships ever built, and yet a fleet of smaller, more nimble ships sank it. The Japanese may have done the Americans a favor in Pearl Harbor by sinking the battleships and missing the aircraft carriers. Forced to change their strategy to take advantage of the resources still available to them, the Americans changed the face of warfare. The American attempt to deploy a previously decommissioned battleship in Vietnam demonstrated that the battleship no longer had an enemy left to fight. The days of the big ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore battery battles were over.”

Rachel paused and caught her breath. “The attack on the Cole demonstrated that anything as slow moving as a capital ship was vulnerable to attack unless defended by small, more maneuverable craft. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the exception of the aircraft carriers and guided missile destroyer, the capital ships no longer had an enemy. The enemy they were designed for no longer existed. Who are the enemies of today’s battleships? Are there other capital ships to fight? Other than the two battleships the Federation sold to the Swordsmen that have since been destroyed, the Federation owns all the battleships that are in operational condition. Who will they fight?”

Rachel’s voice grew louder. “The battleship is as vulnerable as any other ship to an attacker capable of the short hyper jump. If I were commanding any capital ship, I would cover my pipes with small ships on patrol. I would place sensor arrays around the ship and I would never attack a decoy.”

“You have still left one part of my question unanswered,” Mr. Watkins said. “What do we do with all that existing hardware?”

“Exploration of new systems is being done haphazardly by small scouts. We lose huge numbers of these ships and we don’t know why. I would propose we use a larger ship to do the exploration. If we are losing scouts because other scouts are killing the later arrivals, a capital ship would be much less likely to be disabled in such an attack. A capital ship could also carry all the resources needed to immediately map and chart a new system which would be a significant improvement over the current system with its long delays between initial discovery and first colonization.”

Rachel paused. “There is one other idea that occurs to me as we speak. Giant hospitals. Mobile giant hospitals that could move to areas of distress and still protect themselves if they wandered into a shooting war. It’s kind of like a military version of the Sisters of Mercy.”

Commodore Singh said, “I believe that answers all the substantive questions. I have one more before we break for our deliberations. Did you write this yourself, or did you have help?”

“I did all the writing myself, although I had help gathering and interpreting the research. In the bibliography I have detailed my sources and if I did not find the resource myself, I listed who found it for me. I would especially like to thank my sister Wendy who spent a week during Spring Break in London with gentlemen from the British Society for the Preservation of Naval Antiquities. They were

extremely helpful and offered their assistance to any students you might wish to send their way. Sir, we all worked on it. We all learned from it.”

“Thank you. Shall we retire to my office for our deliberations?”

Admiral Lee interrupted. “There is no reason to keep the young lady in suspense. I move we accept the project and recommend that it be forwarded to the Academy’s curriculum committee for study. I think she and her team have done an excellent job.”

Admiral Dankese seconded the motion. They voted and unanimously accepted the report.

Once released, Rachel and her “battle group” headed for the door intent on catching their airplane to Parris Island.

Admiral Lee turned to Admiral Dankese and said, “She didn’t ask why you were here. Surely she doesn’t think you were here solely on her account?”

“I’m sure she thinks I am here on other business like, for example, my nephew’s graduation, which is also true. Even with that, on a project as big as the one we are about to undertake, they will find out soon enough.”

“Are you ready?”

“No, but we can’t wait until we are. We have to move soon or it will be too late. Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?”

“No, thanks. These old bones have seen enough adventure for one lifetime.”

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER NINE

THE CADETS BARELY MADE their flight out of Salt Lake. They took advantage of their two-hour layover in Atlanta to get a decent meal before catching a plane to Savannah. They had reserved a van and driver to take them to Parris Island. The plane landed in Savannah a few minutes ahead of schedule. They were collecting the last of their luggage when Faye Anne said, "Don't look know, but I think Colonel Connors is headed in our direction."

"How could that be?" Rashi asked.

"It is a public airport," David reminded him.

"And Lt. Col. Strong is with him," Faye Anne observed.

"I wonder where they're going?" Wendy asked.

"And they have a squad of Marines following them," Faye Anne added.

"Someone must be in serious trouble," David wisecracked.

"And I think it's us," Faye Anne said. "At-ten-HUT!"

The six cadets sprang to attention and spun to face the phalanx of Marines bearing down on them. They quickly saluted as soon as they could.

There was purposefulness in the walk that said the Marines had come to collect the cadets.

"As you were, Cadets. Is this everything?" Colonel Connors asked.

"I have one more bag, sir," Rachel said.

"Corporal Boudreau, stay here. Colonel Strong, take the others. Cadets, go with her."

The Marines picked up the luggage and headed back down the concourse in the direction from which they had come.

As soon as the group had left, Rachel asked, "Sir, what is going on?"

"Later, cadet." There was stress in his voice, not anger, but tension.

Rachel's bag came and the Corporal grabbed it. He took off at a fast walk in the direction the others had gone. Rachel did not have to be told to follow. They wended their way through the airport until they reached the heliport. A Marine helicopter waited with its rotors slowly spinning. Colonel Connor pointed to a seat for Rachel and sat beside her. Corporal Boudreau closed the door and the helicopter lifted off. When the helicopter headed south instead of north, Rachel turned to Colonel Connors and asked, "Where are we going?"

"Canaveral."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you when we get there."

There were only a limited number of reasons one would go to Canaveral and most of them involved space flight. Whatever was going on had to be huge. The helicopter skimmed the water so low that they looked up at the freighters, cruise ships and tankers they passed near the port at Jacksonville. The flight was so rough that none of them thought of sleep. They held the straps and weathered the ride. The pilot was obviously pushing the helicopter as hard as he could, and the airframe complained the whole time. They approached Canaveral from the water and put down at the end of the shuttle runway. A shuttle sat facing down the length of the runway ready to go with its bay doors open and its giant propellers slowly spinning. A troop carrier container sat inside the bay doors with its door open.

The Marines rolled out the chopper's door the instant it was safe. They grabbed the luggage and hauled it into the troop carrier. The cadets followed the Marines into the transport and took seats as directed. The doors closed and the shuttle rolled down the runway. As many times as Rachel and Wendy had flown the shuttles at Homestead, they had always taken off from the water. Taking off from a paved runway was so much nicer. Still, once they were airborne, the girls were overcome with the memories of flights with Blondie, Brownie, Katherine and Sam. They were not allowed much time to reminisce. As soon as they had cleared Earth's atmosphere, Colonel Connors passed among them and handed each an envelope.

"You may open your orders. Read them. Do not discuss them."

They opened their envelopes and in the dim light of the transport read with astonishment what they were to do. After reading their orders, they quietly folded the paper back into its envelope and put the envelope into an inside pocket. This was going to be a summer like no other and certainly not a vacation. They looked around at the Marines who traveled with them. Many were asleep, happy to catch whatever rest they could. These were not the young, fresh faces they had trained with. These were older, tougher, battle hardened veterans of civil wars, insurrections and operations on a multitude of planets. Many wore scars on their faces from knife wounds or laser burns. Wendy wondered if she was projecting her feelings onto these veterans, but she thought she detected a certain fatigue from having seen so much pain and suffering. Perhaps a sense of battle weariness. She wondered if they yearned for peace. Wendy was glad these people were her allies and not her enemies. These men and women were some of the best equipped, toughest fighters in the history of the human race. Whatever lay ahead that required so many of them promised to be ugly.

The shuttle linked with the cargo ship and transferred the troop carriers. As soon as the interior doors opened, Colonel Connors said, "Cadets, move out. Report to the flight deck."

They did not need to be told twice. Half disbelieving the evidence of their eyes, they proceeded to the flight deck.

"Hello, Peter."

"Hello Rachel, Wendy, Reuben, Rashi, Faye Anne and David. It is good to see you again."

"Peter, what is going on?"

"I do not have enough information to know exactly, except whatever it is must be massive. Your father told me not to discuss what little I did know with anyone, including yourselves."

"Is Dad here?"

"My instructions are to take you to the Nuclear Power School as quickly as possible. As soon as

the last transport is attached, we will leave. Answers must await us at Mars.”

“Um, Peter?” Rachel asked. “Who’s pilot for this trip?”

“You are.”

“Sweet,” Rachel said with more than a little sarcasm in her voice.

Wendy said, “C’mon Rachel, it’s going to be like old times. Soon it’ll be clobbering time, and we’ll be right at home.”

Reuben settled into the flight engineer seat and strapped in. Rashi and David dragged the duffel bags and luggage to the crew quarters. Faye Anne propped her travel computer on the galley table and logged on to the ship’s data buss.

The trip to Mars was only a few hours in hyper drive. When they arrived, they gawked at the fleet that had been amassed in orbit around Deimos. Cargo ships of all sizes sat in formation. Perhaps a hundred P I ships orbited the small moon in neat rows. Destroyers guarded the perimeter, and pickets patrolled the interior. They were not the last to arrive. Ships continued to join the fleet. Many of the ships had large attachments which looked more than anything else like claws or ships’ cradles.

As instructed, the ship’s passengers, Marines, Cadets, some Air Force personnel and a small contingent of lost looking civilians boarded passenger shuttles that docked at the airlocks and descended to the surface of Mars. Wendy met Lt. Col. Strong’s eyes and nodded in the direction of the civilians. “Engineers,” she grinned. “Your sparring partners’ job is to see that they stay safe. I think they will have their hands full.”

“At least they had good practice keeping us out of trouble,” Wendy joked.

“You were a picnic compared to these guys!” Lt. Col. Strong replied.

The task force planning the Saturn shipyard relocation project occupied what had once been a thriving mining community on Mars before it had been abandoned when the metals they were mining ran out. In the six months since the planning started, the population had increased from a few dozen to thousands of military and civilian personnel who now taxed the once dormant life support systems. Colonel Connors and Lt. Colonel Strong escorted the engineers to the mess hall. The cadets followed. They had not eaten since Atlanta and that seemed like a lifetime ago. As the cadets surveyed the room they saw many of their Academy classmates, most of whom looked as bewildered as they were.

Suwanee found the six cadets still eating. “Hey gang! So who sent out the invite list for this party? Hey, I can’t stay to chat. I wanted you to know the gang’s all here and we’re doing fine. We’ll have great stories to tell when this is over! Later!”

Luther and Darius herded engineers in the other direction. They waved cheerily as they left.

“I don’t know if I’d call this a party,” David said.

“It’s all in your attitude,” Faye Anne quipped.

They chuckled as they carried their trash to the containers and headed for their briefing. A thousand people gathered in the community’s theater.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stepped up to the podium. His presence underscored what everyone had already figured out. This was a most unusual mission. "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Mars. Welcome to the most complex combined military and civilian operation in the history of the Federation. You are here because you have certain special skills we need for this operation and because someone has personally vouched for your trustworthiness. Every one of you was hand picked and your histories scrutinized before being selected for this mission. Effective immediately until further notice, all personnel and vessels will maintain radio silence. Everything discussed in this room is classified and may only be divulged on a need to know basis.

"As many of you already know, the mission we are undertaking is moving the entire Saturn Industries orbiting ship yard to a location which will be divulged to the pilots only after they are ready to depart."

A low buzz of conversation filled the room. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a lot to do and not a lot of time to do it. The mission will commence in forty-eight hours when Earth and Mars are at their closest. Flight crews assigned to defense will deploy immediately upon completion of their mission briefings which will follow this so they can be on station before the operation begins. Our attempts to keep this mission secret have failed. We know that opposing warships are headed in our direction. With the regular Federation forces spread thin guarding our settlements, the possibility that the mission might fail due to enemy action is real. Everyone must be on their guard at all times. Do I make myself clear?"

When the murmur in the room died down, he said, "When I finish, engineers and transport flight crews stay here. Marines and Special Operations Forces please exit to your right. Combat flight crews, please exit to your left. People, stay alert. I cannot stress enough how much is riding on our success. Every one of you must succeed for the mission to succeed. There is no room for error. We are not asking you for your best. You need to be better than that. You are here because we know you have what it takes. Ladies and Gentlemen, it is no longer about luck. It is about skill. You will succeed because you are the best that has ever been! Dismissed."

Wendy stood to leave and looked at Reuben who was still seated. "You coming?"

"Nope," he answered, holding the orders he had been given in the shuttle. "Engineer."

Rashi looked up and said, "Me, too."

The four pilots looked at their two friends still seated and paled. Being shot at when you could shoot back was one thing. Being shot at when you were hanging out in space vulnerable and defenseless in a flimsy E V A suit with no battle armor was quite another. Adding the danger of an accident caused by haste or improper planning to the danger of enemy action, it appeared as if Reuben and Rashi had been assigned to the more hazardous detail. After hugs and heartfelt best wishes, the four pilots headed for their briefing.

Reuben and Rashi were assigned to join the team attaching the separated components of the shipyard to the transport ships and dispatching the ships to their final destination. It was estimated that they would spend twenty-four to thirty six hours in their E V A suits before they were rounded up for the long journey to follow. The pilots whose ships they were loading would open their orders with their flight plans after picking up their loads. Reuben and Rashi headed to the storage area where their suits had been prepared for their use after being assured that they would have the opportunity to collect their belongings on the cargo ship when they returned.



The pilot briefing was conducted by Admiral Dankese. She explained the overall defensive strategy and, without naming the commanding officers, showed where each squadron of warships would be deployed. There was no question in anyone's mind that they had half the ships they needed to properly safeguard the operation from the ships they knew were on their way to attack them. The mood at the end of the briefing was somber. At the same time, there was the tingle of excitement at the potential of being in on one of the greatest "stunts" ever conceived. If only they could pull it off!

Final orders waited in large envelopes each individually labeled with the name of the person whose orders it contained. The four cadets stayed together and found a corner where they could sit and read their orders. Rachel, Wendy, Faye Anne and David were to take command of a squadron of light attack destroyers currently piloted by student crews and take a defensive position. The position was currently staffed at half strength with picket ships. Once the destroyers arrived, the picket unit currently on station would fall back behind the destroyers. They would rejoin the remainder of their unit and form a second line of defense behind the destroyers. Once the last of the shipyard's components had been dispatched, the four cadets were to return to the cargo ship.

The four pilots relaxed in a corner of the corridor waiting for their ride back to the cargo ship where the light attack destroyers would meet them. The traffic in the corridor looked like a military convention. Service personnel from every major Terran military force passed in front of them.

Wendy heard the familiar uniquely off balance foot fall first. "Mom!" she shouted after turning to face the sound.

The four of them jumped to their feet. Avi, Greg and Admiral Sherman walked in their direction. Avi and Greg were in their flight suits, Admiral Sherman wore combat armor. Everyone started talking at once. Hugs and kisses followed immediately.

Yes, they had been here since December.

Yes, the inertial compensator worked, sort of.

No, the kids would not be using it this trip.

Yes, they had met the sparring partners. Impressive.

No, they couldn't explain.

The sparring partners were on their way to the shipyard with the other Marines ready to spearhead the assault.

Yes, there would be time to bring everyone up to date on everything after they arrived at the reassembly point.

Rachel, Wendy, Faye Anne and David had been temporarily promoted for the duration of the operation to Captain J. G. and no one had ever heard of that rank before.

Yes, Avi and Greg would each command a squadron of full size destroyers. They would be in quadrants distant from where the others were deployed.

Yes, they expected trouble. Entire battle groups of enemy ships were known to be headed in their direction.

No one knew who the enemy was although Swordsmen were the likely suspects. Intelligence seemed to think that the Swordsmen were busy elsewhere, but they could offer no explanation as to who might have a fleet as large as the one that appeared to be headed in their direction.

Yes, they really were about to pull off the most incredible rescue in the history of humanity.

All too quickly, it was time to catch their shuttles so they headed for the docks.

The squadron of light attack destroyers assembled around the cargo ship. The squadron included four flights of four ships. Each flight maintained a "finger-four" formation arranged like the fingers tips of the right hand. Each flight maintained the same formation with the other flights to form the squadron. "Red One" was the squadron command at the tip of the middle finger and leader of the flight of four destroyers. Rachel entered the docked ship through the matched airlocks to take command of the flight and squadron. "Blue One" was the leader of the second flight and Wendy entered it. Faye Anne took "Green One" and David took command of "White One".

Once the four cadets were on their ships, Rachel handed the pilot a paper with a set of coordinates marked on it. "Are all the ships linked via secure fiber optic cable?"

"Yea-uh," he slurred his response.

"Yes, Ma'am!" Rachel shot back.

"I outrank you," the pilot replied with a sneer.

"No, you don't, Lieutenant," Rachel snarled, "and I am in command of this squadron."

"Denny," the navigator interrupted. "Do you know who she is?"

"No," the pilot said.

"Do as she says. Don't mess with her. She'll space you in a heart beat," the navigator warned.

The flight engineer and fire control officer who were on the flight deck and not at their stations, turned to look at Rachel. Recognition slowly dawned.

The fire control officer quietly said, "Oh my god!" under her breath.

The flight engineer cleared her throat and swallowed. "It's true, we are going into combat."

"Yes, I think so," Rachel replied.

"We've never been in combat," the flight engineer continued.

"That's why we're here. We have, some of us more than once," Rachel offered.

Rachel sat in the instructor seat. Light attack destroyers were designed for four crew positions. The training version had a fifth seat for the instructor. Once strapped in, she said, "Command Mode!"

"Authorization code," the computer responded.

Rachel pulled out the keypad from in front of her console and carefully entered a series of letters and numbers. She only had one chance to do this correctly. If any one of the characters was wrong, the computer would lock up and refuse her instructions.

"Command Mode, Aye." The computer verified that the code had been entered correctly.

"All crews to stations, please. Display flight readiness of all ships. Verify data connectivity,"

Rachel commanded.

The crew members of all four of Rachel's ships inhaled sharply as the realization sunk in. This was not a drill. Rachel's display cycled through the status of all sixteen ships in her squadron.

"All ships, verbally report flight status," Rachel commanded.

Each of the pilots reported their status as flight ready.

"Transfer navigation and flight control to squadron command." One green icon for each of the ships in the squadron appeared on her display.

Rachel addressed her pilot, "Lieutenant Quail, initiate flight procedures. Set speed to ten percent of standard drive. Set course as per the coordinates I gave you."

"Flight procedures initiated, aye," the pilot replied, subdued.

"Setting course, aye." The navigator, Lieutenant Raphael Rivera, read back the coordinates.

"Maintain safe speed until we clear local traffic. Blue leader, rotate your flight ninety degrees left. Green leader rotate your flight ninety degrees right. White leader invert your flight. Maintain radio and radar silence. Maintain visual collision avoidance. Communicate only via fiber link."

"Peter" blinked the outermost running lights to say farewell. Rachel smiled when she noticed.

Sixteen light attack destroyers, linked together by tiny fiber optic cables gently pulled away from the other ships in orbit around the tiny moon. They traveled at minimum speed for an hour until they cleared the area occupied by the enormous fleet. The flight deck of the light destroyer had the pilot's and navigator's seats in their traditional position left and right in front of the instructor's seat. The fire control seat with its mobile display shell was behind the instructor's seat. Behind that was the galley and crew quarters. Behind all that was the engineer's position buried deep within the heart of the ship furthest away from everything that could harm them. Once clear of the local traffic and certain that no other ships were in their path, Rachel commanded, "Extend weapons pods."

"Um, excuse me," her fire control officer, Second Lieutenant Erika Bond, interrupted. "We have been instructed not to open the weapons pods unless we intend to use them."

"How bizarre," Rachel replied. "Why is that?"

"Because drain power from the reactor which can lead to early reactor failure," Erika offered.

"Is that the only reason?" Rachel asked.

"Yes," Erika replied.

"Has anyone ever discussed the weapons pods being open during a short hyper jump?"

"Short hyper jumps are not possible in these ships," the flight engineer, Sergeant Consuelo Rodriguez replied from her invisible position in the heart of the ship.

Rachel wished Reuben or Rashi was there to consult with. "We can extend the pods later.

Prepare to jump to hyper drive. We will jump at one G to the coordinates I gave you.”

“Coordinates locked!” Lieutenant Rivera responded.

“All ships report when pre-hyper drive initiation is complete.”

One small green icon for each ship appeared next to the first set.

“Initiate hyper jump on my mark.”

She paused for a few seconds. There was a brief moment of hesitation, almost indecision.

“Engineering, make that a two G hyper drive.”

“Two G hyper drive, aye, Ma’am”

“Go for hyper drive.”

Sixteen light attack destroyers jumped away from the fleet to their guard station on the far side of the central system.

“We will establish a two hour watch rotation. Flight engineers take first watch. Fire control officers will take second watch. Navigators third and pilots fourth. At the end of the pilots’ shift, all crew report to their positions for the transition out of hyper drive. All personnel not on watch stand down and eat or rest. Flight engineers, I have been informed that these ships are not capable of short hyper jumps. I do not believe that to be true. We know that the model of P I ships the four of us flew with the larger reactors are capable of short jumps with their weapons pods extended. There are sixteen of you. You have sixteen networked computers at your disposal. The four of us will add the resources of our computers to assist in the analysis. Our computers contain complete flight characteristics of the P I ship. You have two hours to determine given what we know about short jumps in P I ships whether these destroyers will make the short jump.”

Less than a minute later, Rachel received a message on her assistant in plain text Hebrew.

“What’s up? Did you send the courier?”

“No. I felt it go and wondered what it was,” Rachel typed in reply.

“Are you talking about the courier?” Faye Anne joined in.

“Yes. Did you see it go?”

“Yes.”

“Could you see which direction it went?”

“It went straight ahead,” David offered. “I knew I didn’t need to worry about navigation so I was checking out the sensor capabilities. It’s on the same course we’re on.”

“I think we can assume that one of the crew on my ship is a traitor. I hate to think that I have to start out my first command by disobeying orders.”

“You did that when you ordered the two G jump. It’s only supposed to be a one G jump.

Somebody is in for an ugly surprise,” Wendy transmitted. “Look, we’re known for disobeying orders and completing our missions because we did. Why do you think we’re here?”

“Faye Anne, can you search the logs and figure out who my traitor is?”

“Certainly.”

The engineers spent most of their shift comparing the destroyer to the P I ship and concluded that given the relative power to mass ratios where the P I ship was capable of a ten G short hyper jump, the destroyers would probably only be capable of a four G jump due to their greater size and relatively smaller reactor capacity.

The shift changed and the fire control officers came on duty. At the shift change, Rachel’s fire control officer, Erika, asked, “How do you like your coffee, Ma’am?”

“Black, no sugar, please.”

“Here you go, Ma’am.”

“Thank you.”

When the crews had stopped moving around the cabin, Rachel said, “I have reviewed our armaments and munitions. I really like the rear firing tubes.”

David commented, “Rachel, have you noticed that you can’t move the munitions from the rear tubes to the front tubes?”

“No, I hadn’t. We’ll need to keep that in mind,” Rachel replied.

“I like having a stinger in my tail!” Wendy joked.

“Makes someone hitting us from the pipes position that much riskier,” Faye Anne offered.

“Does make one hell of a parting shot!” David added. “But, we could exhaust our forward firing munitions and have rear firing munitions we can’t use.”

“Well, I guess we will have to turn that to our advantage,” Rachel mused.

“Have you looked at these multiple warhead things?” David asked. “How many targets can they hit simultaneously?”

David’s fire control officer answered, “Each missile carries six warheads, sir.”

“Hey, can I call my fire control officers ‘Gunny’ like in the Marines?” David asked.

The chuckles that followed seemed to indicate acceptance.

“So, Gunny, tell me how these things work. How are they programmed?”

Wendy’s “Gunny” answered, “They look for a variety of types of emissions like radar or the R F from guidance electronics. They use heat only as confirmation of their other data. These are smart missiles. Once they are within a forty five degree range of fire, they launch their warheads. The

propulsion unit also carries a warhead and it finds the nearest target to slam into.”

“So, one missile could theoretically take out seven targets,” David said.

“That is correct.”

“Sweet!”

“What happens if they miss?”

“They self destruct after two hours. We can override that if we need to.”

David laughed, “I had to dodge one of my own missiles one time. Thank goodness it had run out of fuel and was on a ballistic trajectory.”

“Let’s inventory of our munitions,” Rachel suggested. “We have three multiple warhead missiles forward and one aft. We have twelve heat seekers, twelve Disruptor missiles and ten counter-measures forward. We have four heat seekers and ten countermeasures aft. Is everyone equipped identically?”

The fire control officers confirmed their inventories.

“Do all the missiles fire from all the tubes?”

“No, the multiples fire from a special tube. We have one forward and one aft.”

“I was thinking we should load the multiples in both forward and aft tubes now while we have the time.”

Sixteen “gunny’s” reported one at a time when their tubes were loaded.

“Put counter measures in tubes one and three forward and one aft.”

“Ma’am, begging your pardon, but we’ve been told that countermeasures are not much good and are a waste of a tube,” Erika said.

“Don’t try to tell my father that,” Rachel said. “He loves countermeasures.”

“Do they work?” Erika asked.

“They won’t stop everything, but they will reduce a barrage to where your lasers can deal with the rest. Put heat seekers in tubes two and four forward and in the remaining tube aft. Put a Disruptor behind the countermeasures in tube three. All the other tubes will remain consistent.”

Sixteen ships armed themselves per instructions. Fifteen minutes into the shift, the ships were armed to Rachel’s satisfaction. She released Wendy and Faye Anne to rest. For the remainder of the shift, they discussed the weapons and their uses. At the end of the shift, Erika asked Rachel, “Would you like something to eat?”

“Do you have cinnamon rolls?”

“Certainly do!”

“That would be nice. Thank you.”

After devouring the rolls, Rachel transferred command to David, pulled the helmet on her flight suit closed and took a nap. At the end of the third shift, David transferred command to a revived Wendy so he could sleep. The fourth shift came and went with little conversation. Everyone who could do so slept through the deceleration. At the appointed time, the crews returned to their stations as directed and ran through their diagnostics. Rachel disabled the controls on her ship and transferred command to Wendy. She slid out of her seat and wandered to between the pilot and navigator. Erika gasped when she saw Rachel pull her knife from the back of her flight suit. Rachel motioned for silence.

Rachel turned to the pilot still strapped in his seat. “Denny?” Rachel asked with exaggerated sweetness.

“Yes, Captain?” He made the rank sound like an insult.

“Denny, what are you afraid of?”

“Me, Ma’am?”

“Yes, you, Denny.”

“I don’t know. Why do you ask?” He squirmed in his seat.

“Everyone is afraid of something. Isn’t that right, Lieutenant?”

Rachel looked at Lt. Rivera in the navigator seat who had his palms up and open on the arms of his seat. His helmet’s face shield was open. His eyes were wide with fear. His open palms were clearly a gesture of surrender. He wanted no part of whatever was about to happen.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Lt. Rivera replied with a quaver in his voice.

Rachel turned back to the pilot. “Denny, what are you afraid of?”

“I am afraid of failing in my mission.”

“What mission is that?”

“Defending the system against attack and allowing the personnel in my command to get killed.”

Rachel gently slid the knife next to Denny’s throat. “Now, Denny, if that’s true, why did you launch a courier missile before we jumped into hyper drive?”

“I didn’t launch a courier.”

“No?” Rachel sniffed and sneezed. The involuntary jerk of her hand pulled the knife a short distance across Denny’s throat and drew a few drops of blood. “Sorry about that. If you didn’t launch the courier, why did you just wet your pants? Consuelo, do you have any of those large plastic ties you use for holding cable bundles together?”

“What size do you need, Captain?”

“I need four ties thirty to forty centimeters long.”

“Yes, Ma'am, I'll be right there.”

When Consuelo arrived, Rachel had her bind Denny's hands to the seat's arms and his ankles to the foot rests.

“Thank you,” Rachel said.

Consuelo handed Rachel more ties and said, “Ma'am it is me who should be thanking you. You may need the spares.”

Consuelo headed back into her compartment.

“Now, Denny, should I kill you in front of your friends or turn you over to the cops when we get where we are going?”

Denny sneered, “I am turning you over to my friends. The reward will be tremendous.”

“I think not. Let me see, they told you that if you let them pass through the weak spot in the system's defenses, they would treat you like some kind of hero instead of like the scum you are. Would Commodore Bradley have told you that?”

“Bradley?” Erika asked, “What does he have to do with this?”

“He went missing not long after he was arrested didn't he?”

“Yes, he did,” Erika replied. “How did you know that?”

“Faye Anne's been reading Denny's mail. My money says he's in command of whatever is waiting to meet us. So, Denny, did he offer you safe passage?”

“Yes.”

“And you believed him?”

“Why not. He never lied to me before.”

“Almost everything he told you is a lie. Now, sit and watch. We'll see who's telling the truth. I'm going to close the face shield on your helmet so we don't have to listen to you scream. When we get back I am turning you in. Enjoy what little freedom you have left.”

Rachel climbed into her seat. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have twenty minutes until we drop out of hyper. Immediately after dropping out of hyper we will spin so we are facing into the direction of travel. As soon as that maneuver is complete, without further instructions from me, you will immediately deploy your weapons pods and arm your first flight of missiles. We are a little early, but we should find the sentries we are relieving fairly easily. They know someone is coming to relieve them and should be waiting for us. Fire control, close and seal your shells, please.”

Once the shells were closed, Rachel said, “Engineers, seal your compartments and strap yourselves in. Please verify that all systems are nominal.”



“Navigators, please set your sensors to forward scan at maximum sensitivity. I would rather deal with false positives than false negatives.”

The squadron of light attack destroyers dropped out of hyper drive and looked around. The squadron they were to meet was close to the designated rendezvous coordinates. Rachel remarked that using her docking lights as a semaphore seemed awkward, but it allowed them to communicate without breaking radio silence. One would have thought that Samuel F. B. Morse’s telegraph code would have faded into history by now, but that was how they were communicating. Once the recognition codes were passed and acknowledged, the departing captain signaled, “You’re early.”

“Blame it on the exuberance of youth!”

“Roger that! After this is all over, maybe we can meet at some spacer bar and tell each other lies about our valor in this campaign.”

Rachel smiled. “Roger that!” She signaled back.

Just before he turned to go, the departing captain signaled, “May the Force be with you!”

“And you too my friend,” Rachel said aloud as her crew members chuckled quietly.

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER TEN

RACHEL SET UP A PATROL PATTERN. They had been on patrol for an hour when White Three's navigator called in, "Folks, I think I saw something in sector ten."

"What did it look like?" Rachel asked.

"Like a shadow passing across a star."

"Did you get a feel for the direction of travel?"

"No, not really."

"Fire control all ships, please review your sensor recordings for sector ten. We are looking for stars temporarily obscured by something passing on front of them. I know it's not much to go on but it's all we have."

A few minutes later Blue Four's fire control called in. "I think I found something. I am uploading readings to the pilot consoles."

A small cluster of stars winked out at regular intervals. From the pattern of the stars' disappearance, it appeared to be a large formation of small vessels. Zooming in on the cluster revealed the direction of travel of the shadows as they passed.

"We still don't know where they are going," Rachel said. "I think we can assume they are headed to Earth, but we don't know how far away they are."

"They are far enough away that we can't pick up their drives on our sensors," David commented.

"Unless they're drones in a ballistic trajectory," Wendy said. "In which case we have no real way to pinpoint their location."

David said, "You know, there should be a control ship in the midst of those drones. The fact that we can't pick up its emissions gives us a minimum distance."

"That's a start," Rachel said, "but before we jump, we need better than that. We need to know where they originated. Given that, we can figure out the rest. Can we find a mother ship that launched the drones, assuming they are drones?"

"I think someone knows," Faye Anne offered. "In order to know where not to be, someone needed to know where the place not to be was. Therefore by not being in the wrong place, they could be in the right place."

"Faye Anne, brilliant! Isn't that true, Denny?" Rachel said. "Denny? You do know, don't you?"

"Oh, I forgot, you can't talk." Rachel slid out of her seat and stood next to Denny. She opened his face plate. "Now you can talk." Denny scowled at her.

Rachel looked him directly in the eyes. "Now, I wonder what it would take to make you talk?"

Consuelo interrupted, "Um, Captain, I appear to be having a problem with the flight deck voice recorder. Data and navigation appear to be functioning normally."

Rachel smiled when she realized what Consuelo had just said. "Lieutenant Quail, we both know you know where those missiles are going. How about you tell me?"

He sat in stony silence. Rachel slowly pulled her knife from its sheath.

"If you kill me you'll never find out in time," he cried.

"Oh, I had no intention of killing you. That would be too easy. Castrating you came to mind, but it's all wet and nasty down there. I think I'll pass. Slicing your fingers to the bone on the palm side one knuckle at a time occurred to me. Such delicate hands. That would hurt very much."

Raphael shuddered as he sat in the navigator's chair where he could see every emotion on both Rachel's and Denny's faces. Rachel gently pressed the tip of her knife against the tip of Denny's right middle finger. "Lieutenant Rivera, stand ready to copy."

"Aye, Ma'am, ready to copy." Raphael turned away, sickened and pale.

Rachel gently pulled the knife down Denny's finger drawing a single drop of blood. Denny screamed. Raphael wavered between wanting to stop the torture and fearing if he did, they would die.

"Denny, it's just a little boo boo. Only one drop of blood. Think how much it would hurt if I did it for real."

Denny spit out numbers in rapid sequence. Raphael dutifully copied them down.

"If you lied to me, I will castrate you, wet and nasty and all."

Rachel slid over to Raphael. "Are you okay? You look pale."

"I, I am a little nauseous, Ma'am."

"That's understandable. You're a good man. You have a right to be squeamish. I'd worry about you if you weren't."

"Ma'am, I had nothing to do with any of this." He looked at Denny.

Rachel put her hand on Raphael's shoulder. Raphael stiffened.

"Relax," Rachel said. "We'll be fine. We still have a war to win. Plot our current trajectory and the trajectory of the missiles on your display."

Raphael plotted the two paths. Rachel put her finger on a point on the display and said, "Give me a moment to get back in my seat. Inform the other ships we are jumping to this point at four G. We will go on your mark. Understand?"

“Aye, Ma’am”

Raphael informed the other ships of the plan and as soon as Rachel was securely in her seat, the squadron jumped to the point Rachel had picked.

A flight of what appeared to be a hundred drones flew silhouetted against the white glow of the Milky Way. A single full sized destroyer hid in the center of the drones. They were in ballistic flight silently advancing on the Planet Earth.

“How many of those do you think are nukes?” Wendy asked.

“All of them,” Faye Anne answered with a confidence that indicated she knew more than she was letting on.

“Lieutenant Rivera, since I jumped us short of our target let’s see if you can do better. Plot a short jump to a point directly on their flight path beyond their missile range.”

“Aye, Ma’am”

“Jump on your mark.”

The squadron dropped out of hyper space and spun to face the advancing drones.

“It’s the attack of the drones,” David quipped.

“That’s Episode Two,” Erika shot back.

“Come on you guys!” Rachel scolded. “Accelerate at one G to intercept!”

Suddenly the destroyer came alive. It launched a volley of four missiles.

Several of the navigators called, “Missiles incoming” simultaneously.

“How long to intercept?” Rachel asked.

“Twenty minutes.”

Rachel thought out loud. “If these were P I’s, twenty minutes would be plenty of time to get away, but, these ships can’t maneuver fast enough if those are heat seekers. We stand and fight. No running away for us.”

“Four more missiles launched. That’s eight.”

“All ships, prepare countermeasures in tube three for three minute delay and fire on my mark. Counting down. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Fire countermeasures,” Rachel commanded.

Sixteen small missiles leaped to meet the missiles fired from the destroyer.

“Four more missiles launched. That’s twelve.”

“Fire control, use thermal sensors only. No radar! Prepare lasers for missile defense. Wait until the missiles pass the countermeasures.”

“Four more missiles launched. That’s sixteen.”

Sixty-eight crew members in their positions on sixteen ships, each scanning their displays trying to control their fears, when Wendy, said, almost conversationally, "I don't know how much you know about Rachel and me. We really resent being called war heroes or warrior princesses, but you must know we've been doing this kind of thing for a while. At the time of the battle for Homestead, I was fourteen years old and Rachel was sixteen. The battle at Eretz was less than four years later. All four of us were teenagers when we met the Swordsmen in combat. Our parents raised us to be pilots and warriors. It's kind of like growing up in the circus, only more lethal."

The line brought a few nervous chuckles.

"When our mother and I flew a P I ship in the battle at Homestead. It was just the two of us in that little ship. Rachel flew with our father in an identical ship. As we waited for the attack, our mother did the most amazing thing. She suggested we convene warrior school. For the last few hours before the battle, we discussed strategy and tactics. When the time came to engage the enemy, we were ready. In the few minutes we have left before the missiles engage the countermeasures, I think we should do the same thing. Therefore, I declare warrior school class open. We are nose on to the enemy. We have done this for several reasons. One is so we can give as many of our lasers as unobstructed a shot as we can against whatever gets through the countermeasures. Another is because our job here is to stop whatever this is that is headed in our direction, but there is yet another reason. If we alter our path, it means exposing the reactor radiators to the sensors in the missiles. The heat signature of a reactor radiator is unique. Heat seeking missiles are programmed to ignore everything else if they spot a reactor radiator. In fact, the Disruptor missile's software is so intent on finding the radiators that if a sensor determines that the missile has passed one, it will turn itself around and hit the radiator from behind."

The countermeasures detonated. Sixteen bright flashes lit up the darkness. Once they detonated, any thought of secrecy was shredded at the speed of light. The countermeasures functioned by making massive amounts of electronic noise on a wide range of frequencies to fool missiles into thinking they found their target and detonating on proximity. Three of the four missiles in the first volley were fooled and detonated. The fourth was not fooled and barreled straight through. The countermeasures created so much light that the lone missile was easy to see with the naked eye.

"Lasers, fire at will," Rachel commanded. "Engineering, retract fiber links. Switch communication to visible laser."

The combined force of lasers from sixteen light attack destroyers quickly incinerated the one missile that got through. None of the second wave passed through the rapidly expanding ball of debris. Only one of the missiles in the third wave was stopped. The three missiles that flew around the countermeasures were lasered out of existence. Two of the four in the last wave came through. They were dealt with in the same effective manner as the others.

"So, as I was saying," Wendy calmly continued.

"Holy Shit!" Erika barked.

All of the fire control officers and the navigators made similar exclamations. The drones were powering up and starting their reactors. The sensors showed a much larger force of drones than had originally been suspected. The electronic noise emitted by the countermeasures had triggered their guidance systems earlier than had been planned. With their reactors running, they would be much easier for the heat seeking missiles to find and destroy.

“All ships. Fire control.” Rachel commanded, “Prepare to fire forward multiples. Set sensor sensitivity for heat only. Set minimum default detonation timers for ten minutes. Signal when you are ready.”

Sixteen icons lit up on her display.

“On my mark, all ships fire multiples. 3, 2, 1, Mark! Fire Multiples!”

The recoil from firing the missile was incredible. The ships shuddered as the missiles blasted from their tubes.

“All ships shut down engines. Rudder amidships, using steering jets only, spread the formation to pass around the drones. Relative to my ship and direction of travel, Red will go up. Blue will go left. Green will go right. White will go down. Maintain flight formations. Rotate to keep your nose facing the drones. Use your lasers on whatever survives the multiples. We will pass around the drones and regroup to attack from behind. We will communicate on tactical frequency five when we regroup. If you get a good shot at the destroyer, put a missile into it.”

The missiles destroyed about a quarter of the drones. The enemy destroyer found that its defensive shield of drones prevented it from using any of its defenses against the attackers. The shield of drones melted away under the assault of the light destroyers’ lasers. Almost as if they planned it that way, all sixteen ships simultaneously fired a single missile at the destroyer. It disappeared in a flash of nuclear fury taking some of the drones with it. When the light destroyers regrouped, a third of the original force of drones remained.

“Rotate to face the direction of travel,” Rachel commanded once communication was restored. Radio silence was now a moot point. Rachel suspected that the flashes from the battle would be visible to the naked eye as far away as Earth.

“Arm rear tube multiples. On my mark, fire rear tube multiples into the formation. Set sensors for reactor radiator temperature only. Set default timers for twenty minutes. Counting down, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Mark! Fire multiples!”

The multiple warhead missiles blasted out of their tubes, shaking the ships they left behind.

“Execute outward U turn. Concentrate lasers on whatever is left. Be careful to avoid debris.”

Fewer than a dozen of the drones escaped beyond where the destroyers could chase them. Rachel hoped that the pickets who formed the second line of defense inside the line her squadron was guarding would catch them before they could do any harm. With their reactors running, they should not be too hard for the observation satellites to spot and the pickets to intercept.

Rachel regrouped her squadron a safe distance away from the site of the battle. She hoped it was far enough away that none of the debris from the destroyed drones would impact any of their ships. All of the ships had suffered some damage to their shields from the debris and a few had taken short laser strikes from the destroyer. Most had lost a sensor or two, but none had suffered serious damage and none of the crews had been injured.

“Well, kids,” Wendy said. “Wasn’t that fun?”

Her remark was greeted by a chorus of groans.

Wendy continued, “Our enemy based his plans on there being a hole in our defenses where

we're sitting. He thought he was going to face a squadron of inexperienced crews who would be easily overcome. What have we learned in that last little endeavor? We have learned that we were able to use the element of surprise to our advantage against an opposing force. There may have been more of them, but they were not really able to defend themselves very well. I think we can assume that another wave of something will pass this way soon. What do you think, Rachel?"

"I agree and I think that this next wave will be better able to defend itself. We have expended very little of our munitions in that skirmish. We will see what happens from here. Our surprise is gone. Our biggest problem will be that whoever is following the drones knows that they are facing a force to be reckoned with."

"Yeah," Faye Anne teased. "Who's that?"

"Us!" Rachel shot back.

"Just checking!"

Bound by the physics of the speed of light and the inverse square law, the energy and light waves from the skirmish dispersed across the Central System. When Avi's fire control officer heard Avi gasp she said, in her British accent, "Isn't that where your girls are, mum?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Mum, those are your girls and if they are anything like their mum, they'll be just fine. Mark my words. They'll kick some arse, they will."

"I hope so."

Greg saw the flashes and stopped speaking in mid sentence. His voice choked with fear.

Greg's navigator said, "They'll be fine. They're smart, and they have new weapons. At some point you have to trust them to take care of themselves."

"I don't have to like it."

"No, you don't. We have incoming!"

Greg turned his attention to the formation of frigates headed in his direction.

Commodore Steve Reece watched the battle Rachel and company waged from the flight deck of the picket mother ship. "All pilots, to your ships!" he commanded. "Battle stations. All personnel to battle stations. This is not a drill. This is not a drill." The klaxon sounded throughout the ship.

The pickets departed the mother ship in four waves headed in the direction of the oncoming drones. As Rachel suspected, they had little trouble detecting and destroying the drones. None of the drones survived past the line of pickets.

The squadron of light destroyers watched as the picket mopped up the remains of the drones and turned their attention to whatever would follow.

"Let's use tactic number 48," Rachel said.

“Are we spreading the ships out or doubling them up?” Wendy asked.

“Double up. I always thought that the ships in the diamond were vulnerable to flankers.”

“I wondered about that the last time we ran it,” David added. “Do you want flankers in pairs?”

“Yes, I think our number 3 each flight should make up the visible part of the diamond. Number 4 will hide behind them at a ninety degree angle looking away from the center of the diamond. Numbers one and two will hide behind number 4 to attack from the flanks. With any kind of luck our opponents will only see four ships and get over confident. If they attack head on, we can catch them in the cross fire.”

The squadron moved to positions and settled in to wait. They could see flashes and the sensors detected battles at several points across the system. Faye Anne broke the awed silence.

“Whoever this is, it’s not the Swordsmen. I don’t know who it is, but there are too many unmanned ships. It’s not their style. Everything they do has crew and all male crew at that.”

“I was kind of looking forward to kicking some Swordsman ass again,” Wendy joked.

“Not this time,” Faye Anne said. “We’re kicking ass. It’s just not Swordsman ass. You know, I was reviewing the data on the drones. There’s almost no metal in them. They appear to be made of glass. Glass and ceramic.”

“Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?” Rachel asked incredulously.

“Third Force,” Faye Anne replied calmly.

“Incoming!” Several crew members called simultaneously.

All eyes focused on the displays. Still an hour away from missile range, the formation appeared to be composed of larger ships than before which lead them to believe that these ships had crews. The ships seemed to be larger than P I’s, but smaller than the light destroyers. The formation was headed directly at them. As the formation drew closer, they could see thirty ships in the formation.

“You know,” David said. “When I was a kid I was always told to pick on somebody my own size, until I realized beating the stuffing out of kids bigger than me was more fun! I gotta tell you, though this being the little guy stuff is getting old. At least it’s only two to one.”

“Okay, gang, we know the plan. Their goal is to get past us. Our goal is to stop them. If they can get by without attacking they will. If we miss a few and they slide by, we know the pickets are there to back us up. I would like to let them get into laser range before we fire. Diamond leads, prepare countermeasures for five minute run before detonating. They will be your first defense against missiles. Fire Control and Engineering, verify your pressure seals. Flight decks, put on your helmets. Pressurize your suits. Drop flight deck cabin pressure to one fourth atmosphere. If we get a hull failure due to a laser strike, I don’t want any of you streaming out into space. Stand by.”

“Hey, Rachel!” Faye Anne called. “Look at the formation. Do you recognize it?”

“No.”



“World War Two B-17 bombers!”

“Okay?”

“The B-17 was notoriously weak defending its aft flanks. If you attacked it head on or anywhere forward of the wing, it was well able to defend itself. The formation was designed to allow the ships to cover each other. The only problem was that the last guy at the bottom was still vulnerable to attack from behind and underneath.”

“I guess I’m having a slow day.”

Several crew members chuckled. Rachel had not acted like she was having a slow day.

Faye Anne huffed at her. “When we attack, we come in from the flanks, we don’t attack from the direct sides as the plan states, we attack from behind and below!”

“I’m game,” Wendy offered.

“Me too,” David chimed in.

“Targeting radar!”

“Standby to fire countermeasures!” Rachel waited a full minute. “Fire countermeasures.”

Four missiles headed in the direction of the approaching formation. The countermeasures were designed not only to fool missiles, but targeting radar and throw enough reflective material around that laser targeting was less accurate.

“Diamond ships, stand by to fire multiples. Diamond wings, prepare to fire countermeasures. All ships, arm offensive missiles.”

The formation passed through the countermeasures without firing. Everyone wondered what they were waiting for. They were well within laser range to the point where the destroyer crews could see the approaching craft visually. Long seconds passed as the formation approached. At point blank range, the formation fired. Each ship fired two missiles. Sixty missiles were targeted at four ships. Rachel’s plan had failed and now her squadron was in extreme danger.

“Fire multiples! All ships reposition for missile defense! Fight leaders take independent command!”

The multiples were away and the four ships of the front line fought valiantly, but within a space of five minutes all the ships of the front line were gone. Rachel watched in horror as the consequences of her miscalculation unfolded in front of her. Missile after missile pounded the ships of the front line. Each hit sent a shudder through the rest of the crews. The remaining ships desperately tried to move to protect their comrades, but to no avail. The designers who had labored on the light attack destroyers had done their work well. Each of the ships in the front line absorbed a half dozen or more missile hits before succumbing. One after another they disintegrated in the white fury of a nuclear detonation.

Marines talk about not leaving dead behind, but in this battle, there would be no bodies to retrieve. Given the battle’s current state, it was possible that there would be no one left to tell the story.

For their parts, the fire control officers in each of the remaining ships trained as many of their

lasers as could be brought to bear on the missiles, but it was not enough to save the four ships that made up the diamond front line. As much in anger as anything else, the remaining ships bore down on the advancing formation. The multiples had reduced the attacking force by a third and the second volley of multiples from the flankers further reduced the formation. After the second round of multiples, the formation was too dispersed for the multiples to work and the destroyers were so close that using them could make them vulnerable to “friendly fire” accidents. The next hour turned into a brutal free-for-all as the destroyers pursued the lighter ships that had challenged them.

Of the group, Erika turned out to be the most aggressively effective at intercepting both the missiles and the enemy spacecraft. She intercepted a few dozen missiles and destroyed three ships. When the battle was over, everyone in the group had at least one kill. They had used a tremendous amount of their munitions, but the enemy had been stopped.

Numb from the battle, Rachel was glad to see the pickets move to take a position closer to theirs as she called her group together so they could assess the damages and mourn the loss of their friends.

Faye Anne appeared to be the only one who was calm following the battle. She had divided her time between commanding what was left of her wing and gathering sensor data. Once everyone had caught their breaths she sent a text message to Rachel, Wendy and David. “There’s a lot of broken glass out there. I wonder who builds warships out of glass. Perhaps this can help us find who is behind the attacks.”

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER ELEVEN

**T**HE SHIPS SUFFERED BATTLE DAMAGE, but all were operational and none of the hulls had been breached.

The picket mother ship moved closer to Rachel’s position. “L A D Leader, this is Picket Squadron 327, come in please.” Radio silence seemed irrelevant at this point.

Rachel replied, “This is L A D Leader.”

“Hey there, that was some fancy flying in those tubs. How bad are y’all damaged?”

“Not so badly we can’t stay on station,” Rachel replied.

“Do y’all have injured? If you do, we can dock and tend to them.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I think we’ll take a rain check on that, Rachel said.”

“Roger that. Where did you learn to fly like that? They damn sure didn’t teach you that at Federation flight school.”

“Homestead,” Rachel replied.

“Homestead! Are you one of Greg’s kids?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hot dog! Tell the old scoundrel Peanut Butter sends his regards. If he laughs, tell him where he can find me. If he frowns, don’t!”

“Roger that,” Rachel said with a laugh.

“Are you sure you’re in condition to stay on post?”

“Affirmative. We’re bruised, but we’re still kicking,” Rachel affirmed.

“Roger that. We’ve got your six. Picket 327 off and clear.”

After an hour when no further activity could be detected in their sector, Rachel had her crews stand down and divide watch responsibilities. She stayed awake as she replayed the battle over in her mind again and again. She was angry with herself for the loss of the ships under her command. Even Wendy’s attempts to distract her failed. Faye Anne was quietly and intently analyzing the data from the sensors to glean from the scraps of evidence she had who was behind the attacks. She had become firmly convinced that the Swordsmen were not at fault, but who was driving the assault eluded her. Her suspicion of the Third Force did not feel right somehow.

Eight hours passed with no intruders. Battles continued to rage in other parts of the system, but their sector was quiet. Rachel eventually passed out from exhaustion and slept in her seat. Erika stood her watch for her.

David was the first to notice the faintest of sensor readings. “We have something incoming,” he said. “Take a look at sector 8.”

The sensors focused on the object still quite far away. It was moving on a ballistic trajectory that would take it a few thousand kilometers away from their current position. As it drew closer, its large size became evident.

“Is it a battleship?” David wondered out loud.

“If I were to guess, I would say so or it’s one of the new super freight haulers,” Wendy said.

“Certainly picked a bad time to be approaching the system if it’s a freighter,” Faye Anne said.

“When it gets closer, I’ll hail it and see what they have to say for themselves,” Rachel said. “If it’s a freight hauler, we’ll have them stand off until we get the all clear. If it’s something else, we’ll have to take it out. Folks, arm multiples. Arm all tubes. We’re not getting caught this time. Form up in standard wing formation.”

The ship approached slowly the way a heavily loaded freighter would approach the system being cautious to avoid collisions with other traffic.

“This is Light Attack Destroyer Squadron 4. Unknown vessel approaching in sector 8 please identify yourself.”

The fact that the ship’s transponders were not responding to the destroyers’ computerized hails was troubling. Rachel’s sensors detected the picket ships moving closer to take positions behind her. If this ship was a Trojan Horse, the picket ships would not stand a chance against what it might be. Of course their own ability to survive in a battle with a battleship was questionable. These little destroyers were great warships, but they lacked the maneuverability of the P I.

“This is Federation Space Force Light Attack Destroyer Squadron 4. Unknown vessel

approaching in sector 8 please identify yourself.”

“Destroyer Squadron 4, this is the hospital ship Theresa. Request safe passage to medical facilities in Earth orbit.”

“Hospital ship Theresa, why are your automated transponders not responding to our ships’ hails?”

The silence was a lot longer than the time delay caused by the finite speed of light passing between the two vessels.

“We appear to have a malfunction in our transponder. Thank you for alerting us to this problem. We will have it repaired as soon as we dock.”

The ship continued on its trajectory. It did not change course to intercept either the destroyers or the pickets.

Faye Anne sent a text message to Rachel. “The hospital ship Theresa is supposed to be in System 408. I have no idea who these people are, but they are not the Sisters of Mercy.”

“Picket 327, LAC 4.”

“This is Picket 327, Go ahead LAC 4.”

“Have you monitored our transmissions?”

“Affirmative.”

“Do you recommend a course of action?”

“Standby.”

The suspect ship passed by Rachel’s squadron’s position. The destroyers pivoted in position to face it as it headed into the system. Two of the pickets approached the advancing capital ship for a closer look. “Trojan!” was all one of the pickets transmitted before missiles leaped out of the side of the ship to destroy them.

“The bastard’s mine!” Rachel hollered.

“All ships fire multiples!”

The last of their multiple warhead missiles thundered out of the tubes and drove relentlessly toward the ship. Dozens of smaller warships and missiles popped out of the sides of the phony hospital ship. Lasers attempted to intercept the multiple warhead missiles. The multiples were programmed to deploy their warheads if the nose of the missile was struck by a laser. Instead of having twelve individual missiles to deal with, the fraudulent space ship had eighty-four.

“All ships prepare to fire double volley of heat seekers!” The missile strikes from the multiples erupted all around the deceptive ship’s hull. It was damaged, but it was still fighting.

“Fire heat seekers!” Twenty-four heat seeking missiles charged forward to meet the larger ship. Many of them found their mark. Some were intercepted.

“All ships, prepare Disruptor missiles!”

“Fire Disruptor missiles!”

Twelve Disruptor missiles barreled for the target. Undeterred by the lasers that bounced off their glossy shells, they bored directly into the sides of the ship. The big ship fell silent. The destroyer crews breathed a sigh of relief and focused their attention on the smaller ships that had been launched from the big one.

The silence was short lived as back-up systems came on line. Rachel drove her squadron forward to position it directly astern of the big ship.

“Fire into the pipes until it explodes or we run out of missiles! Fire at will!”

In the barrage, one of the missiles penetrated the ship’s magazine and detonated the ship’s munitions. Unlike other ships they had attacked, this one did not die in a single cataclysmic blast from a reactor breach. A series of internal shocks rocked the ship until it lay still, a dead hulk coasting through space. Had it been a naval surface ship in an atmosphere, it would have been burning profusely while slowly sinking into the sea. Lifeboats would be popping over the sides as frantic crew attempted to escape. With no atmosphere to support combustion, the relic glowed brightly from the heat of the explosions. With nowhere to go, the crew died with their ship.

The destroyers quickly exhausted the rest of their missiles in both forward and rear tubes on the small ships that had ejected from the big one. Finally, left with only their lasers, the destroyers and pickets finished off the last of the invaders.

Rachel regrouped her squadron close to the picket mother ship. Since the picket mother ship had a brig and Marines to guard it, Rachel transferred Denny to them along with a copy of the relevant ships’ logs so he could be prosecuted. The destroyers stayed in formation with the pickets for two more days. Sharing watch duties, they scanned the periphery of their sector searching for more invaders. At the end of the second day of no activity, Rachel resumed the patrol search pattern.

A month after arriving on station, the destroyer squadron was recalled. Exhausted from the tension, they were glad to be headed in. Rachel bid the commander of the picket squadron, Commodore Steve Reece, a fond farewell and headed for the relative safety of Nuclear Power School.

Suwanee waited at the end of the intersection of the docking ramps to greet the returning ships and their crews. One by one, the crew members made their way from the ships that had been their homes for the last several weeks to the orbiting fortress that was Nuclear Power School. Each ship had been greeted by a Space Force security officer who gave each crew member documentation about their debriefing schedules and keys to their rooms in the Visiting Officers’ Quarters. The enlisted quarters were at capacity and even the flight engineers, who held enlisted ranks, were billeted at the V O Q. Space Force engineers followed the security personnel on to the ships to assess the damage and determine if the ships could make the jump to the new shipyard for repair or if they would need emergency repairs on site before departure.

With engineers swarming over her ship and the rest of her crew long gone, Rachel was the last to leave. It had been her first real command, and she still felt the loss of the four ships and the sixteen good people who flew them in support of her and her squadron. Physically and emotionally tired, she dragged the bag containing her personal effects along the ramp. She carried her flight helmet under her arm as if she was carrying her own head after it had been handed to her by the board of inquiry. The thought of facing the inquisition of the debriefing team terrified her. Facing the enemy would be easier

than facing her own superiors.

“Officer on Deck!” Suwanee shouted when Rachel appeared. She snapped to attention and saluted. Rachel, conditioned to return a salute in the manner in which it had been delivered smartly returned the salute.

Suwanee’s grinned. “The brass band was booked on another gig, so I’ll have to do.”

“What are you talking about?” They walked toward the V O Q. Suwanee picked up Rachel’s bag.

“If Commodore Reece’s reports are to be believed, your squadron stopped the invasion single handed.”

“With all due respect to Commodore Reece, he’s full of shit.” Rachel stared directly ahead, almost afraid to face her sparring partner.

“Rachel, we’re more than sparring partners. We’re friends, right?” Rachel smiled. “With any kind of luck for the rest of our lives, yes, why?”

“We can tell each other the truth, right, even when it hurts?”

“Yes.”

“You lost men in battle. That’s what happens. Get over it. If you are ever to command more than your own little P I ship, you need to understand that even when you win the war, you will lose some of your guys. That’s the way it is. Death is part of our lives.”

Rachel turned to Suwanee as they walked. “I know that. I know it in my mind. I accept it. I feel like I failed them. I can’t help it.”

“Will it change the way you fight?” Suwanee asked.

“I won’t know until I do I again. That’s what scares me. Will I make a mistake by trying to keep from making mistakes? Will I hesitate when I should be acting? I don’t know,” Rachel said.

“Well there’s a bunch of folks waiting to ask you that question and you better tell them you learned from it, but you ain’t gonna let it get to you. Got it.”

“You sound like my mother,” Rachel sighed.

“I should. That’s who told me what to tell you,” Suwanee said brightly.

“You spent time with my mother?”

“Yeah. You have a great mother!”

“Where did you meet her?”

“Here. About six months ago. We’ve been working on this thing for a long time. You only came in on the tail end.”

“So what else did my mother tell you?”

Suwanee took a deep breath. “Well, I guess you know about Reuben and me.”

“I guessed something was up.”

“Reuben was in the detail of engineers I was guarding. We spent a lot of time together.”

“And?”

“I love him.”

“No surprise there.”

“Really?”

“Nope. Come on. The lip lock you had on him at the airport when we left Boston said it all.”

“He is the nicest, gentlest, kindest man I ever met in his geeky sort of way.”

Rachel chuckled. “That’s our Reuben.”

“I thought I would have to fight you for him until the night of party. I didn’t think I stood a chance against you. At the party I saw you don’t love him. I don’t get it. He’s so nice. He’s a real catch.”

“Reuben is a dear friend, but no, I don’t love him. He needs more protecting than I have patience for. He’s a sweetie, but not for me. I really am happy for you. He deserves more than I could ever offer him.” Rachel faced Suwanee for the first time since the initial salute. “So what does this have to do with my mother.”

“She saw us together and figured it out. We talked for a long time.”

“What did she say? My mother is very practical. I’m almost afraid to hear.”

“She said I had three challenges. The first was I am not an officer. In the Eretz Defense Force, that would not be a problem, because they have no rule against fraternization. The Federation does.”

“So how did she propose to solve the problem?”

“I have been accepted to Officer Candidate school. I start in January.”

Rachel’s face lit up. “All Right! That’s great news! Way to go!”

“That takes care of problem number one,” Suwanee continued, “Problem number two is that I am not Jewish.”

“That is not an insurmountable problem,” Rachel assured her.

“I started taking classes to convert. I have another year to go,” Suwanee said.

Rachel's excitement lightened her step and she straightened from the slump she had been in since leaving the ship. "This is wonderful."

"Problem number three. I'm black."

"I noticed, so what? If it's not a problem for him and it doesn't appear to be, who else matters?"

"His parents."

"Ah."

"His father knows. He's here."

"And?"

"Did you know he has a completely warped sense of humor?"

"Only that I don't get half his jokes," Rachel admitted.

"He explains his jokes to me."

"He must really like you."

"I think so."

"What about his mother?"

"I don't know. I haven't met her yet."

"Has she been told?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid to ask."

"Understandable. So now what?"

"Reuben and I love each other. For now, that's all we know."

"And for now that's enough. We'll figure something out. We'll help make it work."

"I hoped you'd feel that way. That's what your mother said, too."

"My mother has a way of making things happen. We'll drag Wendy and Faye Anne in and we'll work on it together."

"Thank you. You know, when I joined the Marines, I had no friends, and my family was dead. Now, I feel like I have both friends and family."

"Welcome aboard!"

The walked together in silence for a few more minutes until they reached the lobby of the V O Q. Instead of taking Rachel directly to her room, Suwanee steered her into the bar. Reuben was waiting for them. He put his arm around Suwanee. "Did she tell you?"



“Yes! I am so happy for you.”

“I told you that would cheer her up,” Wendy said.

“What?” Rachel asked.

Suwanee explained, “I was afraid to tell you because you were so down. We all knew how you felt. Wendy said I needed to tell you about us because it would make you happy again.”

Rachel drew her hand back to swat her sister for being so meddlesome when a strong masculine hand caught her arm and spun her around enveloping her in both his arms. “Dad!”

“Hug for luck,” he said.

“Oh Dad!” Tears welled up in Rachel’s eyes.

“Those better be happy tears,” Avi said.

“Mom!”

“Welcome home. As my father used to say, you done good kid.”

Oblivious to the crowd gawking at them, the emotions that had remained bottled up inside Rachel for weeks welled to the surface. She wrapped her arms around both her parents and cried.

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER TWELVE

EMERSON WINTHROP THE THIRD, the Reverend and his family watched the news reports covering the Saturn Industries relocation with interest. Saturn provided most of the warships in both the Federation and Swordsman fleets. Having the shipyard moved into the heart of Federation space did not bode well for the Swordsmen ability to maintain their military strength. In spite of assurances to the contrary from Saturn's board of directors, the Swordsman hierarchy believed that the move was directed against them and resented the extent of Federation military involvement.

The news services obtained photos and video clips of many of the people in command of the various sections of the project. Among the clips was a short sequence that had been shot at the Space Flight Academy which showed Rachel, Wendy and their friends in formation in their dress uniforms on the first day of classes.

Emerson pointed at Rachel's image and said, "That's her. She's the one that killed my father."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Formidable adversary," the Reverend replied, "even if she is repugnant. Women have no business in the military, let alone in command. You will need to be careful with that one. Do not let her use her feminine wiles on you."

"Yes, sir."

"You must never forget they are the enemy no matter how seductive their way of life may be."

"Yes, sir."

"They are an abomination and it is our mission to bring them to the light or eliminate them."

"Yes, sir." Emerson paused and listened to the news reporter repeat the same story for the tenth time. "Who do you think is behind the attack?"

"The press is blaming it on organized crime. It's not us, but I don't think it's the criminals. There's someone else making trouble and they could be a threat to everything we have worked for."

"How so?"

"If the Federation thinks we launched the attack, it will give them the excuse to retaliate. We could not survive a full strength Federation offensive at this time."

"But some day we will."

"Yes."

"Sir, is it not possible that we share a common enemy?"

"It is possible. Organized crime is everyone's enemy and we share our hatred for them."

“If we share a common enemy, is it not possible that we could fight alongside the Federation against this enemy?”

“Combining our forces with theirs would be a repudiation of everything we believe.”

“I did not mean to merge, but to work with them to our advantage for the attainment of a mutual goal. We would keep our forces separate and let theirs take the brunt of the battles. After weakening them in conquest of the common enemy, we can overcome them with our smaller force.”

“There is wisdom in what you say. I will discuss your idea with the church elders.”

Emerson had spent the years living with the Reverend deep in study. He studied what the Reverend wanted him to study, but he also studied military strategy and tactics. Given Emerson's goals, the Reverend encouraged his military research. The Reverend recognized that sometimes even pagans or heathens could be successful strategists and that modern military leaders had much to learn from the ways of past warriors. Emerson was reading a book on Attila the Hun when he realized that some of the basic precepts of the Swordsman religion did not work when a commander needed to rely on subordinates who thought and acted independently. The distances between command and the front lines could be immense in the battles Emerson would likely fight once he gained a command position in the Swordsman Space Force. The “top down” strictly regulated structure of the church might have been appropriate for foot soldiers marching across grassy meadows with fixed bayonets, but it would not allow the kind of flexibility a force engaging the Swordsmen's future enemies would need to survive.

Once the seed of doubt was planted in Emerson's mind, he went back and reviewed his previous readings. Mark Stonebridge's books came under new scrutiny. In particular, Mark's claims that forced conversions were not part of the original teachings made him doubt current policies. The war games Emerson had spent so much time working with when he first arrived at the Reverend's looked different when viewed with a questioning mindset. Even though Emerson questioned the doctrines of the Swordsman Church, the one concept that remained unwavering was his determination to seek revenge for his father's death. The more Emerson delved into the conflicts in his mind the more excited he became about his discoveries each day. He knew enough to keep his new discoveries secret from the Reverend.

The other secret he was keeping from the Reverend was his growing fondness for Harumi, the Reverend's second daughter. Gentle and kind, he hoped that someday he would be worthy of her. He fantasized about the day after he graduated from the Academy when he would return to this house and ask for her hand in marriage. His only concern was that the Reverend might arrange for her to marry someone else in the interim. The thought that he might lose Harumi due to inaction plagued Emerson. He debated whether he should broach the subject, but feared that if he did, he would be rebuffed.

Every evening, Emerson and the Reverend spent a half hour together discussing Emerson's studies. Lately Emerson had restricted the discussions to tales of battles won and lost, troop movements and the impact of new technologies and strategies on the outcome of the battles in question. One evening, after discussing the Battle at Little Big Horn, Emerson found the courage to ask the Reverend the question he had been meaning to ask for a long time.

“Sir, I have a personal question I would like to ask of you.”

“Yes?”

“Sir, I am an orphan and I have no right to ask you what I would like to ask. Someday I will be an officer in the Space Force. I am asking you this question not as the orphan you see before you, but as that future officer who will stand before you six years from now.”

The Reverend raised his eyebrow in curiosity. “Yes?”

“Sir, I would respectfully request that you not arrange a marriage for your daughter Harumi until I return and seek her hand for myself.”

The Reverend contemplated the question for a few minutes. “Emerson, you have six years. I will not enter into negotiations for her marriage until six years from today. If you return as an officer, I will negotiate with you. If not, I will find someone else. Understood?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Emerson returned to his studies as happy as a high school junior about to start taking the college placement exams could be. He was anxious for the start of the new school year so he could meet with his guidance counselor and attack the Academy admission process.

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RACHEL FOUND THE DEBRIEFING process arduous and painful. By the end of the week of examining every detail of every decision she had made, she had begun to debate whether she really wanted to continue as a Space Force officer. The Eretz defense forces were much less adversarial. They were no less thorough, but they seemed more interested in learning from the successes and failures of the past than they were in crucifying any officer who had the audacity to make an error of judgment.

Greg and Avi had been given command of larger squadrons than the one Rachel had led, but where Rachel's had been composed of a single type of craft, their squadrons had been composed of a variety of ships. Many of their ships had been rescued from scrap yards and few operated at their designed specifications. They had lost ships and crews to mechanical failures as well as to enemy action. When they compared notes on the numbers and types of ships they had fought, Rachel and her team clearly fended off the largest force. The enemy's plan obviously had been to rely on the hole in the defenses left by the destruction of the student squadron and the pickets behind it to allow the attackers into the system. When the hole failed to develop as planned, some of the attackers were diverted to other areas, but Rachel's squadron was the only one that had a "Trojan Horse".

In spite of her parents' assurances to the contrary, Rachel became convinced that the debriefing team had determined everything she thought she had done correctly was wrong and everything she felt she had done wrong was right. By the end of the week she was dispirited and depressed.

Rachel became concerned that the interrogation would last so long that she would not be able to get back to the Academy to start the term. There had been discussion that she would take her squadron and make the jump to meet the pieces of the shipyard as they arrived. She wondered if the Academy would give her the year off it would take to make the trip, accomplish the mission and return.

At dinner on Thursday, less than a week before the start of classes, the entire crew gathered all in one place for the first time. Greg, Avi, the six Marines and the six cadets took up an entire corner of the mess hall. Some of Greg and Avi's friends from previous missions joined them as dinner progressed and the party turned loud and raucous as the "adults" tried to outdo each other with war stories and "fish tales" each one more outrageous than the last. They moved the assemblage to the lobby bar and continued well into the night.

As the party wound down, Avi pulled the girls aside. "Are you packed?"

"No, why?" Wendy asked.

"You have a party in Boston on Sunday and you need to be out of here tomorrow."

"The officers of the inquisition aren't finished with us," Rachel said.

"They will be," Avi answered.

"Aren't we supposed to meet the shipyard?" Wendy protested. School seemed much less fun than going on another mission.

"No, you kids are going back to school."

“School!” Greg affirmed. “We have an overriding mission. We must never lose sight of it.”

“Grandma got to you too,” Wendy scoffed.

“Yes,” Greg smiled. “I believe in her vision. There will always be those who seek to prey on the weak, and there must always be people to defend them, but there is no need for the strong to be killing each other in delusions of glory.”

“Hi Ho! Hi Ho! It’s off to school we go!” Wendy sang, making everyone laugh at the reference.

The following day, at about the time the debriefing session normally broke for lunch, the lead officer looked at the others on the panel and said, “Captain, J. G. Rachel Solomon, please rise. That concludes the proceedings. We will publish our findings in about six months. Your rank as Captain J. G. is a temporary rank. You will retain that rank until you return to the Academy grounds at which time you will revert to your normal rank and pay grade. Captain, thank you for your contribution to the campaign. Let me say for myself and the rest of this panel, well done Captain. Job well done.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Oh, Captain, I understand that there is a certain young man waiting for you in Boston. There is a shuttle leaving in a half hour. You need to be on it.”

Rachel blushed bright red. “Yes, sir. Thank you sir. Until we meet again, sir.” Rachel turned to the group standing at the back of the room with their luggage. Her luggage sat in a pile by the door.

“Come on, girl! Time’s a wastin’!” Suwanee shouted across the room.

“Who told them?” Rachel demanded.

Faye Anne hid behind Luther.

“I’ll kill you later!” Rachel said.

“If we miss our ship, I’m going to kill you,” Suwanee countered. “Let’s go.”

The shopping trip at the same mall as they had visited the previous year was only slightly less chaotic than it had been the year before. Outfitted in their new formal clothes, they arrived at the party not long after it started. As they pulled up to the former country club, they were surprised to see a bewildering array of news gathering vehicles parked around the property. They drove to the entrance and the valet greeted them.

“Why are they here?” Rachel asked the valet pointing to the news vehicles.

“To see you,” he replied with a broad toothy grin. “Get ready. There’s no getting around them.”

Faye Anne’s intelligence officer friend came around to the passenger side of the van. “Rachel, please take my arm. Wendy, please take my other arm and let me escort you to the steps. The reporters will want a statement from you. This is a wonderful opportunity to recruit for the Space Force. They aren’t out for blood, but you are heroines. Ready?”

Wendy and Rachel nodded. They walked together to the top of the steps where the reporters had set up microphones. The Marines formed a flying “V” and kept the reporters at bay until they could

take their places at the top of the steps. The twelve stood together in the camera shot. Wendy went to the microphone first. "I am not sure we deserve all this attention, but thank you for coming."

"What is flying in space like?"

"Someone once described air traffic control as being hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror. It's a lot like that."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Yes. I love flying."

"What does it feel like to be a hero?"

"I don't know. I don't know any."

"You all are heroes."

"No, we're Cadets at the Federation Space Force Academy. We're just doing a job. It's like many jobs only more fun than most. We get to play with the coolest toys."

"Just a job? How can battling squadrons of robot space ships be a job?"

"The police officer on the street has a job that's as dangerous as what we do. I think we fail to recognize how important the everyday work they do is when we spend too much time on people like us. The Federation would be better served if you gave the cop on the beat the credit they deserve and spent less time on us."

"Rachel, you have been referred to as a warrior princess. How do you feel about that?"

"We hate it," Rachel answered. "As Wendy said, this is our job. We enjoy our job and we know that there are thousands of young women and men who would be as good at what we do as we are. I challenge the best and the brightest of our students to reach for the stars. Come fly with us. Maybe someday, the press will call you a warrior princess!"

"What do you think about the potential for war with the Swordsmen?"

"We fought the Swordsmen twice. I would rather not fight them again. I think it is better for us to devote our energies to enforcing the peace than it is to be creating wars. If it comes to war with them or anyone else, we will be ready and we will win. Even when we win, wars cost both sides the lives of good people. I have lost too many friends in battle. I do not wish to lose any more."

"Who do think is behind the attack you just fended off?"

"I don't think it's the Swordsmen. Many people think it's organized crime."

"Do you think it's organized crime?"

"It would be an easy answer, but organized crime isn't as organized as we like to think. I don't believe that any one crime family has the resources to pull off a project this large. The organized crime groups have a reputation for turf battles and conspiracies amongst themselves. I suspect they don't trust

each other enough to consolidate their forces to the degree necessary to pull something like this off.”

“Then who is it?”

“I don’t know. It could be someone else who has huge resources and the ability to move large amounts of cargo freely without detection. I fear we will fight them again before we fight the Swordsmen. For my part, if we never fight the Swordsmen again it will be too soon.”

“Were there any survivors to interrogate?”

Rachel scratched the back of her head while she thought about the question. “Have you ever seen what happens to a ship in space when its hull is breached?”

She looked around. Clearly none of them had.

“There are almost never survivors unless one gets out in an escape pod before the ship disintegrates. In some of our warships, it is possible for the fire control officer or flight engineer to survive a hull breach due to the structure of the ship, but I am only aware of a few such survivors and only because they were wearing their E V A suits at the time of the breach. All of the ships my squadron fought against disintegrated. There were no survivors.”

“We heard there were saboteurs on the station. Were any of them captured?” Suwanee had been briefed on how to answer this question, and she moved forward to respond. “There were some people who attempted to interfere with our moving the station, and there were some accidents in the process. Have you ever seen what happens to the human body when their space suit develops a tear in space? I have. It’s not a pretty sight. Whether the damage was intentional or accidental, the result is the same. It’s short. It’s extremely painful, and it’s always fatal.”

“Were there any people inside the space station who might have been captured who could provide information?”

Suwanee replied, “The six of us were outside in space suits with the engineers. We were not briefed on any of the activities inside. We would have no way to know that answer.”

“If you were called upon to do this again, would you?”

“Yes. We are Federation Marines. This is what we do. This is our job. We are the best that’s ever been, and we’re damn proud of it. If there’s any tough guy or girl listening who thinks they can take us on, I will see you at Parris Island. If you think you’re tough, we’ll make you tougher.”

Rachel stepped forward and said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, we came here for a party. It’s time we went inside.” Rachel turned and headed inside. The others followed.

Joshua was immediately inside the door. “Rachel, please, Isaac is outside on the terrace. Could you talk to him? Please?”

“So he can attack me again?”



“No, he won’t attack you, but you’ll know what to say. He won’t listen to me. Please,” he pleaded, his eyes showing his distress.

Rachel looked out on the terrace to see Isaac sitting on the rail she had thrown him over the last time they were together. His head was down and his shoulders rounded. “Wendy’s the sensitive one.”

“Which is why I need to talk to her myself. Please do this.” Rachel went out on the terrace and gently sat on the rail beside Isaac. His face was streaked with tear tracks.

“Big boys don’t cry,” she said softly.

“Yes, they do,” he answered, his voice choking on the words.

Wendy watched Rachel sit next to Isaac. She turned to Joshua and asked, “What’s going on?”

“Our grandparents caught some bug on some planet in their travels. They got sick about six months ago. They died last week. The funeral was Monday. Isaac tried to save them, but he couldn’t. He’s taking it pretty hard. He feels like a failure. It was pretty gruesome. They were bleeding internally and in a lot of pain. We couldn’t even hold their hands to comfort them because of the quarantine.”

“What about you?” Wendy asked, looking into his eyes.

“I’m the engineer, not the doctor. I did everything I knew how to do. I’m still pretty upset and all, but I’ll survive and go on to save other lives. I’m worried about him.”

“Rachel lost a quarter of her squadron in battle. It hit her pretty hard. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“Then why did you ask Rachel to talk to him?”

“Because he loves her.”

“He barely knows her.”

“Doesn’t matter. Rarely does.”

Wendy raised her eyebrow. “And what about you?”

“I would hope someday to be worthy of you. Besides, there aren’t too many women around tall enough to look us in the eye.”

Wendy laughed, “Joshua Cohen, you are a nut case.”

“I will take that as a compliment.”

“Which is how it was intended. I’m not in the mood for dancing. Why don’t we go out on the terrace? We can trade war stories.”

“War stories?”

“Yeah, they’re like fish tales, you know, about the one that got away. You can tell me about all

the fun gizmos you're working on, and I can tell you about the ships I shot up."

"Are you really interested?"

"I won't know until you tell me."

Wendy and Joshua wandered out to the terrace holding hands and stood close enough to hear what Rachel and Isaac were saying, but not so close as to appear to be eavesdropping.

Rachel had mopped up most of Isaac's tears with her handkerchief. "Have you ever lost someone close to you?" he asked.

"Yes, I've lost many friends in battle."

"Did you watch them die?"

"Only one that was real close to me."

"Can you tell me about it?"

Rachel told about watching Myra attack the battleship at the cost of her and Jennifer's lives. She talked about how much it had hurt and that even now, every time she powers up a ship, she thinks about Myra and the fun they had playing in Myra's P I ship. Isaac asked questions about details he did not understand as Rachel explained what had happened.

"It took them six months to die," Isaac said. "They were in pain for six months, and there was nothing I could do. They were dying, and my best drugs couldn't ease the pain. I couldn't even hold their hand to make them feel better. I failed them."

"That's how I feel about the people I lost in this last battle."

"Please, tell me about it."

Rachel explained the details of the battle and why she felt what she did was wrong. Isaac demonstrated a quick grasp of the concepts Rachel as discussing and when she had finished, he asked, "If you had arrayed your ships normally, would you have risked losing all of them in that opening barrage? The missile guidance systems were only given four targets, not sixteen. They would have spread out against the sixteen instead of bunching up on the four."

Rachel thought about the comment for a moment. "You're probably right. Let me ask you. What could you have done differently, knowing what you know now?"

"Nothing."

"Well, there you have it."

"Rachel Solomon, would it be forward of me to tell you I love you?"

She rested her head on his shoulder and said, "I figured that out. This only seeing each other once a year is the pits."

“Maybe you could come to Boston for Thanksgiving or winter break.”

“We’ll work something out.”

The following weekend the gossip columnists would run pictures taken from a distant helicopter of the four of them on the terrace. The headline ran, “WARRIOR PRINCESSES FIND PRINCES!” The subtitle ran, “Why do they look so sad?”

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE RETIRED INTELLIGENCE OFFICER who served as the party's doorman jumped to his feet as three frighteningly familiar silhouettes crossed the driveway. Three old comrades in arms, veterans of shared long forgotten campaigns, strolled in his direction. The only woman in the group, tall, dark and with a sensuous walk that made men's hearts skip a beat ascended the steps with the two men accompanying her a few steps behind.

"Good evening, may I help you?" He was careful to remain calm. These three fellow soldiers had enough dirt on him to make his life very uncomfortable should they choose to do so. He looked around to see if any of the reporters who had been there earlier were still lurking about. Catching these three visitors here would have been a bigger story than the one they came for. He feared that an off-hand comment would jeopardize his cover.

The woman addressed him with a malicious grin, "Bond, is it? As I remember, yes, it's Bond, James Bond, Agent double oh seven." She was clearly letting him off the hook, at least for now. He felt the sweat cool on his back.

"Yes, I am pleased that you remembered me. Unfortunately, I am at a loss. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"Charles, Nick and Nora Charles." She intertwined her arm with one of the men. She turned to the other and said, "Jack Ryan." The trio stepped past him and headed for the door.

"Uh, I'm sorry, but you can't go in there. The party is for the students only."

The woman smiled sweetly, perhaps too sweetly, and slid over to him so her hip brushed his. "Now, Jimmy, we know the rules, but you'll bend them just a little for us, won't you?" She handed him the pistol she had removed from his holster without his realizing she had done so.

"My dear lady, how can I refuse one who stole my heart and ran off with another?"

"I thought you would see things my way." She handed him his wallet.

"Oh Shit!" was the first thing Faye Anne said when she saw Greg, Avi and her father enter the room. "Oh Shit!" She ran to collect Rachel and Wendy.

"Your parents are here! They can't see you like this! You need to look happy. You need to look like you are having a good time! It's a party!" Faye Anne led the two couples in from the terrace. They wandered over to the dessert buffet and nonchalantly selected pastries, seemingly oblivious to the fact that their parents were trying desperately to be discreet and failing miserably. Within seconds, everyone in the room knew who they were and why they were there. Most were glad it wasn't their parents who had decided to crash the party.

The disc jockey, sensing a sudden chill in the room, changed the music to something lively and easy to dance to.

Isaac leaned over to Joshua. "Are you ready to commit to the lady?" He whispered.

“What? Here? Now?” Joshua sputtered.

“Can you think of a better time to win the fair maidens’ hearts? Their parents are here.”

Joshua took a deep breath. “No.”

“Follow my lead.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Isaac smiled. He took Rachel’s hand and started toward the dance floor.

“Where are you going?” Rachel asked.

“To dance with you,” he replied, bowing gracefully.

“I don’t know how,” Rachel said quietly, subdued and embarrassed.

Isaac blinked. It had never occurred to him that she did not know how to dance. They had not danced the year before, and he had thought it was so they could talk freely. His plan had been to dance with her until they were close to her parents and she could not help but introduce him. He needed another plan and fast. With the accent of a bad Shakespearean actor he pronounced, “M’Lady does not know how to dance,” in a voice that could be heard across the room. He turned to his brother. In a loud voice and with theatrically furrowed brow, he said, “Joshua, dear brother, M’Lady does not know how to dance. Does your lady know how to dance?”

Joshua read his brother’s signals perfectly, as he always did. He smiled as he took Wendy’s hand and bowed before her as Isaac had done. In a theatrical voice mimicking the one his brother had used, he asked, “Would M’Lady like to dance?”

“I don’t know how,” Wendy replied with a blush.

“Ah, brother dear, it appears we share the same conundrum. The ladies can’t dance.”

“How tragic!” Isaac said in an oratorical style. “We have two young ladies who cannot dance!”

“Rabbi,” Isaac called to the Rabbi who sponsored the party. When he had the Rabbi’s attention he continued, “Sir, it seems we have a dilemma here, perhaps even a sacrilege. We have two young Jewish women who do not know how to dance. Do you not see something wrong with this?”

Isaac’s grin lit up his face. It was all Joshua could do to keep from laughing.

“Well, my good young man,” the Rabbi replied, suppressing his own laughter. “It is hardly a sacrilege, but it is most unusual. Most Jews learn to dance as children. These ladies must not have grown up in a Jewish community and must not have had the opportunity to learn. Perhaps you young gentlemen should be gracious enough to teach them.”

“Perhaps, indeed!” Isaac stated. “Brother dear, should we teach them?”

“Most assuredly! It is our sacred duty!” Joshua responded in a melodic manner, his voice light

with laughter.

Isaac suddenly turned solemn. "But first, brother, we must disarm them."

Joshua stopped laughing, his eyes wide with surprise. This move he had not expected.

Isaac reached around behind Rachel's neck and gently removed the knife from its sheath. With the gleaming clear weapon lying across the flat of his hand he looked at Joshua. His expression told Joshua that he was to do the same. Gently he followed suit.

Avi was in a state of panic. "What is going on?" She turned to Greg in fear. "Why are they teasing the girls like that?"

Greg scanned the expressions on the two young men and took his wife's hand. "Where you grew up, teasing was a prelude to killing. You teased someone into making the first move so you could kill them. Right?"

Avi nodded without taking her eyes off the two young men who held the knives across the flats of their open hands as they lead their daughters in their direction.

Greg continued. "For most of the rest of us, teasing is a prelude to courtship. These two young gentlemen are about to test their mettle to see if they rate to join our family."

Isaac stopped in front of Greg and Joshua stopped in front of Avi. Faye Anne had moved to their side fascinated by the events unfolding before her. Isaac held the knife for Greg to take. He bowed his head slightly. Greg bowed his head slightly and with both his hands took the knife.

"Gentle sir and madam," Isaac said formally. "I humbly request permission to seek your daughter's hand in marriage."

Joshua presented the knife to Avi who took it in both of her hands.

"Gentle sir and madam, I humbly request permission to seek your daughter's hand in marriage."

Faye Anne poked her head between them. "Say yes, you will be glad you did."

Greg shot her a quick glance and grinned. "Young sirs, might we have the pleasure of knowing your names and professions? How would you propose to support our daughters in the manner to which they are accustomed?"

Isaac straightened and smiled. Greg was playing the game with him. "Gentle sir and madam, I am Isaac Cohen, I am a recent graduate of Harvard Medical College in Boston. I have my MD and am studying for an additional degree in advanced primary care and emergency services. I am studying in a special Federation project to train teams of medical and engineering professionals to provide primary and emergency care in a mobile hospital."

Joshua patiently waited for his brother to finish. "Sir and madam, I am Joshua Cohen. I am working on a Masters of Science in Biomedical Engineering as part of the same program as my brother. My brother is the doctor. I am his support engineer. We travel together as a team. It would be our intent to see that your daughters also stayed together as a team."

Greg thought for a second. "First, you must teach them to dance. We would, of course, prefer

that they finish their studies at the Academy before marriage. If they still wish to marry you, we will see about the wedding. Gentlemen, you're on your own."

Graciously and theatrically bowing, together they said, "Thank you, sir"

As soon as they turned toward the dance floor, Rachel looked at Isaac and said, "What a load of crap! After that, what makes you think I want to marry you?"

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. As soon as he released her she backhanded him in the jaw and instantly melted, apologetic for having hurt him. The skin on his face quickly started to turn color showing the bruise where she had hit him.

Avi watched in horror. Greg said. "Avi, what did you do the first time I kissed you in public?"

"I backhanded you." She looked at him and smiled with the memory. "You made your point."

Faye Anne said, "When they first met, she threw him over that terrace rail out there into the grass. If he wasn't scared off then, this won't slow him down."

Avi turned to Faye Anne. "Why did she throw him?"

"He grabbed her butt."

"Serves him right. How long have they been seeing each other?"

"This is only the second time they've been together. They've been writing and calling since last year's party."

"She never told us. What about Wendy and Joshua?"

"Same time. Less tempestuous relationship, but then they're both more stable people."

Faye Anne filled Avi and Greg in on their daughters' romantic activities as they watched the dance lessons progress on the dance floor.

After watching the others dance for half an hour, when the music shifted to a traditional folk dance, Greg took Avi's hand and tried to pull her toward the dance floor. She resisted. Greg laughed out loud. "Young Masters Cohen! The reason the young ladies do not know how to dance is because their mother doesn't either!"

Avi blushed bright red. "Greg, don't!"

Greg laughed as he dragged her to the dance floor. Several of the young ladies gathered around Avi, boisterously attempting to teach her the steps to the dance. Several folk dances later, they collapsed into the chairs around the room exhausted from both the dance and the laughter. Most of the ladies had smeared their makeup wiping off the tears of laughter as they whirled around the floor in what had changed from a rather sedate party to one that was as loud and rambunctious as the ones Greg and Avi remembered from their youth.

It was into this pandemonium that "James Bond" brought Admiral Dankese, her aide and an Air Force General. Simultaneously, two Air Force helicopters landed on the grassy area beyond the terrace. The room fell silent. Greg, Avi and Admiral Sherman turned to face the new arrivals and more out of

habit than protocol, saluted.

The Air Force General returned the salutes and addressed them. "Admiral Sherman, Captains Solomon, we need you, your daughters and their entire entourage to accompany us in those helicopters." He caught the expression on Avi's face and said, "Admiral Dankese and her staff will see that your personal effects are delivered as appropriate."

"Thank you."

When the girls arrived to see what was going on, the Air Force General addressed them, "Cadets, Marines, please accompany us to the helicopters. Dr. Cohen, Mr. Cohen, please join us. We will see that you are returned to your duty stations following the meeting."

Admiral Sherman addressed the General, "Can you tell us what this is about?"

"Not yet. You will be briefed shortly, and you will understand the reason we need to move quickly. Please, we have little time."

The group moved toward the helicopters. "James Bond" started to go with them. The General addressed him. "No, sir, you stay here."

The flight to the nearby Air Force Base took less than half an hour. The noise of the helicopters prevented any conversation. The helicopters flew inside the open hangar doors and set down within.

"Well, life with you is certainly not dull!" Isaac said to Rachel.

Rachel was too concerned with questions she could not answer to see the humor. She and Wendy had retrieved their knives from their parents as they walked to the helicopters. Isaac and Joshua instinctively rested their hands on their girl friends' backs where the knives were hidden as if somehow knowing their ladies were armed and dangerous gave them a level of comfort that six special operations trained Marines traveling with them did not.

The hangar doors closed, and they were led to a conference room attached to the hangar. The Federation's President stood at one end of the room with several members of her staff. She pointed to chairs arranged in rows, indicating for them to be seated.

As soon as they had taken their places, she addressed them. "We do not have much time. I would love to chat with you individually, but that will not be possible. We have some rapidly developing opportunities that if we do not take advantage of will pass us by. I cannot stress enough how important what I am about to ask you to do is for the future of the Federation. We have discovered some, shall we say, problems in our intelligence operations. The recent Saturn Industries project has exposed serious leaks in the Federation Intelligence Organization. Some of the leaks appear to be from my staff. This is why no attempt was made to disarm any of you prior to meeting with me. Admiral Sherman, we need to tap into your organization for help. Under my authority as Commander in Chief, I am recalling you to active duty with the Federation Intelligence Service for the duration of this operation. We would prefer working with someone who has divided loyalties we are aware of than someone whose loyalties may not be as they appear. Please go with General Thompson, and he will brief you on your duties."

He stood to leave. "Cadet Sherman, go with your father. Your skills have not gone unnoticed."



Faye Anne stood. "Thank you, ma'am."

The President smiled. "You are welcome, dear."

"Captains Solomon, I have vacated the outstanding warrant in the Daniel Esperanza case. You are free to move about the Federation. I need you for a diplomatic mission. The Swordsmen are thinking of seceding from the Federation."

"Can they do that?" Isaac exclaimed, interrupting.

"Yes, they can," David said and realized he had spoken out of turn. "My apologies Ma'am."

"Cadet Shapiro, not at all, please explain."

"The Federation is not truly a government in the strictest sense. It is a legal entity something between an association and a corporation. The members of this association, the stakeholders, if you will, pay to join and pay to remain members. In return for the payments, the Federation provides certain specific services most of which relate to the regulation and facilitation of trade. The Federation does not have a constitution. It has a contract. The contract exists between the Federation and its member states and is enforceable only to the extent that the Federation's courts and military can enforce it. The purpose of this contract is to allow members to trade fairly and safely amongst themselves. The Federation is also responsible for enforcement of certain prohibitions that the founders felt so strongly about that they included them in the original contract. This contract was negotiated over a period of twenty years and took another twenty years to ratify. None of the original negotiators who drafted the first contract lived to see it completed. The most difficult section of the contract to negotiate had to do with the process of secession. Desperately afraid of a 'Star Wars' style evil empire, the founders sought a way to keep the Federation from becoming all consuming. By providing a process by which a member could legally withdraw without recriminations, they sought to limit the power of the central government. The majority of the process of secession is focused on the payment for or return of Federation assets and investments in the seceding party's possession. Under the terms of the contract, both parties agree to a non-aggression pact at the beginning of the secession process. The goal is to prevent interplanetary civil wars that could decimate entire populations. Ma'am, I take it by your comment that the Swordsmen have served notice that they wish to enter into secession negotiations."

"Very astute, Cadet Shapiro."

"Would I be out of place to guess that the Saturn Industries move somehow precipitated their actions?" David asked.

"Exactly. When you retire from the military, you should consider executive office."

"With all due respect, Ma'am, there's no way. A Supreme Court judgeship would be a worthwhile goal, but the executive branch, no thanks!"

The President smiled. "Captains Solomon, remember the Swordsman outpost you assaulted after the battle at Homestead?"

Greg, Avi, Rachel and Wendy all nodded.

“That is their new capital. By sending you, we are alerting the Swordsmen that we will negotiate in good faith, but should they fail to uphold their side of the bargain, we will not hesitate to use force. They know you and fear you. They also know that any concession you grant them will be hard won and honored once the negotiations are completed. Having said that, we are not foolish enough to think that the two of you could survive without support. You will be joined by the six Marines here in the room who will be your personal bodyguards. You and they have demonstrated your ability to work together and your trustworthiness in the recent Saturn project.”

“Excuse me, Ma’am, but are you suggesting that we spend the next several months seated at a table in some conference room arguing over minutia?” Avi asked.

The President smiled. “Ambassador Dwight Bentley will do that. You will be his military attaché and his pilots. You are both promoted to the rank of Commodore, effective immediately. You will assume command of the Cruiser Appomattox and proceed directly to your duty station.”

She held out two berets. One was the white of the ship’s commander, the other was the black of the first officer. Avi and Greg looked at each other for a second in silence. Avi took the white beret and Greg took the black one.

“Ambassador Bentley is on the ship. A jet awaits you on the flight line. Please say your farewells and leave quickly.”

“What about the girls?” Avi started to ask looking at her daughters.

“Back to school,” the president cut her off, “with a special mission.”

“Thank you.”

After a few minutes of pandemonium the room became quiet. The President looked at the seven young people in front of her. She sat in front of them. She looked tired. “Dr. Cohen, I have received conflicting reports about your program. Tell me your opinion. Will it work?”

“Yes, it will.” Isaac answered carefully. “It will only because the people who are on the front lines want it to. There are many who fear that the marriage of medicine and technology will make medicine as mechanical as motor vehicle repair. That is a valid concern. The answer is to find people who care about people. I did not truly understand the program until I watched my grandparents die, slowly, painfully and there was nothing I could do to relieve their pain. I had the best medical minds in the history of the human race at my side, and we could not save them. I shudder to think about the person who knows that were they somewhere else, their loved one would survive, but because they are so far from properly equipped help, their loved one will die. Madam President, the program is about saving lives. Politics should have nothing to do with it.”

“Well spoken. When you leave the protected environment of the school, without politics, how will you decide who will live and who will die?”

“I hope never to have to make that choice.”

“Dr. Cohen, you will make that decision almost every day for the rest of your career. Be ready for it. When you return to school, remember that far more than the lives you touch are riding on your

skills. Do not let us down.”

She turned to the others. “The Space Force Academy has been infiltrated with agents who would see us defeated. They have been responsible for disruptions and harassment. You will return to the Academy to draw out the provocateurs and expose them so we can arrest them. This could potentially be a dangerous undertaking. Use your best judgment and keep me informed. You will channel your information through Cadet Sherman who has instructions as to how to relay the information to her father.”

Ladies and Gentlemen you have your orders. Your transportation awaits on the flight line. Dismissed.”

Rachel, Wendy, Reuben, Rashi, David, Isaac and Joshua reassembled outside the hangar. Faye Anne was already there. “Folks, we don’t have time for long farewells. We will gather in Boston for Thanksgiving. Kisses and we need to go!”

Ten minutes later the flight line was clear and the President’s jet rolled onto the taxiway to start the journey to the next hot spot.

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EVERY ORGANIZATION that had ever spoken ill of the Federation quickly issued at least one press release disclaiming responsibility for the attacks on the Saturn Industries shipyard relocation project. Established crime syndicates as well as groups that the law enforcement personnel previously did not know existed frantically assured the public that they had nothing to do with the attack and reiterated their fear of retribution for crimes they did not commit. The Swordsman Church issued a proclamation asking its people to forward to the church any information they might have leading to the determination of who was behind this attack as they openly feared the Federation might use this as an excuse to come after them. In spite of the church leadership's fears, the Federation analysts had written off the Swordsmen as the force behind the attacks early in their research. Ironically, some of the press releases provided Federation law enforcement agencies information they needed to conclude other criminal investigations.

Federation intelligence agencies sifting through the press releases in search of clues derived as much information from determining who did not deny responsibility as who did. The few agents that had been captured alive were mercenaries hired to accomplish a specific task. As would be expected, their payments could not be traced and they truthfully did not know who hired them.

A pharmaceutical company purchased everything that Saturn Industries had left behind. They moved their orbiting manufacturing plant from its previous location and linked it to what had once been Saturn's office complex, commercial center and living quarters. Mrs. O'Donnell quietly sought out the pharmaceutical company's three top executives, all of whom were women, to enlist their assistance in the "railroad" for abused women. The women had known about the railroad because their products were targeted exclusively toward women and some of their patients had disappeared suddenly only to reappear several months later in a far corner of the galaxy. They had wondered who ran it and how it worked. To be part of the "railroad" machinery appealed to their egos. Accustomed to keeping secrets, the company's network of medical sales people became the vanguard channeling abused and distressed women from the health clinics the company served into the "railroad" and to safety.

Upon returning to the Academy, Rachel and Wendy were promptly called on the carpet for speaking to the news media without authorization. The punishment was minor because their comments had produced a sharp spike in recruitment. The light punishment had little impact on their lives partly due to the fact that they were intently focused on their class work. They found, much to their surprise, that Isaac and Joshua understood many of the concepts they were studying and could offer considered advice on classroom material. In spite of Joshua's reservations when they first met, they did find the time to correspond electronically almost every day. As Wendy often commented, it is amazing what you can do if you are motivated.

Over a hundred Academy cadets had been involved in the Saturn Industries move. Until they returned to campus, few of them knew who any of the others were. They were gathered and debriefed by the Academy staff after the term started. Unlike the debriefing they had endured at the completion of the mission, this debriefing was focused on whether what they had learned at the Academy properly prepared them for the field conditions they met during the operation. Opinions varied amongst the students as well as the faculty and the discussions frequently became heated as deeply held beliefs were challenged. The discussions provided Wendy and Rachel an opportunity to openly discuss among peers and experienced officers their actions in the battle and receive vindication for their strategies.

The discussions at the Academy following the Saturn relocation had finally ground to a halt when Rachel and Wendy received a request to appear at the Academy's health clinic. The receptionist directed them to the office of one of the clinic's psychologists.

They entered the office to be greeted by a short round man who appeared to be in his sixties.

"Ladies, thank you for coming." He read their expressions of concern and smiled his most benign smile. "Many of your colleagues who were in the Saturn project have exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress. I have interviewed them and have helped them deal with their conditions. Their tales of battle are quite harrowing. It is easy to understand why they might feel as they do. However, neither of you are showing such symptoms. I would like to know why that is. Were your battles not as difficult as theirs? Please tell me about your missions in detail so that I may understand."

Rachel inconspicuously opened a comm link to Faye Anne. There was no legitimate reason this man should be asking this question.

Wendy sneered, "You want us to brief you on the details our missions so you can help us deal with them better?"

"By understanding your missions I can better help you deal with the trauma."

"Trauma we're not having?"

"Perhaps it is sublimated."

"Our missions have nothing to do with anything! If you trained people better, you wouldn't have this problem. They're soft, weak, fat and lazy! What do you expect! We've been training for this our entire lives. You can't expect pampered newbies to just jump into combat without stress. You give them a school system that is so dumbed down that any lame brain can graduate with honors and you throw them without any preparation into life threatening situations and then you're surprised that they don't do well! What kind of stupidity is this?"

Rachel looked at her sister in shock. She had never heard Wendy verbally attack anyone let alone a superior even if he was a civilian.

The psychologist looked down at his note pad. "Aggressive," he said as he wrote a note.

"Damn straight we're aggressive! We're warriors, born, bred and trained to be warriors. We're the best and damn proud of it! If you want good soldiers you have to start them young. You can't throw wimps into battle and expect them to emerge unscathed." She paused and scanned the man's notes reading them across the desk. She looked the man in the eye. He averted his gaze. "You listen here, Dough Boy! Don't patronize us with your superior attitude."

The psychologist looked up from his notes. "I apologize. I underestimated you."

"Apology accepted!"

"I had already come to the same conclusion about our training and was seeking confirmation."

Wendy stood. "Then, I guess we're done."

"No, the other reason I called you was to talk about your mother."

The girls silently registered their surprise.

"I performed the tests that convinced the Force to send your mother to the Academy."

Wendy cut him off. "I guess you expect us to thank you for that since if you hadn't done that she would not have met our father."

"I had not thought of that. That's not it. I understand your parents have been given a special diplomatic assignment. This assignment will put her in a high stress situation which could be disastrous for her mental condition. Has she been exhibiting delusional or violent tendencies lately?"

"No more than normal," Wendy replied.

"Is she a danger to herself or others?" Rachel asked. "Is that what you mean?"

"You may be the whiz kid that sent her to the Academy, but you damn sure don't understand her," Wendy continued.

"I understand her better than you think," the psychologist's voice rose in anger. "She is a bipolar paranoid schizophrenic with homicidal tendencies."

"No shit, Sherlock! That's the only reason she and we are still alive. Our mother has developed homicidal tendencies in response to her environment. They are a survival skill."

"I only want to help her."

"What? By giving her drugs that will make her so stupid and so slow that any preschooler with a pop gun could pick her off! I don't think so!"

"In her current condition she is a danger to the Federation!"

"Excuse me?" Wendy's eyes narrowed.

"If she has a psychotic episode, she could ruin everything we have worked for. Based on your comments, I am certifying her as mentally incompetent to perform the duties as assigned and if you stop me, I will certify you as incompetent and have you locked up so tight that nobody can find you!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Wendy saw Rachel calmly scratch the back of her neck. Rachel was smiling. Wendy found comfort in the smile. She knew that Rachel was teasing this man, gently and deliberately. There was no anger in her move, just an awareness that she was about to corner a dangerous animal.

Wendy grinned the same grin her father used when he said, "It's clobbering time." Her eyes bored into the man. "If you were so concerned about our mother's mental condition, why did you push so hard to get her to go to the Academy?"

“She would have been a hazard to others in a regular unit.” The man was sweating profusely.

“And she would have been less of a hazard as an officer?”

“Yes.”

Rachel removed her knife from its sheath and cleaned her already immaculate fingernails.

“How so?” Wendy pressed the attack. Rachel watched the parlay with interest and amusement.

“As an officer she could be assigned to a task that did not endanger others.”

“Like P I?”

“Yes.”

“Your reports were instrumental in getting her assigned to P I.”

“Yes, they were.”

“At a time when the average P I pilot had a life expectancy of two years. And when pirates were killing more Space Force pilots than the Force was killing pirates?”

“I, I guess so.”

“So, you knew that by having her assigned to P I, you were signing her death warrant.”

“I did no such thing!”

“Why would you do that? Why would you want her dead? Why was it so important that you expended so much effort getting her assigned to P I where she would probably be killed? In fact, she almost was, several times,” Wendy challenged.

Rachel leaned forward and placed her knife on the man’s desk. “Faye Anne tells me that there was an attempted rape incident when our mother was in Basic Training. Four men jumped her and her roommate on the way home from the Airman’s Club. She sent them to the hospital. Your brother was one of the men, wasn’t he?”

Wendy turned to her sister and smiled. She turned back to the man behind the desk. “How badly was he hurt?”

“Both his knees were shattered,” Rachel replied.

“Sister, dear,” Wendy said. “Do you think the gentleman might have devoted all that energy to have her placed in harm’s way out of revenge for his brother?”

“Perhaps. I remember Mom saying she was jumped several times at Basic and other than the ones she sent to the hospital, the assailants were never caught,” Rachel said.

“Could it be that when your brother and his goons couldn’t remove her from the service, you had her moved somewhere where you thought she would be killed?” Wendy paused. “You know, I think

I understand better than you think I do. I think there is even more to it than that. When our mother was assigned to Pirate Interdiction, P I pilots were being killed off duty as often as on. Most of that was in bar room brawls. Colonel Connors mentioned that trouble had a way of finding them. Might have been easier if trouble knew where to look.”

Wendy leaned forward. “You knew who every P I pilot was and where they were assigned. I’ll bet you even had access to their patrol rosters. How many P I pilots died because of you?”

The man glared at them. He put his pen down and pulled his hand back.

“Keep both hands where we can see them!” Rachel ordered.

“Why would you do a thing like that?” Wendy asked.

“You’re making this up!” the man shot back.

Rachel placed her hand to her ear. “Your brother’s injuries didn’t keep him from fighting for the Swordsmen at the Battle at Homestead, did they?” Rachel smiled sweetly.

Wendy gently pulled her knife from its sheath.

“You’re delusional! I’ll have you committed!”

“I think not,” Faye Anne said as she strode through the door followed by two security officers.

“In your tenure at the Basic Training facility, you committed or reported as unsuitable for duty ten times as many Jews as non-Jews,” Faye Anne said. “That is especially interesting since they made up less than one percent of the total recruit population. You know, if you hadn’t called my friends in here today, you might have gotten away with it.”

The security officer stood behind the man’s desk and said, “Sir, please stand against the wall. Place your hands over your head and your feet apart. You have the right to remain silent.”

The other officer said, “Ladies, I will expect your reports of this incident on my desk by 1900 hours tomorrow. You are dismissed.”

Faye Anne turned to the others as soon as they were out of earshot. “When you called, I thought we were dealing with a garden variety big mouth security leak! Wow! A Swordsman agent in deep cover! You busted a Swordsman agent in deep cover!”

“We couldn’t have done it without you,” Wendy said meekly.

“Thanks, you did the tough part by recognizing him early enough to do something about it. Wow! Our parents are going to be so proud!”

Rachel’s speculated how many more such agents might be lurking about. Wendy wondered if there was any way to remedy the damage this man had done over the years.



## ACADEMY - CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE CADETS AND THE MED STUDENTS gathered in Boston for Thanksgiving, but the hospital's needs kept them from wandering too far. They spent much of the vacation reading stories to the patients in the children's wing.

Faye Anne filed regular reports on suspicious activity to her father. The discovery of the Swordsman agent was handled in the secretive fashion common among intelligence services. He and his family disappeared. Every once in a while someone in one of Faye Anne's reports would disappear and not return. She wondered if they left due to something she did or if they left on their own. While she believed she knew what was happening, she did not want to think about it.

The group stayed out of further trouble for the first semester of their third year at the Academy. During winter break, Rachel and Wendy flew to Savannah to meet Isaac and Joshua who pried themselves loose from the hospital for the holiday. Reuben flew to an undisclosed location to be with Suwanee who had requested leave from the diplomatic mission. The remainder of the crew drove to a nearby ski resort and spent their vacation playing in the snow.

Rachel found that when she disagreed with an instructor, discussing the issue in the privacy of their office produced better results than discussing it in class. Her military history instructor became especially accustomed to seeing her at the end of class each day. He actually seemed to enjoy the discussions and certainly did nothing to discourage her interest in his class.

The Swordsman secession negotiations stalled over the issues of repatriation of assets and personnel, distribution of refugees and the continued presence of the "underground railway" that left so many Swordsman males without suitable mates. The parties agreed to a half year hiatus during which the technical and accounting teams would hammer through the details. Greg and Avi went home to Eretz for a few months of much needed rest.

The spring semester passed without incident and spring break found the two couples meeting in Boston for a driving tour of Eastern New England. Isaac and Joshua did all the driving. Rachel's reputation with land vehicles had preceded her. They indulged Rachel's fascination with Naval history and stopped at every maritime museum they could find from New London to Provincetown to Bangor. The water was too cold for swimming, but they spent their time walking the coastline.

The six Jewish Cadets ended the spring term clustered around the borderline that marked the top ten percent of the class. None of them were in the top five percent, but none were far below the ten percent mark. All of the students in the top quarter of the class knew each other and had become very competitive. Some of this translated to the sports fields and the games became so intense that the instructors intervened to prevent injuries. The question that kept cropping up was how much of the aggressiveness was sports related and how much was a deliberate attempt to sideline future Federation officers. At one point or another, virtually all of the students in the top quarter of the class suffered some minor injury while engaged in an athletic activity.

The six sparring partners returned to Parris Island in time for summer training sessions. The summer at Parris Island passed quickly. Suwanee and Rachel's team won handily in the war game exercise that ended the session. Rachel and Wendy met Joshua and Isaac in Atlanta for a few days before returning to Boston for the annual party. The party was even louder and more rambunctious than it had been the year before and except for some embarrassing collisions on the dance floor was without

incident. Following the party, they traveled back to school.

Suwanee entered Officer Candidate School looking forward to the day when she and Reuben could be together without fear of impropriety.

However intensely they might have worked before, their fourth year at the Academy was the toughest. They struggled to maintain contact with people outside of school, but as the year progressed, correspondence became increasingly sporadic. The few messages that did pass between the couples carried a longing to be together again and a distinct fear that their respective careers would prevent them from doing so. Marriages among Space Force personnel were especially fragile.

Greg and Avi started preparations to attend the Academy graduation six months in advance. They made it plain to everyone concerned that they had no intention of missing the graduation and wherever the negotiations were, they could wait until they returned. Two years of development had improved the inertial compensator considerably, but it was still a miserable way to travel. There was heated debate as to whether the greater speed was worth the discomfort. Still, a sizable contingent planned on making the trip from Eretz to Earth. The inertial compensator reduced the round trip from almost a year to a month. Rose was determined to see her granddaughters graduate. The planned stop at New St. Louis and potential visit with Ellie Mae and Elvira deepened her resolve to deal with the inadequacies of the inertial compensator.

Admiral Sherman had returned to Eretz on the first anniversary of the Saturn Industries relocation. He and Levonah planned to make the trip with both their daughters. They knew that Rashi was especially anxious to see Esther and they had no intention of disappointing him. Esther had grown up in the years he had been gone. She was not the same little girl he had left behind. Only time would tell whether Rashi would love the new Esther as much as he loved the old one. For her part, Esther was unsure as to whether she wanted the life that being the wife of a Space Force engineer entailed.

Abraham and Sarah Abrams knew better than to leave Mimi behind. She was capable of taking one of the P I ships and traveling to Earth on her own if she desired. Given the motivation she would. Mimi had become difficult to handle, a spirited and impetuous teenager almost to the point of recklessness. Both Mimi and Esther had distinguished themselves in the work they had done receiving the Saturn Industries ship yard as it had arrived at New St Louis. They assisted the teams marshaling the arriving ships and ferrying the crews to the surface to rest and relax before making the jump to Homestead which was their final destination. Their clear thinking and flexibility had helped avert several collisions between the ships maneuvering in the confines of the vicinity of the spaceport.

Admiral Dankese had recommended Mimi and Esther for the Space Flight Academy, but they had declined. Neither was sure what they wanted to do with their lives, but they felt they had done enough space travel to satisfy their curiosity.

At spring break all the students elected to stay on campus and work on the research reports they needed to complete before the end of the term. As final exams loomed ahead, tensions increased to the point that everyone found keeping their own company safer than being around their friends.

As the end of the year approached, many of the Academy students were called for interviews with prospective commanders. Unlike the random assignment process of military legend, the Space Force Staff Allocation Division (SAD) had adopted a process for Academy graduates similar to that employed by the private engineering universities. Commanders with vacancies in their ranks were invited to the Academy to recruit and interview potential additions to their commands. They were allowed to request specific individuals. SAD generally granted the requests. Conflicts where more than one commander requested an individual were resolved unilaterally by SAD. Individuals not thus selected were assigned the old fashioned way. Faye Anne and David were actively recruited. Faye Anne

was relentlessly pursued by the intelligence community and David by the Judge Advocate General's office. While their recruitment was not as intense, Reuben and Rashi were approached by the space flight and weapons engineering research organizations. Wendy and Rachel received no requests for interview throughout the primary recruitment period. They feared receiving orders that held them at the Academy "Pending Assignment" to wait in suspended animation until some bureaucrat found places for them with units that did not want them.

The day after the last final exams, before the results were posted, Rachel was called to the chaplain's office. The Rabbi greeted her warmly and ushered her into the conference room. The room's sole occupant stood when she entered. Rachel paled when she read "Stonebridge" on the admiral's name badge. She wondered at the medical insignia on his collar. She did not know that doctors could hold an Admiral's rank.

"Lieutenant, please be seated." His eyes followed hers to his nameplate, and he noted the sudden pallor.

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, I am that Stonebridge, however, my personal affiliations are closer to Mark's than his father's. How well do you remember my cousin Mark?"

"Very well sir. He was our religious leader on Homestead."

"How could that be? You're Jewish."

"He did the best he could to understand all the religions represented on Homestead. He worked hard to make sure we were as observant as we could be under the circumstances. He did not have an easy job, sir. He took his responsibilities seriously and did well, sir."

"He was an unhappy youth. I am glad he found his place. Lieutenant, what I am about to propose to you is a job no one else wants, but even if it were the subject of fierce competition, I am certain you are the best person to handle it. It will take creativity and a certain amount of willingness to bend the rules. I understand you are adept at both."

"Sir, I don't know whether to be complimented or insulted."

"Neither. Just facts. Actually part of this is your fault, your idea, in a manner of speaking, so let me lay it out for you. We are pulling an old battleship out of retirement to outfit it as a hospital ship. The Space Force operates a dozen hospital ships. We've been refitting surplus warships as mobile hospitals since the Federation was founded. What's unusual about this one is that we are leaving the battleship's armament and weapons systems intact. It will serve as a tender for mobile medical facilities as well as a small fleet of warships. Our hospital ships are being attacked and we are being driven from systems where we need to provide humanitarian aid. We need to field a ship that can provide medical services and still defend itself."

"Sir, with all due respect, why not send two ships, a hospital ship and a tender with pickets?"

"We did that. We need more firepower than the pickets can provide, which is why we are going

back to the P I ships supplemented with light destroyers.”

“Sir, now I am confused. This sounds like a task force instead of a single ship.”

“Close, the battleship will serve as the hospital ship, flagship and tender for four pickets, four P I ships and two light destroyers. The whole package travels together as a single unit.”

“Where do I fit in this?”

“As commander.”

“Excuse me, sir, with all due respect, I’m only a Lieutenant. I do not qualify for command.”

“For now. As I said, no one of higher rank wanted the job. They wanted to fight pirates or Swordsmen. They have reward money in their eyes. No one wanted to take an antiquated warship into a hot spot and wait to be shot at. That, by the way, is the primary mission for this ship. It will respond to requests for assistance from local populations many of which could be under attack. Part of your job will be to assist a Federation team negotiate a peaceful end to the hostilities. By the time you get the ship space worthy, you will be a Captain and authorized to command such a vessel.”

“And in the interim?”

“Your time in grade for the Saturn operation does count.”

“What makes you think I’ll be willing to do this?”

“Rose. Your grandmother is a powerful woman. If I tell her what I need you to do, she’ll make you.” The Admiral grinned mischievously. “It’s a peace mission. I met Rose when your mother and I were at the Academy. She’s a force to be reckoned with. Are you interested?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No.”

“Then, I’m interested.”

“Your orders will be issued tomorrow. Remember, women who follow the rules rarely make history. I expect you to make history. Be careful which rules you bend. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes, sir.”

Rachel and Admiral Stonebridge discussed the project for the next several hours. He provided Rachel a data module on the project which she downloaded to her computer. By the end of the session Rachel was excited about the opportunity and understood both why she needed to do this and why so few others wanted it. She requested to bring the rest of her “team” with her. Admiral Stonebridge promised to see what he could do, but was reluctant to promise results.

Much to everyone’s surprise, David, Faye Anne, Reuben and Rashi all qualified to graduate with honors. Due to the various disciplinary problems they had, neither Rachel nor Wendy could graduate with honors although their academic standing would have qualified them for honor status.

Greg had become uncomfortable flying unarmed ships so he convinced Admiral Sherman that they should take the two P I ships, Buddy and Daisy, with them. The passenger liner was fitted with two docking ports for the P I ships so the three ships could be linked together to make the journey.

Twelve people, including David's mother and brother made up the contingent from Eretz who squeezed into the passenger ship for the four week voyage to Earth via New St. Louis. The closest hotel accommodations to the Academy ere in Salt Lake so they chartered a bus and driver to ferry them to the graduation. They rented the social hall at the Jewish Temple in Salt Lake for the party after graduation.

The graduation ceremony was as boring as most graduations. The families arrived at the graduation less than an hour before the start of the ceremony, and the only way the cadets had of knowing that their parents had arrived was the text messages they received on their data assistants.

After the ceremony, the gang met the bus in the parking lot. Six graduates, six Marines including one freshly minted Second Lieutenant and twelve family members piled on for Salt Lake.

Esther and Rashi sat in the back of the bus. Reuben and Suwanee sat a few rows ahead of them. Most of the contingent from Eretz was still tired from the trip and napped for the drive to Salt Lake. Two young men, recently minted medical professionals, currently resident of Boston, met the bus when it arrived at the temple. The timing of their final exams had prevented them from being at the ceremonies, but they were able to make the party.

The Academy's Rabbi and his family joined the party, as did the remainder of the graduating Jewish Cadets and their families who Greg had asked the Rabbi to invite. By the time everyone arrived, two hundred people congregated in the Temple's social hall.

Shortly after they entered the social hall, Reuben brought Suwanee to meet his mother. Suwanee stood tall, resplendent in her dress uniform with her fresh battle ribbons proudly displayed on her jacket. Some of the ribbons matched the ribbons Reuben displayed on his jacket. After Reuben made the introduction, Sarah looked at Suwanee for a moment before saying anything.

"Do you love him?" Sarah asked, almost misting over.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Please take good care of him. I don't care what he thinks, he's still such a big baby."

"Yes, Ma'am. That's why I love him."

"Welcome to the family."

She turned to Reuben as she gently took Suwanee's hand, "I am sure there is something you can find to do. I need to talk privately with my future daughter-in-law."

Reuben smiled, "Yes, Mom." He turned and wandered toward his father who was in an animated lighthearted discussion with one of the other Cadet's fathers. He shot a glance in his brother's direction. Things did not look like they were going well with Esther. Reuben had not gone far when Esther pushed Rashi away and stormed out of the room with tears streaming down her face. Rashi ran after her desperately calling her name. This was not promising. Reuben sadly shook his head. Rashi could have had any of half a dozen women who had expressed interest in him, but he waited for Esther. Reuben wondered if he had waited in vain.

Isaac and Joshua collected Wendy and Rachel as soon as they could. They had exciting news, but the process of making the introductions followed by the scene between Rashi and Esther interrupted their announcement. The music "Mix-Master-General" further complicated things by cranking up the music so loud that conversations were impossible.

Avi descended on the "Mix-Master" and explained in no uncertain terms that he would turn the volume down or he would not be paid. He huffed once and then recognized her from the videos he had seen and backed down. He chopped back the amplifiers and the conversations were audible again.

The mix-master played a folk dance and most of the Cadets' parents moved to the dance floor. Those of the Cadets who had partners joined them. Rachel and Wendy hung back. Isaac approached Rachel. He gently took one hand in his. He bowed deeply and theatrically before her. "Would M'Lady care to dance?"

"But of course!" she answered.

Joshua quickly followed suit and the floor quickly filled with dancers.

Rashi and Esther returned to the room together, but neither of them looked especially happy. Mimi joined Suwanee and Sarah in their conversation and the three could occasionally be heard giggling as they got to know each other better.

Reuben looked at the three women chatting and asked, "Dad, what are they talking about for so long?"

Abraham looked at his son, so grown and so naïve at the same time. "There is no telling. Frankly, I think I am better off not knowing."

"I guess."

An hour after the party started, the Rabbi called everyone together. "Let's take a moment and go into the sanctuary."

## ACADEMY - CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AS EVERYONE FILED INTO the sanctuary, the Rabbi directed the recent graduates to the platform and everyone else to the seats. Still in their formal dress uniforms, they humbly stood before the arc that held the sacred scrolls.

The Rabbi went to the podium. "In the seven years that I have been a chaplain at the Academy, this is the largest group of Jewish cadets I have seen graduate. This class has more Jewish students with honors than any in Federation history. You have done very well. I would like to have each of you declare for the rest of us what your orders and assignments are as you leave here and head off to serve the Federation and all humanity. The majority of you will never see each other again. The Galaxy is a big place and the human race is spreading further and further into its vastness. One more time, let us all see one another and speak hopefully of the future. Please start on my left and come to the podium. State your name and where you will be headed from here."

The graduates were deployed across the entire range of the known Galaxy. The majority were to become officers in combat units on the frontiers. Faye Anne was headed to Federation Intelligence Headquarters at Langley for further training before receiving her posting. David was headed to San Antonio pending his acceptance into law school. Reuben was going to the space ship evaluation center adjacent to Nuclear Power School in Mars orbit to assist in the field tests of the newly redesigned picket ship. Suwanee expressed confidence that she could be assigned there as well. SAD claimed in its recruitment publicity how hard it worked to keep married couples together. Wendy was assigned command of a flight of light attack destroyers which were part of the Central System Defense Force. Rashi was stationed at the munitions depot on Earth's moon to assist in the development of a new data tracking system to measure the combat effectiveness of the Federation's munitions.

Rachel hung back, almost hoping to be forgotten. She painfully remembered that this was the job no one wanted. Finally, last of all, she stepped to the podium.

"The battleship FSFBS 210 is being pulled from retirement and being commissioned as the FSFHS 28. Its mission will be to provide humanitarian aid in places too dangerous for other ships to go. It will be an armed hospital ship. In its previous duty, the ship was named the Augustus Caesar. In its new configuration it will be known as the Albert Schweitzer. My mission will be to return the ship to operation and then to command it."

That was as far as she got.

Isaac jumped to his feet, cheered and shouted, "That's my ship!" He proceeded to do a "happy dance" in the aisle. "It worked! It worked!" He cheered again.

Joshua stood. "Actually folks, it's our ship. Isaac and I have been training to provide advanced medical care in a mobile hospital. We learned yesterday that we have been accepted as part of the medical team that will turn this derelict of a space ship into a functioning mobile health center. The FSFBS 210, soon to be FSFHS 28, is an experiment. One of our instructors was a driving force in getting the concept approved. The original concept came from Rachel's research report on battleships. In a sense, this was her idea. Isaac brought Rachel's idea for reusing obsolete warships to the faculty and they bought it. Isaac has been adamant that Rachel was the one person who should command this ship. He has made his case to everyone he could find that might have influence. Rachel, welcome

aboard!”

He looked at his brother still jumping around in the aisle and said, “You’d think he just won the Nobel Peace Prize!”

The Rabbi returned to the podium and said, “Let me remind you that the waiting period for a wedding in this area is forty-eight hours. Graduations are the happiest of my duties. Weddings are a close second.”

Rachel descended from the podium. She took Isaac’s hand and they sat next to her parents.

The Rabbi continued. “For centuries, Jews avoided military service. Most of the countries in which they lived excluded them from service, but even in those where Jews were allowed to serve, they tended to refrain from doing so. We can no longer afford the luxury of watching from the side lines while others fight our battles. We have before us prime examples of what Jews can accomplish with the tools a modern military organization gives them. Greg and Avi Solomon have demonstrated the power that a Jew can wield in the military. This is not a power to be forsaken or treated lightly. Each of you has the power to enforce peace or wage war. It is my hope that you will choose to enforce the peace.

“Too many of the people around us are too willing to wage war for their own gain. As Jews we have seen the devastation and destruction that follows such actions. As Jews, we have an obligation to stop it. It is our obligation, our commandment, to stop the bloodshed. Since force is the only deterrent some people understand, we must be prepared to use it even as we abhor its use. Jews, unique among cultures, understand the paradox and can work within its boundaries.

“Two of the most subversive concepts in modern civilization come from Jewish texts. These are so much a part of your life you probably do not think about them. They are the four questions at Passover and the passage recited after the Sh’ma. In the first, even the youngest child is taught to question. Questioning is encouraged and not discouraged. In the Sh’ma which we recite multiple times very day, we are told to teach our children the novel concept that our God is one. This is subversive for two reasons. The first is that we are ordered to teach our children. The second is that our God is different from all the other Gods. We accept this conflict as a given. There are other Gods. There are other valid gods. Ours is different.

“The single most effective defense any population has against totalitarianism is education. Illiterate people are easy to subjugate. Educated people are not. This is why the Jews are the single most dangerous culture in the history of humankind. Today as we look to the challenges around us it is vital that we have Jews in key places to moderate the imperial designs of others. We can no longer watch the war from the sidelines. We must be involved. You, sitting here before me, are the vanguard. You are our best hope to find and hold the peace. May God be with you in everything that you do.”

The Rabbi instructed them to open the prayer books they found in the pew in front of them and they recited prayers of thanksgiving and sang songs of celebration. After the service, they returned to the social hall where the party went well into the night.



## ACADEMY - CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

RACHEL AND WENDY RETURNED to the dorms the next day to pack for the trips to their duty stations. They had made arrangements to ship most of their belongings and were looking forward to spending a few days with the rest of the family and their friends at a mountain resort in the back woods near Park City. Weddings were being planned and while Rachel and Isaac would be stationed together, Wendy and Joshua would not. Still, four weddings were being planned. Rachel and Isaac, Wendy and Joshua, Reuben and Suwanee were the first three. Esther and Rashi decided that the changes in their personalities were a good thing, and they elected to join the festivities.

Rachel had placed the last shipping label on the last box when Reuben appeared at her door.

“He’s here,” Reuben said without warning.

“Who’s where?”

“Emerson Winthrop the third. The son of the guy whose wallet you’ve been carrying around for years. He’s in my dorm. Pre-Freshman Summer Program.”

Rachel turned pale. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

Rachel removed an envelope from her suitcase. “Can you bring him to the first floor lounge in your dorm?”

“Yes.”

“I will meet you there.”

Emerson took one look at Rachel and knew why he had been invited by an upperclassman to the lounge. The upperclassman had opened the door and ushered him inside, but had not followed him. This was the woman who killed his father. Anger welled up inside him. He would not give her time to use her feminine wiles on him. He would seek his revenge now while he had the chance. He lunged at her, anger in his eyes, intent on killing her with his bare hands. “You killed my father!” he screamed.

Emerson’s high school martial arts coaches had taught him well, but not well enough to challenge someone who had been working martial arts their entire life and who had trained with Special Forces Marines. Rachel grabbed his hand and spun him around. She grabbed the other hand and pinned both behind his back. She then pushed him forward and slammed him into the wall.

The block wall against his face was cold and the blood running from his nose was warm. The Reverend said she would use feminine wiles. This was hardly feminine. This hurt. What else had he said that was wrong? Tears of pain and frustration welled in his eyes.

“I did not kill your father. I shot down his helicopter. He survived that. My grandmother killed him. A feeble old woman killed your father. She shot him in the balls. He died crying like a baby. Your father was a cold blooded, heartless murderer. He was a criminal.”

Rachel dropped the envelope at Emerson’s feet. “Your father’s wallet is in the envelope along

with a data module. On the data module are copies of the warrants from three different planets for his arrest for murder. The official reports on your father's military conduct and his entire military history are on the module. There are the reports of his action in combat including the fact that he shot and killed his wounded co-pilot instead of helping him escape."

Emerson squirmed and Rachel slammed him against the wall again.

"I am giving you a choice. We can work together for the benefit of the Federation or you can be my enemy. If you choose to be my enemy, the next time I see you, I will do my best to kill you. Your choice."

Rachel slammed him against the wall one more time before releasing him to fall to the floor. She turned and stormed out the door. She had a ship to resurrect.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER ONE

THE PIRATE, SABRINA MAHONEY, eased her interceptor ship toward the derelict freighter. Its distress beacon registered on her sensors, but no human responded to her hails. The freighter silently orbited hidden in the asteroid belt of a system listed as off limits due to a virulent micro biotic contagion on the system's one otherwise habitable planet. The freighter's markings indicated that it had once belonged to one of the better-known interstellar freight companies, but had long ago fallen into the hands of pirates. Sabrina found some comfort in that, being a pirate herself.

Strange that it would be here. The freighter's running lights glowed with the dim light that indicated failing batteries. No doubt the crew was already dead. Still, she thought she knew all the large freighters that had been taken by pirates in the previous twenty years and she didn't remember this one. Depending on what had failed on this ship, perhaps she could link her ship to it and take control using her ship's computers to drive the cargo ship and operate the bigger ship's engines. That was, after all, her normal method of operation. None of this old fashioned, messy boarding and hand-to-hand fighting nonsense for her. Sea going pirates of old did such things. Her brother had been known for such shenanigans, but the thought of face to face mortal combat turned her cold. For her it was much cleaner. She did not even have to get dressed. Her brother was one of the few pirates that wore combat armor, a lot of good that had done him in the end. In fact, most of the time she wore what had once been an exercise outfit and was now pretty disreputable. Few freighters were armed and what defenses they had were easily disabled. Pirates counted on the "it couldn't happen to me" mentality providing the prey they needed. She generally took control electronically and delivered the ship and its crew intact. Pirates at the base where she delivered her prize did the dirty work and she got paid. Eventually the crew and the ship would be ransomed back to the shipping company less the cargo. For her the process had become almost civilized.

Sabrina advanced slowly, warily, toward the drifting freighter. It could have passive defenses that still functioned. She launched the probe that would seek out the freighter's maintenance override access panel. Once located, the probe would press the spring-loaded release and the hatch would pop open. The probe would connect the fiber optic that ran back to her ship from the maintenance port and she would take control of the ship, rendering the ship her captive. The probe found the hatch exactly where the operations manuals indicated it should be.

The hatch was welded shut.

"Who would weld the maintenance access hatch shut?" Sabrina wondered aloud. "Unless it's a DECOY!"

Multiple proximity alarms sounded simultaneously. Sabrina had wandered into a trap. Visceral tension tightened her body in terrified controlled panic. Her displays showed four ships. Where did they come from? Why hadn't she seen them sooner? Three were P I ships! Sabrina began to shake. Three P I ships! One was bad enough. A solitary Pirate Interdiction warship could take out an entire fleet of the ships pirates like her flew. Three of them in the same place! She didn't have a chance. Each of the P I ships had four internal missile tubes plus who knew how many externally mounted missiles. She had two internal tubes and no externally mounted missiles. Even if she were in proper firing position, which she wasn't, it would take two volleys to even direct missiles at all the ships. In that

time, the three P I's could have put more missiles into her ship in the first volley than she had in her entire arsenal. The lasers at the ends of her weapons pods would not penetrate the thick armor of the P I ship's heat shield. There was no sense in even switching them on. Sabrina made the sign of the cross over her body and recited the prayers of the Rosary. She regretted that there was no priest available to hear her last confession. She might have been a pirate, but she was still a religious Catholic.

"Sabrina Mahoney!" The speaker in her console startled her. "This is Captain Alina Darwin, Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction Specialist. Retract your weapons pods. Stand down and prepare to be boarded."

The call came on a frequency that had been reserved for ship-to-ship hails since the time before humans left the confines of earth orbit.

They were asking her to surrender. They weren't shooting at her. Sabrina recognized the name. By everything she knew about Captain Alina Darwin, she should already be dead. The fact that she was alive baffled her.

Much derided by people outside the pirate community, pirate legends were often surprisingly accurate when they weren't completely dead wrong. The legends about Captain Darwin would take several days to tell in their entirety. Sabrina had heard many of them. The legend that came to mind had to do with an incident that appeared to have changed how Captain Darwin dealt with pirates.

There was a time when then Lieutenant Alina Darwin was just another bright, aggressive, moderately anti-social Pirate Interdiction pilot flying solo patrol like the others. She had a knack for knowing where to find pirates and what to do when she did. Her skills, sharpened with years of practice, had enabled her to find and trap Sabrina. Sabrina came from a long line of successful pirates. She was the last of the line, being her parents' only surviving child and her father having taken the Federation's offer of a peaceful, if "protected" retirement. Sabrina had a significant reputation herself. She had not earned her reputation for a host of successful conquests by backing down from challenges, but there was something to be said for recognizing when one faced a massively superior force.

According to pirate legend, the pivotal event that had pushed Lt. Darwin over the line had come at the end of a long watch. She had been on solitary patrol for a month. Her relief was overdue and three ships appeared at the very limits of her sensor range. She was tired. She had fended off a dozen pirate attacks on the scheduled freighters that passed by her station. She hadn't killed any of them, but she had damaged most and had taken her share of damage as well. Her ship's sensors were unreliable and her synapses were burned. The unarmed freighter was on the regularly scheduled run between two mining outposts. The freighter's trajectory would take it across her current course with plenty of room to spare. The other two ships were worrisome. One appeared to be a pirate and the other was squealing a distress message in the freighter's direction requesting assistance from the freighter. Apparently neither had noticed her which was not surprising given the P I ship's stealthy design. Lt. Darwin had one missile left. One ship was a pirate. The other might be a pirate decoy or it might be what it said it was and she had one missile with which to sort it out.

Sabrina was not rolling over without at least a challenge. "Captain Darwin, what if I refuse?" Sabrina weighed her possible strategies. The chances of escape were slim, but if the P I's left her an opening, she could jump out through it.

Sabrina heard the laughter in Captain Darwin's voice. "Sabrina, dear, your father didn't raise no fool. I fought him enough times to know. Rumor has it he retired under an assumed identity. Something about raising race horses in Kentucky. I heard he bought a run down old farm and has actually settled down."

Sabrina sat stunned. Her father's location was a closely held family secret. "Who are you?" This light chatter did not match the reputation for a tough, hard living tiger of a woman.

According to the legend, the two ships had crossed Lt. Darwin's course and she still could not tell which was the pirate and which was the fugitive. She fired her last missile. She guessed wrong. She killed a ship full of refugees who had overwhelmed the crew of the pirate ship in a desperate bid for survival. Lt. Darwin killed a ship full of women and children. There were no survivors.

The real pirate had laughed at her on an open frequency. The freighter pilot would later report watching in amazement as Lt. Darwin went after the pirate armed only with her lasers. The pirate had a full compliment of missiles, but she dodged and weaved her way out of danger every time. Relentlessly she had gone after the pirate taking hit after hit herself. Concerned about leaks from damage suffered in previous skirmishes, she had had the foresight to put on her EVA suit when she first spotted the approaching ships and wore it as she engaged the pirate ship in battle. Even with her hull breached, the suit kept her alive. She continued to fight through a slug fest that lasted several hours until she finally blew a hole in the pirate's reactor cooling panels that was big enough to cause the reactor to overheat and detonate.

Sabrina knew that at least part of the story was true. The pirate who laughed at Lt. Darwin was her brother. The legend was surprisingly close to a story told about another famous pirate hunter, Captain Greg Solomon. Solomon had disappeared not long after the incident in the legend about him only to resurface twenty years later having married another famous former pirate hunter, Captain Avelina Bardwell. They had raised two daughters who had become military powers in their own right. The similarities between the legends both added credibility and made them suspect at the same time.

Lt. Darwin had never been the same after the incident. Pirate Interdiction had become personal. Sabrina suspected that it was Captain Darwin's personal approach to her work that saved her life in this first direct encounter. Sabrina understood that Captain Darwin studied her enemy with a level of detail that bordered on obsession. She knew the names and faces of the majority of the pirates she might ever run across. She knew their strategies, their favorite methods of attack and when they would flee. She knew their families and had pictures of them as well. Clearly in cornering Sabrina, she knew exactly what she was doing and who she was dealing with. Sabrina knew this because she was every bit as meticulous as Captain Darwin about knowing her enemies.

Captain Darwin's tone was light and friendly without a hint of the arrogance normally attributed to her. "Let's just say I'm your local Space Force Recruiter and you have wandered into my office. Withdraw your weapons pods so I can come aboard."

"Just you, alone."

"Fair enough."

Sabrina reluctantly retracted her weapons pods. The lead P I ship attached itself to her airlock. While she waited, she secreted as many small weapons as she could around her body and in hidden places around the cabin. She was not going to be killed without a fight.

The airlock opened and the tallest, most beautiful woman Sabrina had ever seen gracefully floated weightlessly into the cabin. She was wearing a regulation gray Federation flight suit that, if anything, accentuated instead of concealing her ample curves. This was the famous Captain Alina Darwin, pirate killer extraordinaire. The pictures in the broadcast media did not do her justice. Her definitely non-regulation long dark hair would have reached to her waist if there had been gravity to hold it down. As it was, it floated in a halo around her head, a dark halo setting off her alabaster skin.

Sabrina gasped in surprise. What surprised her the most was that this woman was not visibly armed. Even more surprising was the fact that both her hands were in plain sight and her right hand was advanced in what was clearly an offer to shake hands. Sabrina gingerly took the proffered hand. The Captain gently pulled her into a hug.

“Welcome in from the dark side.” Her voice was as light as if she was greeting a sorority sister.

Sabrina knew that Captain Darwin did not need weapons to kill. There were corpses on three planets who provided graphic evidence of what could happen when she participated in a barroom brawl. In this respect she was like both Captain Solomon and Captain Bardwell who also had reputations for being lethal in a hand-to-hand donnybrook.

Captain Darwin pulled a printed card from a vest pocket. She handed it to Sabrina. Sabrina read along as the Captain recited the text printed on the card. “Sabrina Mahoney, you have been caught in the act of piracy. You have three choices. You could forcibly resist. In which case, you have a less than one percent likelihood of surviving. You could agree to be arrested and tried for your crimes as a pirate. In which case, you will be turned over to the Federation court at the nearest space port at the fleet’s earliest convenience. Your ship will be confiscated and you will remain in the brig until you can be transferred to competent authority. Your third choice is that you could agree to be drafted into the Federation Space Force. You and your ship will be inducted into the defense of the Federation. After evaluation by Space Force officers, you and your ship will be assigned to military duties as appropriate to your experience and the functionality of your ship.”

Sabrina stood with her mouth open. They were recruiting her to fight alongside the people who had spent most of her life trying to kill her. Wide eyed, she stood and stared. Everything in her training told her to fight this woman, but she knew that even with her own extensive combat training, she had met her match. The fight would be pointless. Sabrina would lose it and it would be a painful loss. However, if she was to be captured, she would not sulk and whine like others she had seen. She would stand proud and defiant. She lifted her head to look the Captain in the eye.

Captain Darwin smiled. “You would be granted full amnesty for your past activities.”

“Why?” Sabrina challenged.

“War is coming. After the mandatory cease fire as a result of the Swordsmen secession there will be a full scale war as we solidify our territorial holdings. We need experienced pilots. We need ships like yours. Common enemies make unusual allies.”

“The proverbial offer I can’t refuse.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Then, I accept,” Sabrina said reluctantly.

“Do you have a clean flight suit?” Captain Darwin sounded more like a sister than a captor.

“Not really.” Sabrina was moderately insulted.

“Well, we can’t go meet Commodore Townsend in your jammies, now can we?”

Sabrina looked down. Woman-flesh showed through her well-worn outfit.

“No, I guess not.” She was finally coming around.

“Do you even have a flight suit?”

“Yes. It’s in the locker,” Sabrina huffed.

“Grab it. We’ll decontaminate it on my ship and clean you up for your interview.”

P I ships were designed to support a crew of two on single-ship patrol for months at a time and therefore had amenities that Sabrina’s small ship did not have. One of these amenities was the space-going equivalent of a shower that used real water. Of course, she had to use a breathing tube to keep from drowning, but she did get clean. It was much more satisfying than those stupid moist towelette things she used aboard her ship.

Four hours later, with her ship docked to a service bay on the fleet’s command mother-ship, her flight suit cleaned and her body scrubbed, Sabrina followed Captain Darwin to the ship’s galley. Sabrina had expected that if this day ever came, she would be lead away in chains. Not only were there no chains, the only resemblance to a security detail were the three pilots in Captain Darwin’s flight walking casually laughing and chatting behind them. The pilots, all women, often made randy comments to the men who passed them in the passageway. In the pirate social system, being led in chains was the deepest degradation. To walk to judgment unfettered was a sign of respect.

Captain Darwin stopped before they entered the galley. “We don’t have an Officer’s Mess. Commodore Townsend thought it was a waste of space and turned the one we had into a meat locker. We all eat together. It gets kind of rowdy sometimes. It takes getting used to.”

The ship’s galley reminded Sabrina of a high school cafeteria, loud and raucous. The mother ship maintained just enough spin to provide the equivalent of a quarter gravity along its outermost level. Sabrina found intriguing the fact that the ship’s outer ring was built in segments that could be rotated so that when the ship was accelerating, “down” would still be “down” in the common areas.

Commodore Townsend was standing in the open area at one end of the galley. A Space Force lieutenant stood before him with four men. Two of the men were in chains. “Hey, Gunny!” The Commodore called out to the Marine guard. “These two don’t want to join our crew. Take them to the brig and see if you can’t change their minds. It’ll be a while before we see port. They could be parked in the hole a long time.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” The Marine Sergeant motioned to a pair of Corporals who had been standing with him and they, none too gently, hauled the men away.

The Commodore looked the older of the two remaining “recruits” in the eye. “Tell me what you did for the pirates.”

“Fire control officer, sir.”

“You any good?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“You don’t know? Why is that?”

“Never fired a shot in battle, sir.”

“Why not?”

“Never had to, sir.”

“MARGOLIS!” The Commodore bellowed.

“AYE, SIR!” A man yelled back from across the galley.

“NEW RECRUIT!” The Commodore yelled. He turned to the young man. “See that ugly short guy with the bushy black beard standing next to the tall blond guy? He’s our senior fire control trainer. You’re assigned to him.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“MARGOLIS!”

“AYE, SIR!”

“MAKE SURE HE KNOWS THE RULES!”

“CERTAINLY, SIR!”

When the new arrival arrived at the table where the other members of his new unit were sitting, he was greeted as an old friend with several strong manly hugs and lots of back thumping.

The younger man shivered with fear as the Commodore surveyed him. The Commodore stood in front of him. “Son, how old are you?”

“Seventeen, sir.”

“Lad, when will you be eighteen?”

“End of the month, sir.”

The Commodore thought for a few seconds. “All your paperwork will say that you were recruited the day after your eighteenth birthday. Do we understand each other?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“Before the pirates snatched you from wherever they found you, what were you doing?”

“Training to be a paramedic, sir.”

The Commodore’s face lit up. “BONES! GET OVER HERE!” A rough looking woman as broad



shouldered as she was tall appeared from the crowd. She had a tattoo of the staff and serpents on her right bicep.

“Aye, sir.”

“Kid’s yours.”

She looked at the boy. “You eat yet?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“It’s ‘Doc’ to you. Not ‘Sir’ and not ‘Ma’am’ and he’s the only one gets to call me ‘Bones’ to my face. Got it?”

“Aye, aye, Doc.”

“Let’s get you fed before you die at my feet.” She led him away.

Captain Darwin advanced to Commodore Townsend. She looked him in the eye and said, “I found her and I get to keep her!” She paused and said, “Sir,” as an afterthought.

He rolled back on his heels and roared with laughter. He twisted his face into a mock grimace. “Arghh! Aye, Captain,” he said imitating a pirate in a bad movie.

Captain Darwin punched him in the shoulder and said, “Stop that! I hate when you do that!”

Townsend enjoyed his own joke. Finally he settled down enough to ask, “So, who is she?”

“Sabrina Mahoney, sir.”

The Commodore stopped laughing. “THE Sabrina Mahoney? The one you’ve been stalking the last six months?” He looked at Sabrina as if expecting the answer to come from her and not from Captain Darwin.

“Aye, sir.” Sabrina said assessing this man who stood before her at the same time surprised that anyone would spend six months tracking her down. She must have been a difficult target. The thought felt good. She felt proud to be a prize of sufficient value to justify six months of pursuit.

“As I live and breathe. I’ll be the son of an old sea dog. And you came willingly?” His eyes were bright and inquisitive as he scanned her face.

“More or less, sir. My father taught me that sometimes it is smarter to retreat than to engage a battle one can’t win.”

“Smart man. Tough adversary. I lost many good men and ships to him. Ladies, please have a seat.” He pointed to an empty table. They sat around the table.

“Sabrina Mahoney and on my ship.” He shook his head slowly. “In my command no less. Amazing! How is your father? Are his horses winning races yet?”

“Does everyone know about my father?”

“Those that matter do. I helped bring him in. He has been very helpful to us recently. The Federation will see that he is not disturbed unnecessarily.”

He turned to Captain Darwin. “What did you have in mind for her?”

“Either my wing or command of my second flight depending on the simulation results.”

Sabrina was stunned. To go from captive to flight command or wing to the squadron commander in a single sentence took her by surprise.

“Excuse me,” she said, “but I think I have a lot to learn from Captain Darwin. If I may say so myself, her ability to find and capture me without firing a shot is no small feat. There are debris fields scattered across the galaxy that mark where others have tried and failed. I should be interested to learn how she did it. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll take the wing position.”

“That is the lower ranked position,” the Commodore reminded her.

“I know.”

“Consider it done. Have you ladies eaten?”

“No.”

“STEWARD!”

“Aye, sir.”

“Steak and baked potatoes for the ladies and whatever cook has that passes for vegetables!”

“Aye sir!”

The Commodore pulled a well chomped cigar out of his vest pocket and was about to put it in his mouth when “Bones” snatched it out of his hand, threw it to the floor and stomped on it. She glared at him and wiggled her finger at him menacingly. “I told you no more of those!” She strode away with a heavy tread.

“Sir, if I may be so bold,” Sabrina asked. “What is going on here? This does not look like any of the Federation units my father described to me.”

“That’s because it’s not,” Commodore Townsend said as he sneaked another cigar out of an inside pocket and stuck it in his mouth. “We know the Samurai Swordsmen are going to attack the Federation as soon as the mandatory cease fire ends and we believe that they will pass by here on their way toward the Central System. Once the negotiations end, we will have five years to be ready. That’s not a lot of time given the state of our military. The problem is that we have no information as to their tactics or strategies. We don’t know how they fight. Do they fight as groups? Do they fight as individuals? How is their battle formation structured? Until we know these things we don’t know how to deploy our forces. On top of that, there is this little matter of the Third Force. We can’t figure out who they are, but they are kicking the shit out of us whenever they please. I think they were behind the attack on Saturn Industries.”

“What does that have to do with us?”

“Look around the room. Every man and woman you see here, including myself, is either an outlaw, or has been busted for insubordination or any of half a dozen other minor infractions of the rules at some point in their career. We are renegades. We are here because we don’t think like the cannon fodder that usually populates our forces.” His voice dripped with disgust.

“Aren’t you being a little harsh?” Captain Darwin interrupted.

“Not really. Think about your ex-husband,” he sneered.

Sabrina felt like she had been slapped. Captain Darwin had been married. Pirate legends had her as a lesbian.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“My point,” he continued, “is that we need people who will think for themselves on the front line when the attack comes. We need people who will work as a team, but will react quickly enough to act independently if the need arises. We need people who will protect each other because we know that if the Swordsmen assume control of the Federation, the first people they will eliminate will be people like us. We have the most to lose if the battle goes bad.”

“With all due respect, sir, as a pirate, I fail to see any significant difference between being pursued by the Federation or by the Swordsmen. Either way I die in combat.”

“The difference is that the Federation has always maintained ways for you to come in from the cold. You could have gone to a neutral port and turned yourself in. From that point on you would have been protected. The Swordsmen do not take so kindly to former enemies and their treatment of women in general has the anti-slavery folks up in arms. I shudder to think what they would do to a pirate woman. But let’s look at the other side. Look at your father. The Federation is protecting him from, among others, the Swordsmen. The Swordsmen are looking for you, too. Sooner or later they will find you. Would you rather be alone in your inadequately armed little ship or among a squadron of P I ships with experienced combat pilots?”

“I see your point.”

“That’s settled. Now to the matter of your ship.” He flipped open his communicator and studied the screen.

“My ship?”

“Your ship. It needs extensive repairs and we do not have some of the parts in our stores. Our technicians do not think your ship is safe to fly. None of them would fly it and they’ll fly anything. You need another ship. Fortunately or unfortunately depending on your point of view, I have one. As you well know, the stresses on our flight crews are immense. We lose pilots faster than we can replace them. You should be familiar with that, since you have downed more than one of our ships. You understand that your amnesty only holds as long as you work for us. If you turn against us, we will hunt you down and Captain Darwin will not hold her fire. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“One of our pilots, Pedro Martinez, got into a fight yesterday with his fire control officer. The only crimes that will get you brig time around here are murder and fighting. Pedro will be in the brig for a long time. His back seat will be in the hospital for months. We are now short crew for one of our P I ships. You’re used to flying solo. I’ll loan you Pedro’s ship until yours is fixed or we let Pedro out of the brig whichever comes first.”

“A P I ship, sir?” Sabrina was astounded. Commanding one of the most powerful little space ships in the history of modern warfare was a dream come true.

“Welcome to the club!” Captain Darwin held up her hand with the fist closed. Sabrina tapped knuckles with her as a form of salute. Captain Darwin held her hand aloft with her fingers spread wide pointing forward and her thumb curled underneath against her palm. She then raised and lowered her index finger to indicate that Sabrina had chosen the wing position. Suddenly a dozen loud, exuberant women descended on the table. The Commodore quietly retreated lighting his cigar as he went.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWO

CAPTAIN DARWIN COMMANDED A SQUADRON of eight ships. Four were P I ships and the other four were smaller fighter interceptors. Sabrina had judged correctly that she would be intensely challenged as Captain Darwin's wing. The control software in the Pirate Interdiction ships was not all that different from the software in her old pirate interceptor. Repairs on the ship she had been piloting when Captain Darwin "recruited" her took longer than anticipated due to the lack of parts. She definitely could get to like this heavier, more powerful, better armed P I ship. They ran simulations constantly while on patrol. They continually practiced battle maneuvers and on more than one occasion Sabrina went head-to-head with the Captain in war game exercises. Sabrina had been concerned that the others would give her trouble being a former pirate and having stepped into a position over their heads, but she was surprised to find that her combat skills and her sense of teamwork were all that mattered. Somehow the fact that she had killed a dozen of their colleagues did not seem to bother anyone.

There were jealousies and rivalries, but those were most often settled in the hand-to-hand combat simulators back on the mother ship. By the end of the first month, Sabrina had engaged all the others of her squadron in simulated ship-to-ship combat as well as hand-to-hand exercise and the only one she had not beaten was the Captain herself. She had earned the respect of the rest of the squadron because even though the Captain always won, she had not escaped unscathed from the mock combat which was more than any of the others had been able to accomplish.

Sabrina found that she was taking better care of herself because it mattered. "Bones" was an absolute horror in her enforcement of regular regimens of exercise and proper diet. "Tyrannosaurus Doc" would often verbally abuse laggards and slackers in public. Sabrina was terrified of her. She felt sorry for the kid she had seen assigned to the sick bay that first day she had come aboard the ship although she did have to admit that he seemed to be learning very quickly. There were those who believed fear enhanced intelligence.

When they were on the mother ship, their days included a full hour of hand-to-hand combat instruction under the guidance of their Marine detail. Even the battle hardened Marines were intimidated by Captain Darwin and the only one who would spar with her was a grizzled old gunnery sergeant who appeared to be an even match.

Two months after Sabrina converted from pirate to pirate hunter, Captain Darwin and her squadron were eating dinner when the Commodore wandered by. He pulled up a chair between Sabrina and the Captain. "Lieutenant."

It took Sabrina a moment to realize he was speaking to her. "Yes, sir?"

"Would you like to keep that P I ship?"

"Yes, sir, I would, but why?"

"Pedro Martinez will be tried for murder. His fire control officer died today. The ship is yours. All I ask is permission to use your ship as a trainer."

"Certainly, sir."

“Captain, after you finish eating, please take her to the Quartermaster and take care of the documentation.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Fly safe, all of you.” He turned and walked away. His shoulders were bowed and his tilted head forward unlike the boisterous man the women were used to seeing.

“Pedro was one of his favorites,” one of the other women said softly. “I feel sorry for him. He takes these things so personally. Captain, do you mind if I go see if I can make him feel better?”

Captain Darwin smiled and nodded. The woman left the table and returned to the squadron the following morning.

Six months after being “recruited”, Sabrina was clearly recognized as being as skilled and as adept as Captain Darwin, lacking only the Captain’s experience. Sabrina had grown up on the flight deck of a pirate ship. Her father was one of the most successful pirates in current times. While other little girls were playing “mommy”, Sabrina was plotting ship-to-ship battle strategies. Captain Darwin had taken all that into consideration when she developed her plan to capture the one woman she could treat as her equal. They often split the squadron in half for war games with Captain Darwin commanding one half and Sabrina commanding the other half. The rest of the flight crews on the mother ship watched the maneuvers with the passion generally reserved for professional sports. New tactics and techniques that first appeared in the mock skirmishes were incorporated into standard battle plans. The mother ship’s crew often made wagers on the outcomes of the contests, a practice that even Commodore Townsend could occasionally be found supporting financially.

They were in the midst of a war game when Sabrina noticed an unusual reading on her display.

“Captain, we have incoming at my twelve high. Game’s over!”

“Roger that! Game over. You have command.”

“Roger that!” The eight ships formed two “finger four” arrays with Sabrina’s ship in the lead.

Her sensors probed the approaching ship. She chuckled softly to herself as she recognized the ship. When she reached hailing range, she called the ship on an open frequency, “Hey! Beauregard! You in there? Beauregard Boucher, answer me!”

The voice had a sleepy muffled quality. “Who wants to know?”

“Sabrina Mahoney!”

“Say what?”

“Hey Beau, you still got that pallet of French Champagne you took off that yacht last year?”

“Nah, sold it. Gotta pay the bills. What you doin’ out here?”

“Me and my girlfriends are out cruising looking for a party. You up for a party?”

“I got a case of twenty year old California. Will that do? Hey, Sabby, what are you flying? All I

see are P I's. Sabby, where are you?"

"Beau, I'm in the lead P I and you'll never guess who's on my wing."

"Sabby, I don't like this. What's going on?"

"Beau, it's going to be fine. Captain Alina Darwin is flying my wing!"

"SABBY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"Beau, stand down. We're coming aboard."

"SABBY! Please! What's going on?"

"Beau, stand down. We will explain when we're together."

The eight women and Beau finished the stash of twenty year old California before heading back to the mother ship. The Commodore verbally and publicly took them apart for flying while intoxicated. "Bones" took them apart for getting intoxicated in the first place.

When the yelling stopped, Captain Darwin yawned and said, "I need a shower. We'll deal with this in the morning." She wandered off in the direction of her ship and the privacy of its shower.

The others meandered away leaving Sabrina and Beau standing alone in the galley. "C'mon Beau, let's go to your ship. We have a lot to talk about." Beau was still too drunk to be coherent, but he obediently followed.

By morning, things had calmed down. Commodore Townsend quietly pulled Beau away from the others and talked to him for an hour. The facial expressions the others could see gave them the impression that the Commodore was debriefing Beau and drawing opinions from him. At the end of the hour and a couple pitchers of strong coffee, the two men stood. They shook hands and the Commodore pulled Beau into a strong hug and slapped his back. Both men laughed.

Beau returned to the table where Sabrina and the her small battle group had been waiting. "Sabby, the old man wants to have a word with you."

Sabrina's expression said, "What about?"

Beau smiled and said, "Now."

Sabrina sat across the table from Commodore Townsend as instructed. The steward brought her a fresh cup of coffee and refilled the Commodore's. "Clearly you had no way of knowing the seriousness of the situation you and your friends created. When Captain Darwin gets drunk, she kills people. Let me restate that. When she gets drunk, she kills men. She's never killed a woman in hand combat. She is extremely dangerous when she's drunk. She likes you. She certainly worked hard enough to find you and lure you into our little group. I understand that and am thankful that she does like you. I think you can help her in ways no one else can. If you are to be her first officer, one of your responsibilities will be to see that she never gets drunk again. Do we understand each other?"

"First officer sir? Me sir? How can that be? She doesn't have command."

“By the end of the day she will, and you will be her first officer.”

“Sir, with all due respect, there are others on this ship who are far more qualified than me.”

“You’re the only one qualified that’s not afraid of her and even more important, you’re the only one other than me and Bones she listens to. ‘Nuff said?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Sabrina Mahoney, none of your family got where they were by backing down from a challenge. I expect that you will rise to the occasion as everyone else in your family has done for generations.”

“Sir, you leave me no choice.”

“That was the plan.”

Captain Darwin entered the room obviously very hung over. A path opened in front of her. The men scattered like rats as she approached. The steward, apparently fearing for his life, gave Sabrina a fresh pitcher of coffee and an empty coffee mug. His eyes appeared to be pleading with her.

“Ma’am, would you take this to her?”

Commodore Townsend motioned for her to take the coffee the Captain.

“Hey, sister, this’ll make you feel better.” Sabrina cooed to Captain Darwin whose bloodshot eyes glared back in reply.

Captain Darwin took the mug with both hands and sipped the coffee staring off with an unfocused gaze.

Sabrina eased her into a seat. “Hey, Cap, we have a busy day today. Time to come around.”

“Call me Alina. Nobody calls me Alina anymore.” She rested her elbows on the table and cradled her forehead on her hands.

One of the advantages of being a pirate has to do with access to substances that law abiding citizens never see. Beau had a sizable stash of one such substance with which Sabrina had treated her own hangover. Hoping Bones was not looking, she sprinkled a liberal dose into Alina’s coffee. Quickly swirling the cup to mix the powder into the liquid, she said, “Drink some more coffee. You’ll feel better. We have a busy day, you need to be thinking clearly.”

Alina drank deeply of the drugged coffee and not long after she finished the cup, her eyes popped open. “What did you give me?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I’m going to kill you!”

“Alina, no, you’re not. In about a minute the body rush will end and you will be your normal self only sober.”



"I'm still going to kill you."

"Nope. Not today."

Commodore Townsend casually strolled over to the two women and sat down between them. Captain Darwin cradled the warm cup against her forehead. "Maybe I should kill him."

Sabrina laughed, "Maybe, but not today."

"Because today, as soon as you sober up, I am going to give you your own battle group to command," The Commodore whispered, but not so softly that Sabrina couldn't hear it.

Captain Darwin rolled her still red eyes toward him. "Excuse me, sir? Could you repeat that?"

"It seems that our buddy Beau isn't really much of a pirate. He has a nice ship, but it's empty and he's almost out of money. He agreed to join us. We're going to use his ship as a small mother ship. It can support a flight of four P I ships and associated personnel. You get your own command as soon as the engineers can make the necessary modifications."

"Where do I get crew? Whose ships?"

"You can take any four of our ships. We will ask for volunteers to see who goes with you. I assume you will take your ship and Sabrina will take hers. If you don't get enough volunteers we will fill your crew from people here, but you shouldn't have a problem finding enough volunteers."

"Sabrina goes with me?"

"If you'll have me," she quickly replied, cutting off the Commodore's less diplomatic response.

"As first officer, if you like," he recovered quickly.

"If you wish, I would be honored to be your first officer," Sabrina glared at the Commodore. "Let me handle this!" She hissed at him.

Captain Darwin sat in silence for a moment, her mind slowly assimilating the news. "Your first duty as my first officer is to recruit a crew. I'm going back to bed. I will see you at lunch time." She stood, wobbled a little and staggered back to her ship.

Two pilots, four fire control officers, two flight engineers, two munitions specialists, one electronics specialist, one navigator, one comm specialist, three female Marines, Beau and Sabrina stood for inspection when Captain Darwin reappeared looking much healthier than she had earlier. "Excellent. You have done well," she said after she had spoken to each of her new crew members individually. "We're short a medic."

"Bones made that difficult," Sabrina answered.

"Who do you want?"

"You know that kid that arrived the same day I did? He's pretty sharp. He's kind of afraid of you, though. I think Bones is taking advantage of him and didn't want to let him go."

“Does he mind being taken advantage of?”

“Hard to tell.”

“We can’t let Beau be the only man on the ship, now can we?” Captain Darwin grinned. “We can take advantage of the kid the same as she can.”

Sabrina laughed and some of the other women giggled. Captain Darwin sauntered in the direction of sick bay.

“Bones.”

“It’s ‘Doc’ to you!”

“Bones, I need a medic.”

“Get in line.”

“No, I don’t think you understand. I need one that makes house calls.”

“Sounds like a personal problem.”

“No, it’s a personnel problem. I am taking one of your people on my ship and I need you to see that he is properly equipped and stocked with whatever supplies he might need.” The two women glared at each other.

Captain Darwin broke the deadlock. “See the nice young man hiding behind the cabinet? We understand you’ve had him performing personal services which if he was not performing willingly, we could have you busted for. We understand you promised him a promotion. You haven’t given it to him. I’m giving him that promotion. He will be our ship’s doctor and my personal physician with all the rights and responsibilities that involves. You will let him go, now won’t you?”

They glared at each other for a few seconds. “When and where should he report?”

“1900 hours on my ship.”

“Consider it done.”

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THREE

CAPTAIN DARWIN'S SMALL TASK FORCE departed a week later. Two of the P I ships fit in the freighter's hold and the other two were attached to the docking ports. Five ships all told, with a total crew of twenty headed for a nearby portion of the shipping lanes where the Federation did not have a significant presence and illegal activities were as common as legal ones.

After arriving on station, they found excellent hunting. They quickly "recruited" several more vessels and their crews while on patrol. Sabrina's non-violent tactics backed up by the threat posed by the other P I ships virtually ensured that the suspect ships surrendered without being fired upon. After capture, the drug runners saw their cargoes distributed into the vacuum of space. They and their ships were "recruited" and taken to Commodore Townsend's orbiting base of operations. A Marine and a fire control officer would assume control of the ship and take it back to the mother ship. They would return with the cargo ship that made the weekly supply run. Smugglers and their shiploads of contraband would often be escorted by a P I ship along with the fire control officer and the Marine. Somehow, though, the slavers never made it to the mother ship. For reasons that neither Sabrina nor Alina ever explained to anyone's satisfaction, they had no fatalities and only minor injuries on any of the ships they captured except slavers. There were no survivors among the slaver crews. The captives intended for market were returned to safety, but the people who operated the slave ships had unfortunate accidents and or disappeared into the vacuum of deep space. This discontinuity phenomenon became the subject of much speculation on the mother ship, but no one, including Commodore Townsend, felt safe in challenging it.

This is not to say everything went smoothly for the six months they patrolled the shipping lanes. With only two men and eighteen aggressive women in close quarters, things often became heated and fights did occasionally break out. The usual punishment was extra watch duty for all parties and eventually tempers settled down again for a while.

"Captain to the bridge." Beau was on watch. "Captain to the bridge." All of their conquests had started with that simple request.

Beau was intently staring at the displays when Captain Darwin and Sabrina arrived. He silently pointed at a portion of the display. His face was unusually pale. Several rows of tiny circles were plainly visible. This was not the sort of thing they usually encountered.

"What do you think, Beau?"

"Drones. Lots of drones."

"The first wave of the assault. Sabrina, what do you think?"

"I think we should go take a look. Drones doesn't sound like Swordsmen. It might be something else. Swordsmen ships are always fully staffed. They don't really trust the machines to make decisions. I'll bet it's the Third Force."

"If every missile we owned hit one of those drones, we would still not be able to kill them all."

"There's another way." Sabrina said. "We know there has to be a control ship in the middle of

the drones.” She detailed a complex plan whereby the four P I ships could maximize their missiles, take out the control ship and by having drones fly into the debris field of their destroyed companions eliminate enough of the formation that their lasers could deal with the rest.

“Beau, send a courier to Commodore Townsend. Request reinforcements. We are engaging.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Sound battle stations!”

A recording of a klaxon from a World War II battleship sounded through the ship. “Battle stations! Battle stations! All hands to battle stations. This is not a drill.” The announcement was repeated a total of three times. It was followed by a call that summed up the crew’s attitude. Ripped from an old television show, the speakers sang out, “It’s clobbering time!”

In the heat of battle or in the moments leading up to it, sometimes thoughts which had been floating around formlessly coalesce into a cohesive whole. The four P I ships raced to intercept the incoming fleet so they could determine who they were and what their intentions might be. They had eight hours in standard drive flight time to intercept. This time driving at flank speed gave Sabrina lots of opportunity to ponder what it was about this particular P I ship made her suspect it was somehow different from the others. She swapped places with Tina, her fire control officer, so she could think quietly inside the shell of the fire control position’s displays. Located directly behind the pilot, the fire control position included a spherical array of displays which when closed was completely sealed so that in the event of a hull breach the fire control officer could still operate the ship. In the incident that Captain Alina Darwin killed Sabrina’s brother, even the shell had become damaged which was why she wore her EVA suit without which she would not have survived.

Sabrina closed the shell and noticed where it had been repaired. Fire control display shells didn’t get damaged except in very rare instances. This one had been damaged more than once and at least one of the repairs was not very well executed. Intrigued, she pulled up the ship’s maintenance records on her monitor. The shell had been damaged on four separate occasions. The first had been in a training accident involving a Space Force Academy cadet and trainer. A dummy missile had penetrated the hull and lodged in the shell killing the two crew members on board. The ship had remained in administrative limbo as beyond economical repair for a few years before it was “liberated” from the bone yard by a squadron trying to replace lost ships without breaking its budget.

The repair was hastily and badly done. It failed in combat six months later. The crew died. The ship was repaired again in a remote fleet service center. The ship was hit again in combat and damaged again, but the crew survived by operating the ship from the safety of their EVA suits.

A year later, the ship collided with a fighter interceptor and while neither was seriously damaged, both crews were killed. The shell was repaired yet again.

Two years after that, the ship took a missile strike directly through the view port. The pirate missile failed to detonate, but the hull breach was enough to kill the solo pilot who was not in the shell at that time. Had he been in the shell, he would have survived. Something about the timing of that incident resonated with Sabrina. She pulled up the ship’s logs and listened to the pilot’s report of the battle and then, absolutely stunned, she remembered. She had put that missile through the view port. Suddenly she realized she was flying a ship she had once tried to kill. Instantly obsessed now to find

more about this man she had killed in combat, she scanned through his logs listening to his routine reports and his daily logs until one of the reports stopped her cold.

He was flying formation with another P I ship and was suggesting that they dock so that they could “dock”. The pilot of the other P I ship was Lt. Darwin. The former pilot of the ship Sabrina now flew was Lt. Darwin’s husband. Sabrina had killed Captain Darwin’s husband. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized the enormity of that discovery.

“He was already my ex by that point,” Alina replied to Sabrina’s apology. Radio silence was not an issue. The emissions from their drives would be all the approaching ships’ sensors would need to know who was coming and how fast.

“Remember Townsend’s comment about cannon fodder. The guy was a bonehead. I told him that going after you like that would get him killed. I told him to wait for us. Stupid fool. Cost him his life. I had to tow the ship back to be serviced. What a pain that was.”

“You knew the whole time?”

“Yes, I wanted you on our side. You were too good to be left out there on your own. You were much more valuable to us alive on our side than dead.”

While they were talking, Sabrina made another observation in the logs. “Alina, what model are the reactors in your ship?”

“A pair of Thermonuclear Industries Mark Ten’s. Why”

“There’s a note on the logs about having trouble finding the special fuel rods for this reactor. Why would that be, the reactors in the P I’s are all the same. What are on the other ships?”

“Mark Ten’s. Are yours different?”

“Yeah, they’re Tactical Nuclear Technologies Mark Five’s.”

“How bizarre.”

“My thinking exactly. Send me over the specs on your reactors. I am curious what the differences are.” Alina transmitted the specs and Sabrina reviewed them carefully.

“Alina, do you have data on ship ID codes? Do you have the numbers for Avelina Bardwell, Greg Solomon and Myra Myrakova?” There was a pause then Alina replied, “Greg Solomon was 1098 B, Avelina Bardwell was 1658 C and Myra Myrakova was 1156 B. Why?”

“Following a hunch. Those are the squadron assignment numbers. There’s a bunch of pirate legends about those three and their ships. Something about the reactor being weird. Do we have the serial numbers on their ships?”

“The manufacturer’s serial numbers?”

“Yeah.”

“Alina ran the search on the data base of ships not to fire at. Greg Solomon’s ship was Saturn Industries Model 2251A Serial 405. Avelina Bardwell’s ship was the same model Serial 411. Myra Myrakova’s was Serial 415.”

“I’ll be a son of a sea horse. Alina, what’s the manufacturer’s model number of your ship?”

“It’s a 2251.”

“No letter afterwords?”

“No.”

“This ship is a 2251A, serial number 414. Let’s talk legends. According to legend, Greg Solomon, Avelina Bardwell and Myra Myrakova were so successful at pirate interdiction because their ships could do something no other ship could do. That something is the short hyper jump.”

“Short hyper jumps are impossible.”

“Not true. There have been several accounts of battles where short jumps were successfully used by P I ships to attack and defeat entire fleets of pirate vessels. The pilots in these stories are Solomon, Bardwell and Myrakova. There is a rumor that short hyper jumps were material to the success of the defense at Homestead against the Swordsmen. The key is that only three ships have been reported to have been able to use the short hyper jump.”

“The three we’ve talked about.”

“Yes.”

“The legend goes on to say that only a few ships were built that could do the short jump because the reactor was so much bigger than the normal reactors. According to rumors, someone has been buying old P I ships and they are especially interested in the ones with the bigger reactors. I also heard they didn’t find them all and are still looking for the last one or two they don’t have.”

“So?”

“So two things. We have a ship that I believe is capable of short hyper jumps and we have a ship that is worth far more on the black market than we could make in our lifetimes.”

“Now that we know this, what do we do about it?”

“You know the plan I so carefully spelled out before we left?”

“Yes.”

“Forget it. New plan. Look at simulation 41. I’ll take the six. You take the twelve.”

“If you say so.”

They still had a few hours to missile range but suddenly the approaching cruiser, which had been becoming more and more distinct on their sensors, blossomed and eight fighter interceptors popped out of launch bays.

“Things just got real ugly,” Sabrina said.

“Roger that!” Alina replied.

“Oh by the way, their course is not for the central system. It’s for our mother ship,” Sabrina observed.

“All this hardware for our mother ship?”

“We must have struck a nerve. I wonder which nerve,” Sabrina said.

“The slavers?”

“Could be.”

“As soon as we hit missile range, I’ll split off,” Sabrina said.

“You better come back!”

“That is the plan.”

All four ships extended their weapons pods in preparation for battle.

Sabrina and Tina had returned to their normal seats. Sabrina had spent the last two hours deep in the ship’s software documentation. She finally found the piece of code she was looking for. With minutes to spare, she keyed in the commands, “Disable all reactor overload warnings. Disable all reactor overload limits. Engage all reactor cooling pumps in simplex. Authorize full power reactor operation. Set reactor duty cycle at 100%. Disable navigation lock out. Enable all navigation solutions.” As expected, after each command the error message appeared on her display, “Are you sure you want to do this?” For each command she keyed in the word “YES.”

“Command accepted.”

“Tina, stand by for a rough ride!”

“Roger that!”

As the sensors provided more detail, they had determined that their opponent was not Swordsmen as they had anticipated, but rather the Third Force. The drones had glass bodies. Glass made them less visible to the ships’ sensors with only slight sacrifices in strength. There were those who believed the third force was aliens from elsewhere in the galaxy. Pirate legend had more likely scenarios. The majority held the belief that the third force was some megalomaniac industrialist who wanted to conquer it all. A slightly smaller group of pirates held that it was the son of such an industrialist who wanted to show Daddy how much smarter he was than the old man.

Over a hundred drones, eight fighter interceptors and one cruiser with more firepower than everything else put together faced four P I ships with twelve missiles and twelve lasers each. For reasons only an accountant would understand, these ships had not been equipped with the outboard missile launchers available for many other P I ship models. This was fixing to be ugly.

Sabrina struck out first. Federation rules of engagement required that Federation ships not fire until the opponent presented a clear act of hostility. Targeting radar had been flying around for an hour,

and Sabrina was in no mood to wait to be shot at while she sat on her hands. She programmed a vector and a distance. Previously, the navigation system would have popped up an error message at this short a distance at that vector, but this time it merely blinked its acceptance of the order.

Sabrina pushed to “Go” button.

The lead P I ship whisked out of sight with the familiar blur of a jump to hyper drive. Traveling faster than light, the ship would arrive at its destination mere seconds later. In the transition the ship would be invisible to visual sensors and undetectable by any current technology.

Transition into hyper drive was considered one of life’s more unpleasant events. An unavoidable feature of interstellar travel, it was tolerated as best one was able. It has been compared with a belly flop into a pool of water from a six story building and then hitting the bottom of the diving well. This transition was all that and more. Sabrina and Tina screamed in pain as the ship executed its pre-programmed transitions into and then almost immediately out of hyper drive. However painful the transition into hyper drive was, the immediate transition back out was worse. Much worse. Every cell in every soft tissue in their bodies screamed in pain on the transition back out.

In spite of the pain blurring her vision and making every move an ordeal, immediately upon dropping out of hyper drive, Sabrina fired the missiles she had prepared an hour ago for exactly this moment. The missiles fired in sequence, three seconds apart. The four missiles, all heat seekers, were aimed at the same target, a specific point between the cruiser’s four reactors. The emergency self destruct explosives secured in that box were designed to separate a failed reactor from the remainder of the ship in case of a catastrophic reactor failure. Theoretically this separation would allow the ship to survive until the crew could be rescued. The monitoring electronics kept the box warmer than the rest of the hull, but cooler than the better shielded reactors themselves. This temperature differential allowed it to be detected specifically by the heat seekers.

The goal was to disable the reactors without detonating them, because detonating the reactors at this distance would destroy Sabrina’s ship as well as the cruiser. While that would have been a spectacular show, it was not one that Sabrina cared to put on.

One of the advantages of Federation missiles as opposed to the pirate missiles is that they really did go where they were programmed to go and Sabrina watched as four missiles found their targets in rapid order. Most capital warships shared the same weakness. If you could get close enough to put a missile into the ship’s propulsion system, there was nothing there to stop you except possibly a fighter interceptor. Due to the stresses of the fields necessary to support hyper drive, the propulsion system could not be shielded and therefore was vulnerable. Sabrina had exploited that vulnerability. Traveling though the path cleared by the first three missiles, the fourth missile apparently found its way into the cruiser’s munitions magazines. A series of internal explosions ripped the ship apart.

Score one for the home team!

Sabrina had eight missiles left as four of the interceptors homed in on her. Rather than hang around as the rapidly expanding debris field over took them, Sabrina entered a vector and a distance and punched the “Go” button. The jump back was every bit as painful as the jump out. Psychologically, it was even worse since they now knew what to expect.

Unfortunately they still had over a hundred drones and eight interceptors to deal with and they only had 44 missiles left in their entire squadron.

Once having lost the control signal from the cruiser, the drones shifted to heat seeker mode.



Roughly two dozen of them headed for Beau's ship. Sabrina hyper jumped back to the freighter to defend it. The other P I ships could not get back to the freighter in time to protect it and were heavily engaged with the interceptors. Even with the few missiles she had left, her lasers and the freighter's lasers, four of the drones got through and detonated the cargo ship's reactor. Beau had separated the crew module from the rest of the ship before the reactor blew and was able to minimize the casualties, but no one on the ship escaped completely unscathed and some of the injuries were severe.

The three remaining P I's also engaged the interceptors. The interceptors were well trained and fought ferociously, but eventually they were all destroyed at the cost of both of the other two P I ships.

Reinforcements arrived in time to finish mopping up the remaining drones and tow the survivors home.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FOUR

**R** & R ON A SMALL out-of-the-way planet with little to entice travelers except for freight marshaling yards did not turn out as planned. Sabrina dragged her thoroughly drunk and marginally coherent commanding officer out of the “Space Lizard’s Thrust Lunge” as fast as her small stature would allow her to haul a woman half again her size who was not being particularly cooperative. In spite of her best efforts, Sabrina had let Alina get drunk. It was not a pleasant sight.

The explosion behind them, which obliterated the lounge they had just left, jumbled Sabrina’s thoughts. She knew she needed to focus on getting as far away from the blast as possible, but her mind kept jumping around. She didn’t understand why men had to be such beasts. It was true that her C O, Captain Alina Darwin, was one of the most beautiful women she had ever met. It was also true that Captain Alina Darwin was one of the most lethal Pirate Interdiction Specialists since Captains Avelina Bardwell and Greg Solomon. It was also true that she was trained in a dozen forms of martial arts and could kill with her bare hands, a skill she had just demonstrated rather dramatically. If Sabrina had her numbers correct, tonight’s victim would be number four in hand-to-hand. There was no way to know how many in ship-to-ship. Her boss was a first class killer, no doubt about it.

The worst part was that Sabrina had seen it coming, but too late to stop it.

The man, muscular, with broad shoulders, taller and heavier than the very tall Alina Darwin, came up from behind her as she danced alone in front of the bandstand. The band was hideously bad, but none of the dancers cared. The band only needed to be loud and they were that. He had put his arms around her and, for a few seconds, it looked as if she would be willing to dance with this stranger. Sabrina could tell from the movement of his lips what he was saying to her. He had seen the charm on the end of her necklace nestled deep between her ample breasts. Captain Alina Darwin was Jewish, one of a growing number of Jews in the Space Force and somehow the rumor had been started that Jewish women were aggressive and passionate lovers just waiting for a man dominant enough to take them.

Sabrina was wending her way through the dancers as fast as she could. When things went south they went south so fast Sabrina had to reconstruct what she thought she saw to figure out what had gone down. Still holding Alina from behind, the man had rested his chin on her shoulder. His hands slid down forward and she reacted. Left elbow to the ribs, right elbow to the ribs, quick back kick in the balls, spin around, a smooth chop to the throat and a dying man lay choking on the floor. It had taken a few seconds and it was over. Even drunk, years of training made Captain Alina Darwin a very dangerous woman. Of course, where she had grown up, being pretty was a hazard and being beautiful was life threatening. Unless she was willing to be raped a couple times a week, martial arts had to be part of her daily life.

They raced down the street at first out of fear of being arrested by the Shore Patrol, but now out of fear of whatever blew up the bar.

Fire sirens jerked Sabrina back to the present. Emergency vehicles raced toward the block of stores that had once held the “Space Lizard’s Thrust Lunge” now completely engulfed in flames. Sabrina and Alina appeared to be the only ones headed away from the inferno. Emergency vehicles and personnel were converging on the scene. Sabrina reached for her comm unit. She called her ship. “Tina, prepare for immediate departure!”

“We’re ready! Waiting on you!”

Tina and Pam were the two fire control officers. Tina worked with Sabrina and Pam worked with Alina. Where Alina and Sabrina were warriors, Tina and Pam were “girly girls” who happened to think that operating the teeth in a small warship was something one did for fun. Where Alina and Sabrina sought out the “action” in each port, Tina and Pam would find the fanciest day spa in the immediate vicinity. They would get manicures, pedicures, facials and massages. They would play with the pretty boys that worked there who knew how to make a woman feel warm and womanly inside as well as out.

They had returned to the ships long ago and waited for their crew-mates Sabrina and Alina had started the day at an art festival. They had gone from there to an amateur soccer game in a public park. They had found their way to a concert and that’s where Alina started drinking. Something in the music started her thinking again. Sabrina knew Alina was uncontrollable when she was drunk, but by the time Sabrina realized how much Alina had been drinking, it was already too late.

Sabrina approached the spaceport’s guard gate running as fast as she could. At least Alina was running on her own now although her pace was ragged. The flames that started in the lounge were voraciously consuming huge chunks of the city. A convoy of fire trucks raced out the spaceport’s gate to assist their beleaguered civilian colleagues. In the confusion, Sabrina dragged Alina past the guard. As she did she looked up at the video monitor over the entrance to the space port’s main terminal. The Constant News Channel was announcing that Sabrina, Alina and their entire crew had died in the blast at the bar. Sabrina quickly turned away. She was angry enough as it was.

The reason Sabrina had originally attempted to pull Alina out of the bar had nothing to do with the unfortunate man she killed. The ship’s sensors had detected an incoming missile and sent her the alert. The ship’s threat assessment system had located the homing beacon the missile was tracking as being inside the bar. Someone was trying to kill them. That, in itself, was not news. Being shot at was a routine occurrence for P I pilots and crews. What was news was that someone would stand off in space and lob a missile which would cause so much collateral damage in an attempt to get at them. Even more surprising was that they shot at the bar and not at the ships. Although, Sabrina reflected, if the ships had sensed that the missile was aimed at them they could have shot it down on their own with their lasers before their human crew knew what was going on. Why the planet’s defensive net had let the missile through even though it was not aimed at the spaceport was a question that would need to be answered later.

Pam and Tina were waiting outside near the ships. They helped drag Alina into her ship and strapped her into the fire control seat. Pam climbed into Alina’s seat and started pre-flight procedures. Sabrina and Tina raced for Sabrina’s ship.

Tina headed for Sabrina’s seat. “You sit in the back, I’ll get us out of here.” Sabrina slumped in the back seat and braced for lift off. The two ships lifted off together and, ignoring the warnings from the control tower, headed into space at full throttle.

“Did you see who threw the missile?” Sabrina asked.

“Third Force,” Tina replied.

The mysterious Third Force. Not the Federation and not the Swordsmen and feared by both. Pirates told of mysterious readings on their sensors. They believed the third force was an alien life form. Soon one of the intelligence services would get a break and figure out who they really were. A

few had been captured. They weren't organized crime and they weren't pirates, but they were human and their crews were "contractors" recruited from a variety of military services. They were well funded and had huge manufacturing capabilities. They built small space ships and drones like Detroit had once built automobiles. You knew a third force ship immediately when you saw it. Even though it was made of glass, it looked unfinished. The ships were awkward and stodgy to fly although even a novice could fly one if need be. A few ships had been captured, but there was no indication of the location of the manufacturer. None of the parts could be traced back to other manufacturers. Someone had built a completely vertically integrated space ship manufacturing facility to the point where they apparently even mined their own metals.

"I suppose he got away," Sabrina said.

"Lobbed the missile and split," Tina replied.

"Take us to where we can couple the ships and we'll decide where we're going from there," Sabrina said.

"Not going home?" Tina asked.

"Would you go home under these circumstances?"

"Probably not."

"Me neither."

The sounds of docking interrupted Sabrina's debate as to their course of action. The two ships were combining so they could travel as one. This meant one ship's computer controlled both ships and watches could be split four ways instead of two.

They gathered on the flight deck of Alina's ship.

Alina was still asleep in her seat.

"Where can we go that's safe?" Sabrina asked.

"I think we need to find help for the Captain," Pam said.

"You know," Sabrina thought out loud, "I think we can do both."

"How?" Tina asked.

"Eretz, the planet of the Jews. Someone there will know how to deal with her," Sabrina said.

"What about us? We're not Jewish." Tina asked.

"I don't think that matters as much as it used to. We can go there and be safe," Sabrina said.

Alina revived enough to ask, "Where are we going?"

"Eretz," Sabrina replied.

"My cousins moved there. Why are we going there?"

“You need help, the kind of help we think only they can give you,” Sabrina said.

“I didn’t mean to kill him. I didn’t even see his face. I’m sorry.” Alina started to cry.

“No matter, he would have died in the blast even if you hadn’t killed him,” Sabrina replied.

“Was it a missile?”

“Yes, third force,” Tina said.

“You’re right. Please, set in the course.,” Alina ordered.

The other women nodded and set in a course for Eretz.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FIVE

THE TWO P I SHIPS traveling as one dropped out of hyper drive a short distance outside the Eretz defensive perimeter. They identified themselves and requested safe passage.

The girl who greeted them and escorted them to the freight depot on the moon of the system's only habitable planet identified herself as Mimi Abrams. To Captain Darwin, she sounded young, but there was a hardness in her voice that spoke of combat experience. She advised them to wear their dress whites and not their flight suits when they reached the depot.

Two young, heavily armed men greeted the travelers as they exited the air locks to the pressurized gate ramps. Their smiles and greetings were formal, but not challenging. Welcoming surprise guests was their job. The travelers were impressed by the pristine cleanliness of the depot and its environs. A sense of order and unhurried purpose permeated the atmosphere. They had arrived at the start of first shift, the "day" shift although the facility ran full-time without regard to day or night on the planet below.

Signs of welcome and instruction in a half dozen languages were prominently displayed along their path. At the end of the ramp they came to what was clearly an immigration processing facility. A row of workstations extended the width of the far side of the room. Between each pair of stations a walkway lead to wide doors. Over the doors a large sign read "Welcome to The Land - The Planet, Eretz" translated into a half dozen languages.

Four very old men sat behind the workstations. Each of the travelers was directed to chair in front of a work station. After stating their name and raising their hand to affirm that everything they were about to commit to the forms they would fill out was the truth to the best of their knowledge, they were instructed to sit. The forms were devoted to questions about their health, their job skills and the names of their nearest relatives. After filling out the forms, they were directed to small enclosed glassed in rooms. Sabrina was the first to finish and the first to be directed to one of the rooms.

The man who waited for Sabrina was wearing a Federation Space Force uniform and had the insignia of a chaplain. He stood as she entered the room.

"Lt. Sabrina Mahoney, it is my pleasure to meet you. I am Father Andrew D. Hadalski."

"A priest, sir? I thought this was a Jewish settlement."

"It is and I am. The Federation Space Force maintains a weapons research facility here. Five chaplains of different denominations service the assigned personnel. It is a delightful assignment. We conduct comparative religion seminars as part of our duties and I find the discussions invigorating. But enough of that. Let's talk about you. As you know everything you say to a Chaplain is privileged and cannot be divulged without your permission. This is why one of our duties as Chaplains is to interview arriving military personnel before they have had a chance to talk to anyone else."

"Is it like confession?"

"Sort of. It is your last opportunity to change your mind without consequences."

"Consequences?"

“Technically, you are either AWOL or a deserter and can be punished for that fact. However, this planet has become such a magnet for many of the Space Force’s brightest officers, the Federation has agreed to some exceptions. For, example, any member of a flight crew except the commander can claim that they were brought here by their commander and not necessarily of their own volition. They merely sign a statement to that effect and we put them on the next ship headed for New St. Louis. From there they are redeployed to a regular Space Force unit. Alternatively they could claim that they thought it was a good idea when they left wherever they came from, but now that they have arrived, they are not sure and wish to return to regular duty.”

“What happens when they return to duty?”

“They are docked accrued leave from the time they left wherever they came from to the time they arrived here and their enlistment contract is extended by the difference between the accrued leave and the time away.”

“Is this offer available to me?”

“Yes.”

“What if I elect to stay?”

“A review board will assess your skills and determine if they have use for you or if there is some pressing reason they would like to keep you around. In your case, that would not seem to be an issue. Our intelligence folks are circling like hawks to debrief you within an inch of your life. They are very excited that you have dropped in and wish to learn as much as you have to teach them.”

Sabrina shuddered at the thoughts of long interrogations. “By force?”

The priest laughed. “No sweetheart. They will be so helpful and attentive to your every wish that you will want them to go away and leave you alone. I think they call it killing with kindness. I can think of worse ways to live.”

“Then what?”

“Most likely patrol duty, test pilot or combat instructor. I understand your flight skills are outstanding.”

“How long can I stay?”

“Forever or until a Federation ship comes along and you sign on with them. Although if you wish to stay, the pressure to marry and have children is impressive, and, you know, I thought Catholic parents were masters at guilt. These people make us look like amateurs.” He grinned. “Of course, I would prefer the babies be brought up Catholic.”

Sabrina smiled. “I certainly understand. What will happen to Captain Darwin?”

“As commander, she can't claim coercion or that she has changed her mind. If she tries to go back, she will be tried for AWOL or depending on the circumstances of her departure, even desertion in the face of the enemy.”

“What if she stays?”

“If she is allowed to stay, she will lose all time in grade, accrued leave and her enlistment contract will be extended by the time away. She could request political asylum, although as a Federation officer, that probably won’t work. It frequently does for civilians. The review board will determine if there is some compelling reason for her to stay or that if she were anywhere else she would be a hazard to others. It is important that merely being a hazard to oneself is not good enough. She must be a hazard to others.”

“That’s why I brought her here. She’s a walking time bomb.”

“You brought her? She didn’t come on her own?”

“Sort of. She knew we were bringing her to get help, but she was passed out drunk at the time.”

“You better tell me the whole story.”

Sabrina told Father Hadalski everything starting when Captain Darwin captured her at the decoy freighter and ending with her decision to bring Captain Darwin for help. The priest only interrupted when he did not understand something Sabrina had said or needed clarification on the sequence of actions.

“My child, I never would have expected one brought up as you to be so sensitive and caring. You will need to tell the story to the review board exactly as you told it to me. I am sure you will be accepted into our community. I expect to see you every Sunday at Mass when you are not on patrol.”

The review board convened a few hours later. Pam and Tina had elected to return to regular duty and were already on a shuttle that would take them to a freighter for the trip to New St. Louis.

Sabrina and Alina answered a battery of questions. Some of the questions were clearly standard questions for which standard answers were expected. Others were not. Sabrina repeated her motivation for bringing Alina to them twice before the panel members were satisfied with the story. Dazed and confused by the ordeal, they were relieved when the woman who chaired the panel looked at her peers and asked them to vote using their workstations.

They were conditionally accepted. They were to proceed to the planet’s surface where they would undergo physical, psychological and skills testing. Pending the results of the tests, a secondary review board would make the determination as to whether they could stay and if so, in what capacity.

P I ships are capable of entering a planet’s atmosphere and landing on the surface, but Sabrina and Alina were instructed to retrieve their luggage from the ships and take a passenger shuttle to the surface. The freight yard’s traffic controllers had determined that the P I ship Sabrina flew was indeed one that they had believed lost in a training exercise and were delighted that it had shown up.

A squad of Marines flew on the same shuttle and other than making gentle amorous passes at the ladies, left them alone. Once on the surface, they were more than happy to escort the ladies to the Visiting Officer’s Quarters.

After settling in to their rooms and collapsing exhausted on their beds, Sabrina and Alina awoke the following morning absolutely famished. They headed for the Officer’s Club and breakfast. While they were eating, a young lady in a flight suit approached them.



“Captain Darwin?” The young lady looked like she could be Alina’s kid sister.

Alina looked up. “Yes?”

“Mimi Abrams. I escorted you to the freight depot. It’s a pleasure to meet you. You are a legend around here. May I join you? I’ve already eaten.”

“Certainly.” Alina looked carefully at the insignia on the flight suit. “Are you a civilian?”

“Yes,” Mimi replied. “I’m under contract. In less polite times, I would be called a mercenary.”

“So young!” Sabrina exclaimed.

Mimi grinned. “I learned from Rachel and Wendy Solomon and they had the best teachers of all, their parents. Sabrina, may I call you by your first name?”

“Yes.”

“Sabrina, you should know all about being young in combat. Your reputation precedes you.”

“But, I was not a normal child and I did not have a normal childhood.”

“Neither did I and I like it this way.” Mimi’s eyes sparkled. Her expression suddenly changed and became serious. “What can you tell me about the drones? Was their formation rows and columns, random or in some pattern?”

“It was two concentric cylinders with the control ship in the very back. Why?” Sabrina asked.

“My ex-boyfriend works in Intelligence. I want to show him up that I got the first real information from you before he did!” She grinned widely.

Alina laughed. “I had a friend in school who was a lot like you. I haven’t talked to her in years. We should spend lots of time together!”

“Speaking of which, my mother and some of the ladies get together after work in the school gym for exercise. It might be a nice time to get to know the people who live here. Folks start showing up around 1900 hours.” Mimi’s communicator sounded for her attention. “Uh, that’s Dad! Got to go! See you later!”

Sabrina watched Mimi bounce out the door. “I’ll bet she’s a handful for her parents.”

“No doubt.”

At 1900 hours, after having spent the rest of the day in combat simulators, Alina and Sabrina appeared at the gym wearing their workout clothes. Mimi was jogging around the far end of the indoor track when they arrived. She quickly ran over to them and introduced them to the other women in the gym. There were almost as many men in the gym as there were women, but Mimi made no attempt to introduce them. That was probably a good thing since that reduced the flurry of new names by half. Once introductions were made, Mimi suggested they warm up by running laps around the track.

Flight crews maintain their physical condition by using the exercise features built into their

flight seats. Even the best flight seat, however, is no match for real exercises like running or swimming. Alina and Sabrina quickly found themselves short of breath.

Mimi suggested they stop and catch their breath at the edge of the mats being used for martial arts instruction. They joined the familiar warm-up and concentration exercises along with rest of the class. Mimi wandered off to join a pick up basketball game.

At the end of half an hour of exercises, the instructor, a heavily tattooed female Marine, paired the class for practice of the combat moves. The exercises were familiar and relaxing for Alina even though they brought back memories of her troubled youth. When the class was officially scheduled to end, the instructor challenged anyone in the class to a one-on-one round with her. When there were no takers, she wandered over to Alina.

“I think someone here is sand-bagging us.” Her grin was devilish. “I think there is someone here who could beat the pants of everyone in this gym except me. Isn’t that right Captain?”

All eyes turned toward Alina. She looked down and shuffled her feet. “I don’t know.” Her voice said one thing but her body language said another. She did know and resented the fact that this pug of a woman half her size had challenged her. Alina was concerned that she was not likely to be allowed to stay if she was always picking fights.

Sabrina moved forward to intervene. Mimi caught her by the shoulder. She whispered in Sabrina’s ear. “Don’t. It’s a test. We need to see what she does.”

“Captain, I wish to show these folks what proper execution of the arts they have been studying looks like. According to your records, you hold several prizes in martial arts competition.”

Alina looked down. She spoke softly, “Yes, it’s true, but I have killed people this way. Please don’t make me do this.”

“Time to exorcise the demon. Captain, please follow me into the ring.”

Alina reluctantly followed the Marine lieutenant into the ring. They assumed a fighting pose and quickly engaged. Alina was good and the audience who had gathered around the ring was impressed with her skill, but the Marine was just a little better. After one particularly brutal round, the two women stood warily moving in a circle around the ring. A man stepped into the ring behind Alina. Sabrina started to move and prevent what she feared would happen next. Mimi held her down. “This is the test.”

Sabrina looked at Mimi with wild eyed terror. “She’ll kill him!”

“Not him,” Mimi replied confidently.

The man reached around and grabbed Alina’s breasts. Alina exploded. Her elbows flew back only to impact a body wearing combat armor. Instead of the familiar sound of crunching ribs, Alina was surprised to hear dull thuds. Her foot kicked back and high to hit a solid surface instead of the softness she expected. Her leg was kicked out from underneath her forcing her chop to go wild and instead of hitting her assailant’s throat, hit the combat armor protecting his chest. She went down face first to the mat in a series of thudding noises as she collapsed. He followed landing solidly on top of her. Locking her in a full nelson as they fell and knitting his fingers behind her neck, he pinned her to the mat.

Alina screamed in protest as the man's weight crushed her into the softness of the mat.

"My goodness, she's fast!" Mimi said to Sabrina. "But Rev Schwartz is faster. He's a former Marine combat instructor, but now he teaches grade school. See the lady sitting across the parallel bars? That's his wife. She's on the review committee."

"Does this mean we get sent back?" Sabrina asked, frightened.

"No, I don't think so. She is as dangerous as you said she is. If he hadn't been wearing combat armor and been as skilled as he is and as heavy as he is, she could have killed him. We had doctors standing by in case." Mimi shook her head as Alina continued to scream and writhe trying to break free. "I'd hate to see what she's like when she's not already tired."

"She's worse drunk. We must never allow her to get drunk."

"Hmm, tough one. We have lots of social drinkers here and wine is part of our ceremonies."

Rev Schwartz attempted to get up off Alina a couple of times, but each time he did, she attempted to attack him again. Finally, exhausted and defeated, Alina started to cry.

"Welcome home, Alina Darwin." Rev Schwartz softly said into her ear as he gently stroked her long hair. "You will be safe here." He looked up at his wife who smiled with approval.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER SIX

DEPRESSED AND DESPONDENT, Captain Rachel Solomon sat across the table at the shipyards' officer's club from her parents both of whom were wearing the uniform of Space Force Commodores. In fact, in an unusual exception to policy, her parents served together on the same ship as the military attaches to the diplomatic mission negotiating the Swordsman planets' secession from the Federation. Her husband, Dr. Isaac Cohen sat beside her. His mood was as dark as hers.

"Rachel, the military is always like this," her father said. "You've only been at this a year. You are trying to accomplish what normally takes ten years. Designing a new type of ship from scratch is not an easy undertaking. I don't think you understand how far you have come in this time."

"But Dad, we're not designing a new ship." Rachel responded.

"No, you are taking bits and pieces of four big ships and bolting them together to form one huge ship," her mother offered. "No one has ever attempted anything of this scope before. It takes time. It's difficult engineering." She turned to Rachel's husband, "Isaac, I think your idea of pulling the parts from that old hospital ship languishing in the bone yard was brilliant. Who would have thought that a battleship and a hospital ship would be built on the same space frame. It certainly shortened the design and construction time."

"Thank you, Avi, but the idea to bolt in the mid and aft sections from the cargo ship was Rachel's. It seems that Saturn Space Industries built a lot of ships on the same frame and with the same propulsion unit."

"Where did the idea to combine all the drives come from?" Greg asked.

"Dad, it started with a comment you made," Rachel replied. "You said you were concerned that the drive would not be powerful enough to handle the weight. Once we added the modules from the retired passenger liner for the rehab center and living quarters we knew we would not be able to make a full G in hyper drive. I ran the problem by Reuben and he came up with the idea of using four drives. He designed the structure that allowed us to use the cargo ship's drive as the center drive and array the other drives in a triangle around it. Apparently the space between the drives is critical so they don't interfere with each other. Reuben spent a month on the problem before he was satisfied he solved it."

"How's he doing by the way?" Avi asked.

Rachel said, "He's bored. The research lab isn't as much fun as he thought it would be. He and Suwanee love that they are assigned together, but I think he would rather be working here with me."

Greg laughed. "Looking for a little action?"

Isaac chuckled and said, "His words exactly."

Greg looked at his daughter and proudly said, "Life with my Rachel is certainly never dull!"

“Daddy! I wish you would quit saying that!”

It was Isaac’s turn to laugh. “But, sweetheart, it’s true and I love you for it.”

“How is his brother Rashi doing?” Avi asked.

“Rashi’s project is blowing up in their faces, literally. The new missiles are detonating prematurely and no one can figure out what is causing the failures. He is working overtime to solve the problem and I think his marriage is suffering.”

“I wondered if marrying Esther Sherman was a good idea,” Avi mused. “I know they were childhood sweethearts, but that does not always translate into a successful marriage. I wish there was something we could do for them.”

“I’m not sure there isn’t,” Rachel said. “When I get to staffing my ship, I’ll need to pull in a wide variety of people and Rashi’s munitions experience will be critical.”

“I must admit that a hospital ship with the armament of a battleship is a strange duck and you will have your hands full, but aren’t you asking for trouble if you have both of them under your command?” Greg asked.

“Actually, only Rashi would be under my command. Esther is a civilian and would be under HIS command.” She poked Isaac in the ribs and grinned. “As a pilot, I would have her flying one of the med-evac units and not a combat unit.”

“Rashi and Reuben are both pilots,” Greg observed.

“They would be more valuable as engineers. I can find pilots. It’s the ships that concern me.”

“Why is that?” Greg asked.

“The Space Force has not been forthcoming with other support. I know I will have the two destroyers I am supposed to have but they are stalling me on the P I ships and the pickets. I am getting mixed answers on the med-evac units.”

“And then there is the issue of crews,” Isaac interrupted. “I am having difficulty recruiting medical personnel. Doctors generally try to avoid going places where they might get shot at. There is something to be said for the controlled chaos of an inner city hospital. I may be forced to staff the hospital ship with recent med school grads and the odd bored retiree. It will not be an ideal situation. I suspect we will have the same problems once we start recruiting combat crews.”

“You know that Admiral Sherman is very interested in this project,” Avi commented.

“I had heard that,” Rachel replied.

“Admiral Sherman has a way of making projects he cares about happen,” Greg smiled. “I’ll bet if you get your cobbled together battle wagon out to him, you will find more support there than here.”

“Do you really think he could help us?” Isaac asked.

Avi smiled. "Let me put it to you this way. He told me if you didn't stop there on a recruiting trip with your new ship, he would be personally insulted."

Isaac grinned, "Then, we shouldn't disappoint him should we? I heard their new med school at New Boston should be graduating its first class next spring. I know there are not enough internship opportunities for all of the new doc's. And they will be trained with all the new technologies. Do you really think we could pick a few of their fresh MD's?"

"And RN's and LPN's I think," Avi offered.

"Sweet," Isaac said.

"Do you think Admiral Sherman would loan us a few ships?" Rachel asked.

"I know two P I ships who would be personally insulted if you didn't ask," Greg suggested.

"Do I have to listen to them whine?" Rachel asked.

"They promised to be good. No whining, but they are looking for action, too. They're bored. They know you'll take them where the action is."

"Wait a second," Isaac interrupted. "You're talking about ships like they're people. What's going on here?"

Rachel took his hand. "We talk about them like they're people because they think they are people, very special people."

Isaac shuddered. "This is too Asimov for me. They are machines, right?"

"Yes, they are machines and they know that, but they are so well programmed they think like people. There is a huge debate whether they are actually self-aware or only programmed to appear that they are. As far as I am concerned the difference is insignificant." Rachel replied.

"I can't believe this," Isaac said.

"Believe it. What until you meet them. Speaking of which. Do you think Peter would re-program my ship's computer? I could use all the help I can get."

Greg smiled, "He asked that question, too. He said that I shouldn't bring it up, but if you asked to tell you he'd be thrilled."

"Who's Peter?" Isaac asked.

"Dad's cargo ship," Rachel answered.

"Another computer?" Isaac asked.

"Yes," Rachel affirmed.

"I can't take any more of this!" Isaac exclaimed.

The others seated around the table laughed at his anguished expression.

“Get used to it,” Rachel said. “Say, have you heard from David?”

“David is deep in his studies,” Avi said. “I’m worried about him. Law school has become an obsession. I can think of worse obsessions to have, but I’m afraid he’ll burn himself out.”

“I agree,” Greg said. “He’s working much too hard. He’s scoring near the top of his class and Harvard is not exactly the easiest law school, but the grades don’t matter to him. It’s like the law has become his new lover and he is utterly devoted to her. He is entirely out of control. He has no social life and no other interests.”

“Isn’t there a woman in his classes he could be interested in?” Isaac asked.

“We asked around. His room mate said he gets passed at all time by both women and men. He’s just not interested.” Greg answered.

“Does he fly at all?” Rachel asked.

“Not enough. He piloted the ship that took the class on a field trip to the moon, but I think that’s it and he only did that because his adviser ordered him to. He didn’t have enough current flight time and was in danger of losing his pilot’s rating and his pilot’s salary. I talked to his adviser and he was the one who told me about David’s obsessive behavior. We’re not the only ones who care about him.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Rachel asked.

“Short of kidnapping him and stranding him on a desert island, I don’t think so,” Greg replied.

“We could at least try,” Rachel said.

“Yes, we should,” Isaac added.

“Whatever we think, there a couple of admirals out there who really want him to finish school. I think we should give him moral support, but we should leave him alone,” Greg cautioned. “His school counselors are aware of the problem and can deal with it. If they think they need help, they have been told to call us.”

“When is the ship scheduled to start its performance trials?” Avi asked, changing the subject.

“Two weeks,” Rachel replied. “The engines have been static fired and responded properly. All the control and maneuvering function problems have been fixed. The plan is to take it out of the service bay two weeks from Monday.”

“Are they doing a manned test or a remote control test?” Greg asked.

“Preprogrammed and remotely monitored,” Rachel replied.

“Even in the area near the shipyard? What about all the other ship traffic?”

“They are demanding that all other shipping clear the area when they take it out the first time.”

“They really don’t trust it do they?” Greg observed.

“No, not really,” Rachel said.

“Only time will tell. I think it should be fine, but it’s their job to err on the side of caution,” Greg said.



## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER SEVEN

COLONEL REGINALD CONNORS, Marine commanding officer of the special training program for military academy students on their summer hiatus looked up at the young man who had been ushered into his office.

“Stand at ease, Cadet.”

Colonel Connors glanced down at the file on his desk before addressing the cadet again.

“Cadet Winthrop, I am surprised you are here. As a Swordsman, you are no doubt aware that virtually everyone here at Parris Island hates you. Whatever hell on earth you have endured at the Academy will pale by comparison to what you will suffer here. I am sure you are an honorable and honest person, but your religion makes you the enemy. Are you aware how difficult that is going to make your summer here in training with the Marines?”

“Yes, sir, I do, sir.”

“You realize that every Christian evangelical in camp is going to seek you out for special attention and not all of that will be benign?”

“Yes, sir, I do, sir.”

“You realize that every son of a serviceman whose father died in combat against the Swordsmen will be going for your throat.”

“Yes, sir, I do, sir.”

“May I ask why you chose to come here?”

“Yes, sir, I came to learn to fight.”

“You certainly came to the right place. Your reports on your combat skills from the academy classes are quite good, but they will be children’s games compared to what you will face here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Cadet Winthrop, I have reviewed your files. I am aware of the circumstances of your father’s death. The ship that shot your father’s helicopter down had two people in it. I understand you have encountered one of those people in the academy and that she broke your nose. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You have stated that you will seek revenge on her for killing your father. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you aware that she did not kill your father and that her grandmother did?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any Federation officer motivated by vengeance is a hazard to themselves and everyone that serves under them. I hope if you learn nothing else this summer revenge makes you stupid. You make stupid mistakes and you endanger your fellow soldiers. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You should also know that the other person in that ship was her father. Her father was my sparring partner in this program when he was in the Academy. We still correspond and see each other on occasion. What that means is that for the time you are here at Parris Island, you can trust no one, not even me. You have no friends here. There will be times when the only thing that will keep you alive this summer is the recognition that others’ survival depends on your survival. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When the Swordsmen secession negotiations are complete, I assume that you will cross over to the other side. Remember this, once that happens, any of the officers you trained with, if they find you on the field of battle, will not hesitate to kill you. Everyone here expects that to happen. In battle, they will expect no quarter nor give any. You are on your own. I cannot guarantee your safety, but I will do my best to see that you survive your stay here. You will not die on my watch. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Cadet Emerson Winthrop the third, you are dismissed. Your sparring partner awaits on the parade grounds.”

“Yes, sir.”

Emerson found the summer to be as difficult as Colonel Connors warned him it would be. He sparred in the gym against motivated opponents. Even walking on the grounds he was not safe. He was caught in brawls as he walked outside his barracks. All summer long he fought. He grew stronger and faster, but the constant barrage took its toll on his spirit as the summer progressed.

Emerson did have one pleasant surprise that summer. The half dozen Jewish students in his platoon rallied around him to help defend him against the militantly Christian, the merely militant and those who blamed the loss of some relative who died in action against the Swordsmen on him personally. He asked why they did that for him since the Swordsmen hated the Jews so much. They explained that combat was one thing, but persecution was another. No one deserved to be persecuted like he was being persecuted.

Emerson grew stronger and wrote home frequently. He longed for the day when he could marry Harumi, the second daughter of the Swordsman clergyman who had adopted him and rescued him from the orphanage. The day would come when he would be a Swordsman officer and fight for the glory of his church, but for now he intended to learn everything he could from his future enemy.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER EIGHT

SABRINA MAHONEY ASSIMILATED into the team that wrote training simulations for combat pilots. She became one of the “alpha” test specialists working with the new software before it hit the “beta” stage and a wider range of testers. In the multi-player games she was always assigned the role as the aggressor once the software designers discovered the depth of her skills. As Father Hadalski had suggested, she was happy to teach the space flight school faculty because winning the games was so much fun and because to win she often had to step outside “the rules” as they were taught. There was something of a perverse delight in catching the software engineers by surprise.

Sabrina attended Sunday Mass every week. She did not always make early Mass, but she always took communion. There were fewer than a hundred Catholics on the planet and most of them were clustered at the Federation installation. There were a couple of the Catholic officers who caught her eye and she thought about settling down with one of them, but every time she climbed into the flight simulator and felt the blood rush of combat, she decided against doing anything that would keep her grounded for very long. In confession, she would occasionally apologize for not marrying and making lots of good Catholic babies, but she knew that while motherhood was not out of the question, settling down was and the kid would just have to get used to living in a space ship.

Captain Alina Darwin was admitted to an intense psychological program intended to mitigate her anxieties about men. The program was a complete failure. In his frustration, Rev Schwartz made her substitute in his place teaching the boys’ upper level martial arts classes. Boys of that age normally radiate high levels of pheromones and putting her in their midst would certainly increase the intensity of their activity. He hoped that the exposure to their adolescent maleness would inoculate her from the mental associations she had made in the past. He trusted her to not kill one of them because she did know they were just boys and not grown men.

By the end of the second week, Alina was teaching all the boys’ martial arts classes even down to the youngest grades. They loved her and she basked in the light of their affection. She enjoyed teaching the boys so much that the girls became jealous and soon she was teaching them as well. She quickly progressed to coaching the wrestling team and assisted with the gymnastics team. Although she did not know gymnastics, she did know conditioning and the proper ways to exercise.

Alina and Sabrina got together at the end of their work days for dinner and would normally would head off in separate directions. They had agreed that except for ceremonial occasions as appropriate to their faiths, neither would partake of alcohol and they found other ways to occupy their time.

Six months passed like a day. Alina occasionally joined Sabrina in the combat simulators and they made a formidable team. Combat simulators were tremendous fun for them, if not for their opponents. One evening they challenged the flight school instructors. The game screens and displays were simulcast to everyone in the community who wanted to watch. The event drew as large an audience as some of the more popular sporting events, which, in a sense, this was. With only two simulated P I ships, they held off a much larger force of instructors for three days before finally losing the battle. The severity of the “casualties” they inflicted on their opponents impressed everyone.

Alina and Sabrina were sitting at dinner a few days after the “big game” when a tall dark haired woman wearing the uniform of a Space Force Commodore approached their table. Slightly behind her

was a man also in a Commodore's uniform who looked vaguely familiar.

"May we join you?"

Alina and Sabrina jumped to their feet. "Yes, of course."

They scanned the name badges and both their hearts skipped a beat when they read the name "Solomon" on both badges. They noticed that she carried the white beret of a ship's captain, and he carried the black of a first officer. Their open mouths and wide eyes betrayed their feelings at having been approached by these two famous military geniuses.

The woman smiled. "Please sit. Greg, would you be a dear and get some coffee?"

"Sure."

"Ladies, I don't have a lot of time and I will jump right to the point. I wish I could get to know you two better and sometime in the near future we will have the opportunity to chat at length."

"Excuse me, ma'am," Alina interrupted. "Are you who I think you are?"

Avi smiled. "I am Avelina Bardwell Solomon and that is Greg Solomon and our daughters are Rachel and Wendy Solomon."

"Oh my!" Alina exclaimed.

"Before he gets back, Alina, forgive me for getting right to the point, but when you kill someone does it feel good?"

Alina's eyes popped open.

"Do you get a body rush that is unlike anything else you have ever done?"

"Yes," Alina replied tentatively.

"Better than sex?" Avi pressed.

"Yes," she grudgingly admitted the truth.

"And it frightens you," Avi stated.

"Yes," Alina said earnestly.

Avi continued, "You are afraid that there is a monster inside of you waiting to take over and you will go around killing for the fun of it because it is the best body rush you could ever get."

"Yes." She dropped her eyes in shame as she spoke.

Avi smiled. "Me, too."

Alina gasped.

Avi continued, "I don't like to say anything in front of Greg because I have him convinced that

sex is better than killing, and it is very good, but it's not better."

"Why are you telling me this?" Alina asked.

Avi checked to see that Greg was far enough away to not hear her. "Because I don't want you to make the same mistake I did, and I knew that there are only a few people you could hear this from that you would believe. Fear of the monster almost cost me Greg. I lost him once and I had to search the galaxy to find him again."

"Do you get that, that, feeling?" Alina asked.

"The power? Oh, yes. I used to walk aboard a captured ship wearing combat armor with two laser pistols and shoot anything that tried to get in my way. It was like a drug. It was awesome and addicting. I did it because I liked it. You feel it too, don't you?" Avi asked.

"Yes, I do. So what do I do about it?" Alina asked.

"Recognize it for what it is."

"What is it?"

"A survival skill. It will keep you alive, but if you are not careful it could kill you. It is a loaded weapon. Use it, cherish it, know that it is as much a part of you as any other part of your personality. Most of all, be careful when you choose the man you want to love. He will need to understand how you feel, but he must not share your blood lust. If he does, you will kill many innocents."

"Are there such men?"

"Greg is. There must be others."

"Does the feeling ever go away?"

"I don't think so."

"That's bad news."

Avi turned to Sabrina. "Sabrina, it's not like that for you is it? You're like Greg. You like the chase, the challenge of the conquest, but once the battle is won, you don't always know what to do with your conquered prize."

"No, not really," Sabrina agreed.

"Which is why you leave the messy parts for someone else," Avi said.

"Yes."

"You provide a balance for each other. Do what you can to stay together. You will be stronger as a team than you can be individually."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I have reviewed your records. I am recommending that you be returned to regular Federation service at the earliest opportunity. Admiral Sherman disagrees in that he hopes to keep you around. He thinks your presence is an asset to his organization and I can't disagree with him. You are assigned to his command and you can't leave until he gives his permission, but you are cleared to go anytime you can convince him to let you loose."

Greg returned with the coffee and sat down. "I reviewed the simulation you two played against the instructors and I must say I am impressed. Years ago I told Admiral Sherman never to attack a pirate head on and he didn't listen. You certainly took a piece out of his squadron!" Greg laughed.

"Admiral Sherman was playing?" Alina exclaimed in surprise.

"The second squadron was his. For a spook, he isn't real subtle," Greg said.

"A spook?" Sabrina asked.

"He was an intelligence officer before coming here. Still runs an amazing intelligence operation. If he decided it was important, he could find the names and current locations of all of your sex partners. He's that good at intelligence. At strategy, he's not so hot. I told him a dozen times to never try a straight in approach on a pirate. He didn't listen and you took him right out of the game. Some people have to learn the hard way, right Alina?"

"Some men have to learn the hard way!" Avi interjected.

"Ouch!" Greg laughed. "You should play against Admiral Sherman solo. You'd clobber him in a one-on-one. Try it sometime. Could be fun. Would serve him right for bottling you up here."

"We'll do that, but what if we like it here and want to stay." Sabrina asked.

"There is nothing that says you can't stay. Settle down, find nice husbands and make lots of happy babies. Except I don't think you'll do it. Unless I misjudged you, the right ship will come through and you'll race up the ramp to join the crew. Mark my words. To do otherwise would be a waste of your talents. The Federation needs people like you in command of its ships. Don't let us down." Greg replied.

"With all due respect, sir," Sabrina said, "I have not been impressed with the support the Federation gave you in the battle at Homestead or the battle here. Why are they deserving of our support?"

"They aren't worth much, but they are all that stands between us and lawlessness." Greg replied.

"There's a frightening thought," Alina said.

Avi looked at Alina and said, "Which is why operations like the one Admiral Sherman runs are so important. Support them while you are here, but come back to us when you can."

"I hate to eat and run," Greg said, "but we came here to pick up a gaggle of specialists who will

inspect the Swordsman nuclear plants to see if they are generating power or building weapons. They should be aboard the ship by now.”

“Before we go,” Avi said. “My mother, Rose Bardwell, works in the child care center. She understands women with your special problem. Talk to her. She can help you more than all those psyche idiots over at the hospital.” Avi paused and grinned. “I understand that half the boys in the school are having wet dreams over you!”

Alina blushed. Sabrina laughed.

“It’s good for them!” Greg laughed. “Take care of yourselves. We’re off.”

Sabrina and Alina sought out Rose a few days later. They spent several evenings together and they found, much to Alina’s surprise, that Rose really did understand the blood lust. They were even more surprised to find that Rose felt it, too. When she explained how she felt after she pulled the trigger that sent the bullet between the eyes of the man that raped Lonnie and what it felt like to watch his brains spray all over the wall behind him, they understood the power they were dealing with.

What they did not expect from this white haired grandmother who had killed perhaps a half dozen men, was that she was a radically passionate pacifist at heart. By the time she finished explaining her plan for peace by using counter balanced interstellar forces, Alina and Sabrina were as committed to the plan as Rachel and Wendy.

Sabrina and Alina found that they were comfortable with Rose and spent as much of their free time as they could with her and the babies in the child care center. Being around the babies did not make them want any of their own, but there was comfort to be found in handling their small bodies and nurturing their developing minds.

Sabrina challenged Admiral Sherman to a one-on-one in the combat simulator and beat him handily. Half a dozen re-matches later, he finally gave up.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER NINE

FEDERATION INTELLIGENCE SERVICE Lt. Faye Anne Sherman walked unannounced into the closet in the corner of the shipyard's administrative complex that Captain Rachel Solomon used for an office. She was followed by Commodore McGuire of the Judge Advocate General's office and by Admiral Stonebridge.

Rachel looked up from her workstation. Whatever brought these three people into her office could not be good news. The last she had heard, her friend, classmate and flying buddy, Faye Anne was at Federation Intelligence Headquarters at Langley. Commodore McGuire, who had saved her from an ugly courts marshal, was supposed to be at Andrews. Admiral Stonebridge, who had "recruited" her for this assignment, was supposed to be dirt-side scaring up money for the project. She did not waste her time and theirs speculating on what could have brought them. She stood to greet them.

Admiral Stonebridge spoke first, "Let's move to the conference room."

Once settled in the conference room, Faye Anne blurted out, "How fast can you get that bucket of bolts of yours space-worthy?"

"We could take it out now. The engineers have had it out of the dock a couple of times. It won't run at the speeds the Space Force mandates, but it passed most of the engineering tests. It's almost ready for us to start recruiting staff. Why?"

Commodore McGuire cut Faye Ann off. "How long would it take to recruit your staff?"

"Depending on how fast Staff Allocation works, could be six months."

Admiral Stonebridge leaned across the table. "Captain Solomon, you have one month to be ready to ship out. Lt. Sherman will fill in the details. Commodore McGuire and I have to visit the President. Do not leave port for longer than twenty-four hours until you hear from us. Understood?"

"Yes, sir. But why, sir?"

"Lt. Sherman will explain." The two men turned and left.

Rachel stared at Faye Anne for a minute before Faye Anne was satisfied Rachel was calm enough to hear the news.

"What?" Rachel screamed once Faye Anne had finished the explanation. "You want me to be completely operational and ship out in a month! Are you out of your mind?"

"Fifty thousand lives are at stake," Faye Anne replied calmly.

"Why can't they send a hospital ship and passenger liners? We can't lift that many people!"

"There aren't ships available and the people don't want to be helped. We will have to shoot our way in to rescue them from their own stupidity."

Rachel closed her eyes. She was getting a tension headache. Headaches were becoming an



increasingly frequent occurrence. "If they're that stupid, why don't we let them die?" Faye Anne was turning a merely bad day into a horrible day.

"Because we are the Federation and not barbarians," Faye Anne shot back.

"Sometimes I wonder," Rachel sighed.

She called Isaac. The two women sat in silence staring across the table until he arrived. Isaac looked at the darkness under his wife's eyes and instantly keyed on her mood. Faye Anne stood when he entered the room. "Eh, what's up doc?" Faye Anne said pretending she was chewing on a carrot.

Isaac jumped right in. "The yard dogs are saying we ship out in a month. Would someone please tell me what's going on?"

"We just became the Lone Ranger in space," Rachel said sarcastically. "We are to be the white knight that rides off to rescue the delusional planet that does not want to be rescued from extermination by an errant comet."

"You're not serious," Isaac said.

"Deadly," Faye Anne replied.

Isaac shook his head as the enormity of the task sank in. "Where is this place?"

Faye Anne took four water glasses and arranged them on the table in something that resembled a gentle curve. "We're here. New St. Louis is here. Eretz is here and two weeks further out is Everest. That's where we're going."

"With two stops and flight time in between we won't be there for nine months," Isaac said. "How long before this thing hits and how bad will it be?"

"That depends on who you talk to," Faye Anne answered. "According to Federation Astrological Survey, the planet is in no danger. The comet will pass inside the orbit of the planet's moon and create a magnificent meteor shower, but will cause no damage. A team of Astrophysics graduate students from Fed Tech disagrees. They studied the system as part of a doctorate thesis. They say the collision will be an oblique hit with the body of the comet sweeping across the planet's atmosphere not far from the equator raining debris as it spirals down to impact the surface. Some of the chunks of rock falling to the surface could be as big as a kilometer across. They both agree that the pass will occur fifteen months from now."

"My money's on the grad students," Isaac said.

"Yeah," Rachel agreed. "We all know how good Survey is. Survey said that Homestead was uninhabitable and I grew up there."

Faye Ann said, "the problem is that the local population believes Survey and was completely bent out of shape that the graduate students surveyed their system without notifying them. They were especially angry that the students were there for six months without being detected. They do not take

kindly to visitors, even visitors who could help them.”

“I suppose this means we can’t just show up in their space, tell them who we are and start an evacuation?” Rachel said.

“Nope. They have fortified since then. It means we can expect to be shot at for the privilege of rescuing their sorry butts,” Faye Anne said.

“Which is why we have an armed hospital ship. Sometimes the best medicine is painful.” Isaac added. “Well gang, we need a plan. Let’s recruit who we can from here. We can send couriers to New St. Louis and New Boston and let them know we’re coming. One of my instructors retired last year. Let me see if I can drag him along. Admiral Stonebridge approved most of my org chart for the medical staff so let me start there.”

“I’ll see who Lt. Swanson in Staff Allocation can scare up,” Rachel said.

“Do you want me to get the boys?” Faye Anne asked.

“Reuben and Rashi?” Rachel asked.

“Who else?”

“If you would, yes, please. See who they can bring with them.” An hour later Captain Rachel Solomon sat across the desk from Lt. Gloria Swanson in the Space Force Staff Allocation Division complex attached to the shipyard.

“Captain Solomon, so it’s real. You’re going out.” The strawberry blond lieutenant who looked too old to still be a lieutenant said as soon as Rachel was settled.

“Yes.”

“All Right!!” She shouted, her eyes glistening. “It’s about damn time! Let’s get to work!”

“How did you know?”

“You wouldn’t be here for any other reason. Everyone in the office knows how much I’m interested in this project. Really, it’s about damn time you came to see me.”

Rachel smiled. “I guess that’s why the folks in the office wouldn’t let me see anyone else.”

“I would have killed them if they did. We have work to do.”

“I brought an org chart,” Rachel started tentatively as she brought out a large paper document.

“Kinda look like this?” The lieutenant projected an org chart on the screen next to her desk. It did look like Rachel’s except that it had more names filled in.

“Yes.” Rachel was stunned by the woman’s level of preparedness.

“We’re going to have to move quickly to get the people we need. But, before we get started, I

want to cut a deal with you.”

“Deal?”

“I’m coming on your ship.”

“In what capacity?”

“Education officer.”

“Done.”

“And my husband.”

“In what capacity?”

“Spacecraft maintenance. When I met him, he was flying helicopters dirt-side. He’ll fly anything. He’s flying passenger shuttles and he’s gone half the time. I would like to have a husband that’s around more. He’s actually better at fixing ships than flying them, but pilot pay is better.”

“Done.”

“And our son.”

“In what capacity?”

“Paramedic. He’s a first responder airborne paramedic with ten years on the job.”

“Done. Anyone else?” Rachel laughed.

“No, that’s it. Our daughter wants to stay dirt-side. She’s still in college. We’ll come back for her later.” Lt. Swanson handed Rachel a data module. “Homework. I have collected staffing data on every person who even so much as inquired about the project. Everyone in the office knew to forward the requests to me.”

Rachel took the module and stepped to the displayed org chart. “I see you have my sister on the chart. Isn’t that against regulations for us to be in the same chain of command?”

“Admiral Stonebridge said not to worry about it. He knew that when the time came you would want her on your team. He’s asking for a waiver of the rules on your behalf.”

“I see you have both Reuben and Rashi listed. Do you think they’ll come?”

“Girl, you don’t know who your friends are! Damn straight they’ll come! We will have to pry their current commanding officers off them, but they’ll come.”

“If Reuben comes, then Suwanee comes. That’s good. I miss her.”

“She’ll keep you out of trouble, that’s for sure!”

“What about Esther?”

“Esther is a civilian. We can’t order her to do anything. We have to be careful with our civilians. They need to be on the med side. That’s one of the reasons I suggested my husband not be a combat pilot as much as he might like it. He’s a civilian. Esther is a pilot and could also fly med-evac. I hear she loves to fly and flying med-evac is almost as tough as flying combat.”

“You have Faye Anne listed. She’s already told me she wants to come. You have David listed. I know he’s the sixth point of our star, but he’s in law school. I don’t think it would be fair to him to pull him out. Have you talked to him?”

“I haven’t. I thought since he was such a strong part of your team, you would want him back.”

“I do, but he has a more important mission. We’ll let him know how much we’ll miss him, but he needs to finish law school. I’ll bet Commodore McGuire has a protege he would be happy to send.”

“I’ll look into that.”

“Thank you very much. I will take this and read it. Shall we meet again tomorrow?”

“It would be my honor, Captain!”

Captain Rachel Solomon stepped out of the office feeling much lighter than she had going in. Staff Allocation Division had a reputation for being verbally cooperative, but slow moving. They agreed to virtually all requests made in person and then always found reasons for things to take longer than anticipated. Rachel hoped that she had found a live one.

Rachel was about to step out of the staffing complex reception area when a Commodore called to her. “Captain Solomon, could I see you a minute?” Rachel turned to face the officer who was half her size, but had a strong bearing and aura of determination about her.

“Certainly.”

“Please step into my office.”

The nameplate on the desk identified her as Commodore Helga Burkhalter. As soon as the door closed Commodore Burkhalter addressed her, “Captain, I suppose you think you’re something special because of your parents.”

“No, ma’am.” Rachel was instantly defensive.

“Then why do you think you can break a list of staffing regulations as long as my arm?”

“Because Admiral Stonebridge told me it was the only way I would be able to accomplish the mission he gave me, ma’am. With all due respect, ma’am, I am doing what I need to do to guarantee the safety of my crew and the success of my mission.” Rachel was getting a little hot under the collar.

“And how do you propose to do that? By stealing a member of my staff?”

“She asked me if she could come. I did not recruit her. She said she was interested in the project and wanted to be part of the crew.”

“Ever since she got busted for insubordination!”

Rachel stopped for a second before responding, “Insubordinate to whom, ma’am and what was her rank before she was busted?”

“Insubordinate to me! Captain! She outranked you before she was busted!”

Instantaneously, for a second, Rachel had the urge to dispatch this woman with the throwing knife secreted behind her neck under her uniform. It was strictly against regulations, but there nevertheless. Some habits die hard especially when tied to survival instincts. She quashed the emotion and stared at the irate Commodore.

The Commodore spotted the fleeting thought and stepped back, her eyes wide in fear.

Several seconds passed in silence.

Rachel finally spoke. “I will review the personnel data I have been given and will select my crew. Commodore, I thank you in advance for your assistance in expediting this project.”

“Captain, that will be all, thank you.”

Rachel left the office stunned by her own reaction as much as she was by the Commodore’s assault. She wasn’t the one who had the shortest fuse. Her mother was. Or at least, she thought she had her temper under control. The time she shot Shawn with the arrow and the time she threw her knife at David were ancient history. The idea that she even thought, however briefly, of killing a superior officer was frightening. The more she thought about it, the more she realized the wisdom of her grandmother’s advice that she and Wendy stay together as a pair.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TEN

ONE WEEK AFTER MEETING with Rachel, Commodore McGuire, Admiral Stonebridge, the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff of Federation Joint Military Force and the Chief of Staff for the Space Force met with the Federation President. She scanned the men standing before her.

“Let me see if I understand you gentlemen correctly,” she said. “There is a planet settled by neo-isolationists not far from the extreme edge of human expansion which is in danger of extermination due to a pending collision with a comet and the only ship we have in our entire fleet that can help is the kluge of a battleship grafted to a hospital ship now sitting in dry dock?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Admiral Stonebridge replied.

“And you want me to order a mission that sends an untested ship assembled from derelicts based on an untested concept with an unproven crew lead by an inexperienced commanding officer into a hot spot because we have no other ships that can do the job?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Admiral Stonebridge replied.

“Actually,” the Chief of Staff of the Space Force interrupted, “what he wants is for you to request the J M F to authorize the mission and for me to order it.”

The President sighed. “Sometimes I am glad that this is my last term in office. I can do what I believe is the right thing to do without worrying about the political consequences.”

The men looked at her in varying degrees of confusion. “The party will nominate Brendan and he’s been a great VP, but he will get absolutely clobbered in the polls. We will all be out of jobs this time next year.”

“Maybe the publicity from this humanitarian effort will help. If not, I am sure there is a planet out there that would be thrilled to have you retire in their community and use your influence on their behalf.” Admiral Stonebridge suggested.

“Of that I have no doubt. The problem will be finding a planet that will not be involved in the war the Conservatives are about to launch on the Swordsman as soon as they are elected. They are opposed to the secession negotiations. They want to force the Swordsmen to stay in the Federation.”

“Don’t they realize that the Federation Charter prohibits such a war for five years after the signing of the secession documents?” Commodore McGuire asked.

“The Conservatives have a way of ignoring those parts of the charter that are inconvenient to them this week. Free speech is only free if it agrees with them. Privacy is only private if it’s theirs. They will take us to war and there is nothing we can do about it. They will force most of the current senior military staff into retirement and replace them with their toadies. Officially the justification is that the people being retired are not aggressive enough or loyal enough to the Federation when in fact their only crime will be trying to prevent us from launching an illegal war.”

“How do the Swordsmen feel about this?” Admiral Stonebridge asked.

“They don’t want a war any more than we do. They want to abandon the rest of the Federation to our sinful ways and wait for the Almighty to annihilate us for our sins. Then they can take over the planets we have left behind. That’s why they are so interested in concluding the secession negotiations while I am still in office. If the agreement is not ratified before the election, it won’t ever be ratified.”

“Do you think the Conservatives are trying to build a ‘Star Wars’ style empire?” Commodore McGuire asked.

“They have as much as said so. They advocate strong central government and tighter control on personal freedoms. They expect their series of what they believe will be limited scale wars will drive their economies and make them all rich.” She scanned the men standing before her one more time trying to decide if she should do as she had been asked. “Admiral?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You have a reputation for not being entirely forthcoming or informative when you want something. What are you not telling me?”

“The complexity of the mission, the risk of failure, the difficulties that lie ahead for the crew. I have spared you those details. What else would you like to know?”

She shook her head. “You have your permission. I will request that the Space Force take on this risky mission. Further, I will request that young Captain Solomon be given a free hand in choosing her staff. I suspect that she will want her sister to be part of her team. You are going to have to make some exceptions to the rules about family serving together, but since I established the precedent with their parents, you can blame it on me. My only condition is that everyone who goes on this mission must be a volunteer. No conscripts and no coercion. Even if they have a grand and glorious success, the news won’t reach us until after the election. Gentlemen, you have your orders. Thank you.”

Once out of earshot of the office, Commodore McGuire leaned over to Admiral Stonebridge as they walked and said, “At least you didn’t lie to her.”

“Fat lot of good that’s going to do if they fail.”

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER ELEVEN

RACHEL WAS ON THE SHIP studying the materials she had been given in what would eventually become the Captain's conference room once the rest of the furnishings arrived. Files and data modules floated around her. The ship was weightless in the yard to facilitate the work being done on it. A stocky man with curly black hair, a close trimmed thick black beard wearing a flight suit and captain's bars floated effortlessly into the room. "This ship is a shit pile."

"Welcome to the Federation Space Force Hospital Ship 28 Albert Schweitzer. Whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

"Captain Grant Curra, your new executive officer."

Rachel looked up at him. "And what makes you think I want you for my exec?"

Captain Curra laughed. "Commodore McGuire said that would be your first comment."

"How can you be my exec because I'll bet you outrank me?"

"And that would be your second."

"What does Commodore McGuire have to do with this?"

"He is good!"

"Start at the beginning. Who are you? Why are you here? How can you be my exec if you outrank me and what does McGuire have to do with all this?"

"Commodore McGuire said he'd keep me out of the brig if I promised to join your crew. He said you would need my special talents. He called. I came. I don't outrank you. I got busted. I was a good exec. I will be again. You need a great exec and I will be that. I am Captain Grant Curra, former executive officer on a series of ships which increased in size at each step. My most recent assignment was exec on the battleship Attila the Hun." He handed her a data module.

"Do I get any choice in this?"

"Yes and no. You could send me away and I would be released from my promise to Commodore McGuire, but you would be stupid to do so, and you do not have a reputation for stupid."

Rachel debated which question to ask next. "What did you get busted for?"

"Unauthorized procurement of Federation equipment."

"As in theft?"

"No, the equipment was in Federation possession. It was merely on a ship other than the one for which it was intended."

Rachel paused to think about what he had just said. "Is this the special talent that Commodore



McGuire referred to?”

Captain Curra brightened. “Yes, ma’am.”

She thought for a second. “What happened to your captain when you got busted? Surely he knew what was going on.”

“He quietly took early retirement.”

“And what happens when we get caught?”

“Since we likely won’t be back in this area for years, we’ve got some time to figure that out. Besides, I suspect between Admiral Stonebridge and Commodore McGuire, we’ll keep you out of trouble. Of course, being your parents’ daughter won’t hurt matters. You are war heroes after all.”

Rachel shook her head in resignation and backed up to the other question she had meant to ask earlier. “What do you know about my reputation? I’ve made some pretty dumb moves.”

“What, like losing a quarter of your squadron in battle when every other captain I know would have lost all of it? Still brooding? Hmm? Losing ships in battle is an occupational hazard. I feel the loss of my comrades who have fallen in battle as much as anyone, but you did the right thing.”

“Maybe.”

He grinned. “You’re not a kid anymore. You need to think like the sharp commanding officer you are. You have an excellent track record. For one thing, there’s the brilliant way you handled yourself when you found those nukes on your cargo ship. Nicely done. You are Greg and Avi’s kid and there is nothing you can do to change that. Own up to it and be who you are meant to be.”

“Right now, I am a little overwhelmed.”

“Understandable. Most other people would be completely overwhelmed and not just a little. Ah, before we go on, I have one more thing to give you.” He handed her a data module. “Play it now.”

Rachel plugged the data module into her personal data assistant. Commodore McGuire’s image appeared on the display.

“Captain Solomon, I am glad that you have decided to take my recommendation and add Captain Curra to your staff. He is an experienced hand and you have much to learn from him. You will need three types of people on your staff. The first type is the person who knows you and trusts you. These are the people who are loyal to you and will follow you wherever you go and whatever you do. The second type is the person who shares your vision of the mission and is prepared to do what ever they can to support it and therefore support you. The Captain is of the third type. He is proud of himself and of his work. He will not fail you or your mission, not so much because he believes in it, but because he believes in himself and his ability to do whatever needs to be done. He will not always follow the rule book, but he will always get the job done. He is the right person for the job you need to have done for your mission to succeed. Take care of yourself and our ship.”

Rachel turned to Captain Curra. “Do you agree with all that?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Please have Lt. Swanson over at SAD fill out the necessary documentation. Then, when you are done, make a complete and thorough examination of the ship and report with any concerns you might have that would need my attention. In addition, focus carefully on those areas where your special skills will come into play. Do you have quarters here on the station?”

“No.”

“Then you might as well settle into the executive officer’s quarters in the executive suite such as it is. Until my husband returns from Earth, you and I will be the ship’s only crew. I moved here from the VOQ two days ago. The ship has been certified for habitation.”

“Very good. When do the Marines arrive?”

“Soon, I hope.”

“Good. I will need their assistance. I understand that you have a squad of Marines who are your personal friends and fit in the first group Commodore McGuire mentioned.”

“Yes, it will be good to be all back together again. I miss them.”

Captain Curra floated off in the direction of the staffing office complex.

Less than an hour later Rachel’s personal comm unit sounded for her attention. She had barely acknowledged the call when Commodore Burkhalter from Staffing Allocation screamed, “Are you out of your mind? Captain Curra is a felon! He belongs in the brig not on the bridge of a battleship!”

“According to the proceedings of the Courts Marshal, the lawyers would disagree.”

“The man is a thief!”

“According to the proceedings of the Courts Marshal which I have in front of me, Captain Curra did not take personal gain from the material he is accused of having taken. In fact, even the prosecutor acknowledged that had he not taken matters into his own hands, the mission to which he was assigned would have failed for lack of adequate supplies with considerable loss of life.”

“I guess I should have expected as much from Greg Solomon’s daughter.”

“Glad to not disappoint you. You seem very familiar with my father. Are you a notch on his gun belt? I heard there were many in the time when he and my mother were not seeing each other.”

“How dare you speak to me like that!”

“I’ll take that as an affirmation.”

“You insolent, insubordinate minx!”

“Commodore Burkhalter, I may be insolent, but I am not insubordinate. You have the authority to reject my choices for my crew. That is why I sent Captain Curra to you for your approval. You could

reject any of my candidates, but I suggest that you do so at your own risk.”

“You will regret having spoken to me this way.”

“Commodore, I record all my official conversations. We will let Commodore McGuire be the judge of that.” The comm unit display indicated the call terminated.

The comm unit sounded again with Wendy’s special tone. “Hey, did you really get permission for me to fly with you?”

“Did you get orders?”

“Yup. Can I bring my crew?”

“Are they any good?”

“Of course!”

“Send me their files so I can run it by SAD. I don’t see why not. Actually send it directly to Lt. Swanson in SAD. She’ll handle the documentation. Copy me on anything you send her.”

“Got it! See you in a couple of days!”

“The sooner you and your crew are on board, the happier it will make me.”

“The cavalry is coming!”

Reuben called in an hour later. “Hey, Rachel, I got orders for your ship. Is this real?”

“Yes, did Suwanee get orders, too?”

“I don’t know. I’ll check when I see her tonight.”

“She should have orders, too.”

“How did you do that?”

“Commodore McGuire and Admiral Stonebridge did it. I’m just riding the wave.”

“What about the rest of the gang?”

“I requested them. We’ll see who shows.”

“Just like old times.”

“Almost, David is not coming.”

“Why?”

“I want him to finish law school.”

“I’ll miss him, but we need him more in legal than we’ll need him on this mission. I know a good legal officer here I could probably convince to join us.”

"I asked Commodore McGuire to find one, but if you have a good one, send the file to Lt. Swanson in SAD."

"See you in a couple of days."

Rashi called in almost as soon as Reuben hung up.

"Rachel, I just got my orders. Esther is away delivering a new yacht. As soon as she gets back, we'll be there."

Isaac and Joshua had immediately left for Boston to try and recruit medical staff from their former colleagues. For two weeks they pounded the pavement ferreting out available members of New England's medical community. Meeting with limited success, they expanded their search and traveled from medical school to medical school trying to find people willing to uproot themselves on short notice and join this risky venture. After the third week of bouncing from city to city, they packed it in. When they returned to the ship, with one week left before departure, they had less than ten percent of the staff needed to properly operate the ship. Disheartened, they reported to Rachel.

"I know the plan was to use only civilian medical staff, but why can't we use military personnel?" Rachel asked.

"Will they take orders from a civilian?"

"Most will."

"I don't know. What we're doing is pretty radical medicine," Isaac said.

"No more radical than what goes on in a ship that has taken enemy fire. We'll put the word out for anyone that wants to join us to meet us in New St. Louis."

"That will be good. I only hope we can find the rest of the people we need in New Boston."

Exactly 178 hours before the ship was scheduled to depart, Rachel felt a familiar thump radiate along the ship's structure. Rachel smiled and waited for the call. She felt a second thump like the first a moment later.

"Hey, Rachel! The gang requests permission to come aboard."

Other than Captain Curra, Rachel, Isaac and Joshua, Wendy and the crews from the two destroyers were the first inhabitants of the assembled ships now known as the F S F H S 28 Albert Schweitzer. When the ships were up to full staff, the battleship would have a military crew of two hundred. Rachel's first command had been three ships and a score of people. Her second command had been sixteen ships and sixty-eight people of which she had lost four ships and sixteen people. This newest command would include a military compliment of two hundred under her direct chain of command. The civilian component under Isaac's command would be as large. The battleship had originally supported a crew of five hundred, but with the automation and computer controls that had been added in the last year, it was fully operational with a crew a fifth of that size. The remainder of Rachel's command was made up of the flight crews and their support. The original battleship had never traveled without escort. The smaller vessels that protected the battleship were supported on tenders and other vessels in the convoy. In its new configuration, Rachel's ship was intended to travel alone and be

self sufficient with everything it needed somehow bolted to the massive extended space frame.

Within six hours of Wendy's arrival, all of Rachel's original team who were coming had assembled. Reuben and Suwanee arrived not long after Wendy and her crews. Rashi and Esther arrived shortly thereafter. Faye Anne showed up with a stunningly handsome blond young man who she had recommended for science officer, Lt. Dale Hammersmith.

Rachel's sparring partner in the Marine summer programs had been Marine Lt. Suwanee Baxter who had married Space Force Lt. (Engineering) Reuben Abrams following his graduation from the Space Force Academy. Gunnery Sergeant Patricia Hefner had been Wendy's sparring partner. She arrived with Faye Anne's sparring partner, Gunnery Sergeant Janet Rivers. Reuben's sparring partner, Gunnery Sergeant Darius Black, tracked Reuben down in the engineering department not even taking time to unpack before digging into his duties. Rashi's sparring partner, Gunnery Sergeant Lionel Sanford and David's sparring partner Gunnery Sergeant Luther Townsend covered the group's rear dragging a squad of eighteen space trained Marines straight out of school at Parris Island in tow.

Rachel smiled to see the Marines who had so quickly changed from green recruits themselves and metamorphosed into veterans of more than a few campaigns. It was not so long ago that she and Suwanee had raced across the parade field that first day of summer training after her freshman year at the Academy. She hoped that she had grown enough to be their commander.

Captain Curra greeted each of the new arrivals and pointed them in the direction of their quarters. In the battleship's previous configuration, the plan for living quarters had called for the enlisted personnel to bunk up in quads, junior officers in doubles and senior officers in singles. Command staff, which included himself, flight ops, engineering, tactical, combat info (intelligence) and science were assigned two room suites. Rachel had a two room suite with a conference room attached. The remainder of the officers would normally be assigned to single rooms. With a fraction of the crew the ship was designed to accommodate, no one need be cramped. The ship would be departing with a quarter of its intended military crew and a tenth of its intended civilian crew so living space, at least for now, was simply not an issue. Those people that wanted to live together could and those that wanted to live alone could do that, too.

Captain Curra was especially happy to see the Marines. He immediately pulled Suwanee aside to talk to her. As the commander of the Marine contingent, he needed her cooperation.

At the end of the nominal "day" shift, Rachel gathered everyone in the battleship's galley for a dinner of individually packaged flight rations designed to be consumed in weightlessness. Everyone was excited about the opportunity of seeing action. The few civilians who had arrived that day sensed the mood and quickly became part of the euphoria.

Captain Curra called for everyone's attention as he floated upside down relative to everyone else in the room.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I think our Captain should make a speech on this auspicious occasion."

Rachel gathered her thoughts. She welcomed them by name and expressed her gratitude at their joining her crew. "The moral of this story is to be careful of what you wish for. You just might get it. I suggested that a good use for aging battleships might be as hospital ships. The thought of creating an armed hospital ship seemed like a contradiction, but at the same time it made sense. We are about to find out how much sense it really makes. Ladies and Gentlemen, from the depth of my heart I thank

you for being willing to experiment with me. I can't promise this will work, but I can promise you..."

Isaac interrupted, "Life with Rachel is never dull!"

The room erupted with laughter.

Isaac continued, "Folks, for those of you who don't know me, I'm Mister Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen." He grinned at her. "And she is Missus Doctor Isaac Cohen. This grand experiment is not without risk. I thank you for being here and I hope that you will find the experience rewarding. In the meantime, I understand Captain Curra has some work for us. Captain?"

"Thanks Doc! Yes, folks we are about to play one of my favorite games. It's called midnight requisition. As you probably noticed, the ship is bare of such amenities as mattresses on the bunks or fresh food in the galley. We will split into teams and procure what we need. When we leave port we will be as well equipped as we can be given the resources at hand."

Captain Curra divided the crew into small groups. Each group included at least one Marine. He sent them on their way with instructions where to find what they needed and how to bring it back. When everyone else was gone, Rachel, Isaac, Wendy and Joshua were left in the galley.

"Grant," Rachel said, "shouldn't we be doing something?"

He turned to her. "You ladies have been apart from your husbands for a while. Once we get started, you will be hard pressed to find quiet time to be together. You go hide somewhere and let me run things for the next few days. Oh, by the way, as you suspected, your father did spend some time with the wicked witch from SAD, the infamous then Lt. Burkhalter. The rumor is that he was seen fleeing from her quarters carrying his shoes. Whatever was going on must have been real ugly for him to do that. He did not have a reputation for running out on women in the middle of the night. Now, you all get out of here, you need to be fresh in the morning because no one else will be."

They didn't need to be told twice.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FINAL WEEK OF PREPARATIONS was a frenzy of activity. No one on the ship slept more than four hours a night. New arrivals were put to work as soon as they tossed their luggage into their quarters. There was some question as to whether Captain Curra slept at all that week. His “procurement” teams ranged the length and breadth of the shipyard. Badly needed items rapidly filled storage areas and food lockers. When Rachel thought the old cargo ship’s hold could take no more, the battleship’s munitions magazines were filled with even more material than Rachel thought possible. At the end of every shift Captain Curra brought manifests and procurement forms for Rachel to sign. As he explained it, this was the difference between “midnight procurement” and theft. He would drop off the completed forms with the appropriate offices moments before the ship departed. This way they would keep what they took and still keep it in Federation possession.

Rachel understood the motivation behind most of what Captain Curra had collected. The one piece she did not understand was the nonfunctional cargo shuttle he rescued from the bone yard. It was identical to the ones she remembered from her childhood on Homestead.

“Why do we need that?”

“I don’t really know. Call it a hunch. It was there. It was free. So I took it.”

Two hours before their scheduled departure, Captain Curra found Rachel, Wendy, Reuben, Rashi, Faye Anne, Science Officer Lt. Dale Hammersmith, Space Frame Specialist Lt. Richard Trucks and Propulsion Specialist Dag Halliburton on the bridge running through their departure check lists.

“Captain, are we ready for departure on schedule?” Captain Curra asked.

“We are indeed. I should ask you the same question,” Rachel said.

“Yes, we are. I will go make my document run. If I might suggest, you might wish to gather all the passengers and crew together for a briefing before we pull out.”

“Sort of like a life boat drill?”

“In a sense. Might I suggest the galley in the passenger liner? It’s the only space large enough to gather everyone together.”

“Should we wait for you to get back?”

“No, I will be back in one hour and fifty-nine minutes. When I hit the deck, you slam the air lock doors tight and light the candle.” He grinned a wide toothy grin.

“Got it!”

Fifty military personnel, twenty medical and support staff and twenty civilians who had decided that risking passage on this untested ship was better than waiting two more weeks for the next ship headed to New St. Louis gathered in the galley. Since the ship was still orbiting at the shipyard, it was weightless. Some of the passengers were not dealing with the weightlessness very well and the military personnel who had experience with weightlessness were tending to them. Rachel and Wendy floated at

one end of the room with their husbands by their sides.

Due to reasons of both protocol and practicality, the military and civilian personnel had used different loading ramps to enter the ship. The ramp the civilians had used had been disconnected an hour ago. This was the first time everyone on the ship had been gathered in one place.

After a moment, Rachel took a deep breath and started to speak. "Over two decades ago five courageous women hijacked, or rather, drafted our father for a mission that made history. The ship they rode to the planet they would later name Homestead is a lot like the one that forms the center core of this ship. Twenty-nine people fled Earth expecting never to return. They were followed by other refugees seeking freedom from persecution. Half of these twenty-nine original settlers died in the battle to defend their home planet. Of the settlers that had followed that original group, many of them died in the same battle. My sister and I fought in that battle. The invading force was vanquished with almost total losses.

"A few years later, my family was called upon to defend another planet from the same enemy. Again we prevailed. We lost ten people and five ships. They lost many more than that. Due to the advanced weapons we used, we were able to capture thousands of enemy combatants without excessive loss of life. It is my goal that the casualty ratios in any confrontation we may encounter will be like the latter and not like the former."

Rachel checked to see if she still had their attention. "We are over a hundred people short of our authorized staffing and yet we will embark on a mission that could as easily make history as the one our father embarked on as he fled from Earth. I do not wish to minimize the risk of our mission. What we are doing is dangerous. I will do everything I can to minimize that risk and I expect all of you to do the same. Always remember that our lives depend on all of us working together. The ships we are traveling in are not completely equipped or even totally assembled. As we travel, we will use the material in the holds to furnish and finish our living quarters and to equip the medical facilities. Folks, the sad fact is that space travel is boring. We will fill the time in transit building our ships. We will make them as mission ready as we can en-route to New St. Louis. I will send a courier missile ahead detailing our needs and I hope we will pick up staff and equipment there. From there we will travel to Eretz where I hope we will pick up the remainder of our staff and equipment."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we leave in three quarters of an hour. The flight crews will check to see that all civilians are securely strapped into their seats for the transition to standard drive and then to hyper drive before securing themselves. We will travel in standard drive at low speed for two hours. We will accelerate in standard drive another two hours. Do not leave your flight seats during that time. I recommend you take a sedative if you are not familiar with space travel. We will jump into hyper drive four hours after we depart from the dock. Once we are established in hyper drive, I will make an announcement and I would like everyone to return here and be checked by the medical personnel. Not everyone takes the transition to hyper drive well and there are things that can be done to ease the transition. It's that time, let's go."

Rachel looked around and said to no one in particular, "and so it begins."

Rachel and the flight crew returned to the bridge. Their flight plan filed, the traffic controller cleared them for departure. One by one, the ship's crew disconnected the cables and connections mating the ship with the shipyard's support systems as they brought the ship's internal systems on line in accordance with the pre-flight checklists. Finally, the only connection that remained between the



shipyard and the ship was the access tube the military personnel had used to enter the spacecraft.

The ship and its crew patiently waited for Captain Curra. Reuben's former sparring partner, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Darius Black stood in his E V A suit inside the right hand side at the far end of the boarding tube that still attached the ship to the shipyard inside the tube's airlock outer door. Rashi's former sparring partner, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Lionel Sanford waited on the left side wearing his E V A suit. David's former sparring partner, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Luther Townsend hung behind them in his EVA suit waiting to pass a large football to Faye Anne's former sparring partner, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Janet Rivers and Wendy's former sparring partner, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Patricia Hefner. Marine Lt. Suwanee Baxter – Abrams, Rachel's former sparring partner and Reuben's wife, stood by the airlock controls.

Exactly sixty seconds before departure time, Captain Curra raced down the departure tube with two Space Force security officers hot on his heels. Like a well-oiled machine, the Marines sprung into action. Luther grabbed the captain by his belt and collar and tossed him mightily up the loading tube. He then raced to follow. The catchers on the other end of the tube grabbed the captain and tossed him through the ship's inner airlock door. As soon as they were all clear, Lt. Baxter closed the inner airlock door. Sergeants Sanford and Black fended off the pursuing security officers and pushed them back inside the safety of the station's airlock. As soon as the security officers, who were not wearing vacuum suits, were clear of the station's airlock doors, Darius manually slammed the airlock doors shut sealing the station from the boarding tube. Once Suwanee called that the inner airlock door was closed, the two Marines at the end of the tube disengaged the tube from the station, but not from the ship. Their tethers kept them from blowing out to space along with the air in the tube.

As soon as Rachel heard that the tube had been disconnected from the station, she engaged the engines and the ship started to move. Using electric winches attached to the tethers, Sergeant Townsend reeled his two buddies back up the tube. Once all three were safely inside the confines of the airlock, they released the access tube to float away and be picked up by a salvage crew. They closed the outer airlock door. After the pressure had equalized, they opened the inner air lock door, opened the helmets on their E V A suits and headed for their stations to strap in for the transition into hyper drive. The three female Marines carried an exhausted Captain Curra to his quarters where he fell asleep before they finished strapping him in.

Within minutes of departure, they received an angry message from Station Security demanding that they return to port.

"Station Security, this is Captain Solomon of the Federation Space Force Hospital Ship 28 Albert Schweitzer. I acknowledge your request that we return to port. Given the volume of traffic in this area it would be unsafe to turn this large a ship at this time. I will endeavor to return when I have sufficient area around my ship to do so safely."

"Roger that, Captain Solomon. You will have sufficient clearance in ten minutes at your current course and speed."

"Acknowledged. Might I inquire as to the condition of the two officers who attempted to stow away on my ship and were sent back at the last moment?"

“Ahem, the two officers suffered minor bruises. They were not trying to stow away. They were trying to apprehend Captain Curra.”

“Acknowledged.” Rachel closed the ship-to-ship comm.

Rachel keyed her personal comm, “Suwanee, what’s Grant’s status?”

“Sleeping like a baby,” Suwanee chuckled.

“10-4, thanks.”

“Incoming open communication,” Faye Anne reported.

“Not encrypted?”

“Nope.”

“Who’s it from?”

“Commodore McGuire”

“Put it on the speakers.”

“Commodore, it’s good to hear from you! I have you on speaker so everyone on the bridge can hear you.”

“Captain, I wanted to wish you and your crew a safe and successful voyage. Please keep us here at home informed of your progress.”

“Roger that!”

“I have a surprise for you.”

David’s voice came over the speakers, “Hey gang, are you all there on the bridge?”

“Most of us are. The Marines are off being Marines.”

“When I first heard you were leaving without me, I was hurt. I called Commodore McGuire to see if he could change your mind, but he refused. He explained why you and he thought I should stay here. I still wish I could go with you, but I understand your thinking. Promise me that when I finish law school you’ll come back for me.”

“David, you have a home on any ship I command,” Rachel replied. “Finish school first.”

Wendy shouted out, “How’s Boston? You meeting lots of exciting women?”

“I’ve been too busy to have much of a social life,” David replied.

“Shame on you!” Wendy shouted back. “You should be partying up a storm with all those good looking college girls!”

David laughed, “Boston is the ultimate college town. That’s for sure.”

“When we get back I don’t want to hear that you have been cloistered in the library for your entire time,” Faye Anne warned. “I will have my spies reporting on you.”

“No doubt! Have a safe voyage and when we get together I want to hear the stories.”

“Roger that!”

The bridge was eerily quiet after David disconnected.

The ship proceeded slowly through the traffic around the shipyard. Hundreds of small ships clogged the space around the resurrected battleship. Entire fleets of well wishers flashed their running lights in gestures of good will. The old ship gradually accelerated as the numbers of small sightseeing craft surrounding the ungainly monster shrank and the path out of the system cleared ahead of them.

For the four hours it took for the ship to reach one G of acceleration in standard drive, there were too many small sightseeing craft for the ship to safely turn around. The traffic controllers attempted valiantly to clear the traffic but finally gave up. Captain Grant Curra had escaped them yet again. As soon as the space around the ship cleared enough to do so, Rachel engaged the hyper drive and the mission began.

Rachel gradually increased the acceleration to one G of hyper drive. Even though the ship had passed its basic flight trials, it had not been thoroughly tested and Rachel was being conservative.

“Reuben, can we go any faster than one G? This trip is going to be forever long.”

“Patience, my dear Captain,” Reuben replied. “Rashi and I inspected the space frame along with Space Flight Engineering Specialist Five, Trucks while we were still in the yard. Do we have time for a little physics lesson?”

“We have all day,” Rachel sighed.

“The four ships that were assembled to make the Albert Schweitzer were stacked end for end. The drive units were removed and arrayed at the after end. The structure holding the four drive units together is well designed and strong. We have no concerns there. Immediately forward of the drive units the space frame consists of four large trusses providing separation between the propulsion unit and the aft end of the cargo bays from the old cargo ship. Removing the cargo ship’s crew quarters and bridge module reduced the mass of the cargo ship by about ten percent. More of the cargo ship could have been removed, but we would have lost its docking ports. The four P I ships and the two destroyers dock to the cargo ship.”

“I know all this.”

“Hang in with me. We’re not in a race. The old passenger ship is attached ahead of the cargo ship. Since its bridge was redundant, it was removed. The space separating the propulsion unit from the body of the ship was also redundant and it was removed. That reduced that ship’s mass by thirty percent. The four pickets and whatever personnel shuttles we might need will use the passenger ship’s docks. In fact, it was the need for docking ports and not cabin space that drove the inclusion of the passenger ship into the plan.”

“You still haven’t told me how fast we can go.”

"I'm getting there. The hospital ship's bridge was removed and the redundant structure behind the body of the ship was removed. Unfortunately, the spinning operating rooms that adjust to accommodate the direction of the simulated gravity are heavy. The hospital ship even with all the unneeded parts removed masses as much as the passenger liner did before it was stripped. Add the med-evac ships and their docks and things start to get heavy forward. Now we come to the most massive part of all. The battleship with its armor and its munitions is the heaviest component. Even with the massive structure of the drive units for balance, the center of mass of this ship is further forward than is normally the practice. This makes the ship difficult to maintain on course."

"We know this."

"Yes. In addition, all the stress of the force of the drives pushing the ship is translated to the space frame at a point just aft of the cargo ship. The cargo ship was designed to sustain four G's of acceleration under full load. There is some safety factor, but not as much as I would like. More than one G with all the mass ahead of it and the space frame may bend. A ship with a bent space frame is almost impossible to control. This ship carries four times as much mass as the cargo ship. Even with all the reinforcing that was done to the space frame aft of the cargo ship, we are concerned that acceleration greater than one G will cause the space frame to bend or break either just aft or just forward of the cargo ship. That is an eventuality none of us wishes to contemplate."

"You win. Helmsman! Plot a course for one G to New St. Louis." Rachel looked around the bridge and grinned. "Oh! I am the helmsman. Well then, Aye, Aye Captain! Plotting a course for one G for New St. Louis." Her little joke earned a few polite chuckles.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE TRIP TO NEW ST LOUIS took three months. During that time the combined talents of the military and civilian personnel were deployed to incorporate the “acquired” material to make the ship as functional as possible.

Rachel, Wendy and Faye Anne rotated command on the bridge. The destroyer flight crews and the civilian pilots filled out the remainder of the bridge positions. Fortunately, the ship’s navigation was highly automated and needed little monitoring. Captain Curra supervised the engineering and support crews who spent the majority of their time testing and programming the sensor and weapons systems. They were particularly concerned about integrating the new lasers and defenses added to the cargo ship. The intent was these devices would protect the after portion of the ship from attack while the battleship’s normal defenses would protect the forward areas. The main goal of the project was to link the sensor arrays and the lasers to take advantage of the parallax gained by the length of the ship and the distance between the devices.

The medical personnel, the remainder of the military personnel, the Marines and even the passengers, worked around the clock to make the ship as ready as possible for its eventual mission. Working in and on a ship traveling in hyper drive presented its own problems. In the shipyard, weightlessness had allowed them to move large items easily. The simulated gravity caused by the ship’s constant acceleration provided a more familiar work environment in that “down” meant something. The steady low vibration from the engines that permeated the ship and radiated out from its structural center core was the issue. Carrying heavy loads in the confined spaces of the ship’s passageways was difficult enough in the freedom of weightlessness and would have been merely difficult in normal gravity, but the vibration in the floor made walking less steady. Due to the extreme care needed to install the medical equipment, the work progressed slowly.

As they approached New St. Louis, Rachel called her flight crews together. Her only combat ships were the two destroyers that Wendy had brought with her. Even those were not the ships she was supposed to bring, but a slightly more advanced newer version. Wendy had “accidentally” brought the “wrong” ships. The P I ships and pickets that had been promised had not been delivered. Rachel knew where two of the P I ships were coming from, but the source of the remainder of the ships remained a mystery. They had been so busy getting the ship ready that they had made no attempt to even determine what was wrong with the shuttle Captain Curra had commandeered let alone try to fix it.

Rachel gathered the ship’s personnel not on duty in the galley. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are three days out of New St. Louis. We will drop out of hyper drive shortly. We have many reasons for doing this, not the least of which is that we need to test the transition from hyper to standard drive somewhere well away from inhabited space. The second is that I would like to enter the system in a way that will provide us an exercise for entering a hostile system. I will send a courier ahead. Admiral Linda Dankese, the station’s commander, is a family friend. I am requesting that she assist us in a combat exercise. The courier will also detail our personnel and equipment needs. We will deploy the two destroyers while we are in standard drive. Once we receive an acknowledgment that Admiral Dankese is willing to assist us in this exercise, we will proceed to New St. Louis. I expect that this stop will add two days to our travel time, but the delay will help us prepare for our formal mission. This will be a training exercise. We will make it as realistic as possible, but it will be an exercise. Our Tactical

Officer, Lt. Cho Mae Chin, will detail your roles in the exercise. I apologize that you have not had time to practice this in the simulators, but this will give us a good idea of what our strengths and weaknesses are. Lt. Chin, please.”

Lt. Chin, a tiny woman who looked like she might blow away in the slightest breeze, stepped up. She explained the intended plan and briefed everyone what to expect from the exercise. The majority of the civilians and medical personnel were to stand by in the galley where the monitors on the galley walls would simulcast the bridge combat displays. In the event that the ship suffered “casualties”, the medical personnel would be dispatched from there.

The ship dropped out of hyperspace and Rachel dispatched the courier. Isaac supervised the sterilization of the operating suites. Few contagions can survive the cold and vacuum of space. The operating suites were designed to be able to be opened to space and allowed to cool. The resulting slowly developing ice crystals would internally shred any bacteria or small insects that lurked in the hidden recesses as the organisms froze. After twenty-four hours at super cold temperatures, the suites were closed, warmed and treated with traditional disinfectants and cleaners.

The courier missile returned with the simple message, “Space Force Combat Exercise Rules Level A. Loser buys the winner’s command staff first round at the Officer’s club. Winner buys second round. Linda.”

Rachel explained to the gathered crew what the cryptic message meant. “Combat Rules Level A is the least restrictive level of combat exercise. We are about to engage in the space equivalent of a paint ball war. The missiles they will use are made of pressed paper that is consumed as it flies. The payload is a bag of white powder. Other than making a loud thump and spreading a huge white splotch on the side of the ship, it will not harm the ship or its occupants. You do know when you get hit. We should feel it even on a ship as big as this one. On a smaller ship like the destroyers, you really know it. Unfortunately, we have no such missiles. We can’t exactly be throwing real missiles at our friends so we are restricted to using targeting lasers. There is no surrendering. The game continues until every ship in one side’s fleet has taken enough critical hits to be considered destroyed. At that point one side admits defeat and we all go to the bar.”

“Do we even have a chance against a fixed base installation?” One of the passengers asked.

“No, the goal is to see how long we last. I am prepared to buy drinks for Admiral Dankese’s staff. The training will be good for of us. Folks, it’s that time. Let’s go.”

The two destroyers arrived first at opposite sides of the system doing everything in their power to spoof the sensors into thinking that they were stealthed battleships and drawing fire away from the real battleship. They lasted six hours. Given the weight of the force thrown against them and the fact that they had none of the paper missiles, six hours in the type of combat they were fighting is a very long time. Wendy piloted one of the destroyers and Raphael Rivera, who had flown with Rachel on the mission that they had moved the Saturn Industries shipyard, piloted the other. Both were skilled pilots with experienced crews but eventually they were overwhelmed.

Rachel plowed straight towards the spaceport at New St. Louis. Large numbers of picket ships attacked the battleship head on against its armored battle face.

“Faye Anne, do you recognize this strategy?” Rachel asked.

“Is this the one you got court marshaled over?” Faye Anne asked.

“Yup.”

“The one you said was no good?”

“Yup! Look at this. Like lemmings going over the cliff. How many have we hit?”

“Twenty.”

“And we’ve only taken one serious hit.”

She had deployed medical and damage control teams to one of the weapons bays to deal with the “casualties” from the hit.

“I think she’s playing with us. These are pickets. We haven’t seen a P I or a destroyer. With our destroyers gone, if she threw hers into the battle, there’s not a lot we can do.”

“Next time you’ll keep your destroyers close.”

“I had hoped for the diversion.”

“That’s your father’s game. You need a different one.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Reuben, Rashi and the rest of the engineers had developed the software necessary to allow the laser arrays mounted on the cargo ship to be operated in conjunction with the lasers on the battleship. The combined force of the targeting lasers had quickly “dispatched” several of the attackers who had tried to attack the ship’s flanks. The one avenue of attack that was not adequately covered was the same one that Rachel had exploited herself as far back as her first battle. The “up the pipes” shot into the arrayed propulsion system was the big ship’s greatest vulnerability. They had sensors that would warn them of an intruder on their tail. Their planned defense was to fire the engines to full throttle and burn the attacker with the wash. A second plan was to rotate the ship quickly to bring the broadside of lasers to bear on the attackers.

Rachel compared this later strategy to the one the early Boeing B-17 pilots had used in Indochina at the beginning of World War II. Lacking the tail gun position that would be incorporated into the B-17 shortly thereafter, the pilots endeavored to swing the tail of the aircraft back and forth allowing the two side gunners to bring their weapons to bear on an attacker from the rear, the “six o’clock” position. Unfortunately, Rachel also knew that the technique generally only delayed the inevitable. Enemy pilots knew the B-17’s were vulnerable to attack from the tail and routinely made their attacks from that direction. Few of the B-17’s involved in those early battles survived beyond the first year of the war. Rachel hoped that the tactic would work better for her than it did for them.

When it finally came, the attack on the propulsion system was fast and accurate. A single destroyer dropped out of hyperspace directly astern of the hospital ship / battleship. The technique was the same one that Rachel and her father had used on a Swordsman battleship in her first battle when she was sixteen years old. It was the same technique that one of her closest friends, Lt. Myra Myrakova, had used in the same battle. While Myra had destroyed the attacking battleship, her ship was engulfed

in the debris thrown from the battleship's explosion and had not survived.

The destroyer was too close for the lasers mounted on the cargo ship to hit it without hitting the arrayed propulsion systems and too far for the propulsion systems themselves to "burn" it. Destroyers carry five forward missile tubes. Four are standard tubes. The fifth tube carries a multiple warhead device. The destroyer dropped out of hyperspace, fired all five tubes in rapid sequence and hypered out again. The individual evenly spaced thumps from the missile payloads of white powder impacting the ship's aft section could be felt the length of the ship. Five direct hits on the propulsion system effectively took the ship out of action. There was no time for defensive action.

"Damn! I think we need a stinger in our butt!" Rachel grumbled.

"Roger that!" A chorus of voices agreed from around the bridge.

"Game over!" Rachel called to the system's defense command center. "First round is on me."

The defense system computerized voice replied, "Federation Space Force Hospital Ship 28 Albert Schweitzer, welcome to New St. Louis! The Federation Space Force Interstellar Traffic Control System welcomes you to the gateway to the galaxy. While you are here please take the time to visit our many shops, restaurants and entertainment venues. Visitors are always welcome at New St. Louis. We hope your time here is pleasant and profitable. Please proceed to docking area eleven and wait for further instructions."

New St. Louis was not located on a habitable planet, but rather on a moon of a gas giant in orbit around a G type star. Initially established as a mining colony, it had once been a pirate base. Greg and Avi Solomon had raided it for supplies and come away with a shipload of refugees abandoned by their pirate captors. The pirates who had built the installation left on a raid and never returned. Swordsmen held the installation briefly until a Federation task force took it over. The Federation established a permanent freight marshaling facility and frontier outpost to service traffic outbound to the fringes of the galaxy in much the same manner as St. Louis had served as the "gateway" to the American West.

The facility hosted a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant specifically designed to handle spacecraft reactor requirements. The fuel facility drove the station's robust economy. The moon's lower gravity and lack of atmosphere allowed space-going ships to dock on its surface instead of having to tender personnel and materials through an atmosphere to the planet's surface.

The freight yard's docking cradles were designed to handle a wide variety of ships. In fact each of the components of the current assembly had docked here in its time of independent duty. However, the cradle could only accommodate one of the sections of the current ship. Military protocol suggested that the battleship component should be attached to the cradle leaving the rest of the ship tethered, but not connected. Passenger and civilian convenience suggested that either the hospital component or the passenger component be attached to the cradle. Rachel decided that since the plan was to fill their now empty cargo holds with material to outfit the ship, they would dock with the cargo ship in the cradle to facilitate the movement of large objects into the hold.

Rachel did not know exactly what to expect for a reception, but she certainly did not expect the reception that awaited her. In keeping with protocol, the ship's captain and executive officer descended the debarkation ramp first followed by those senior officers who were not on watch. Rachel and Isaac descended the ramp together. Captain Curra followed at a respectful distance. Wendy and Joshua came next followed by Faye Anne and Lt. Dale Hammersmith.



According to standard protocol, a wide range of officers could greet the incoming ship. The lieutenant on watch greeted most ships. At the bottom of the ramp, a very pregnant Admiral Dankese stood arm in arm with the man who had once been Admiral Davidson's aide. Rumors about their relationship had circulated for years. Rachel was glad to see that they were now out in the open.

A man dressed in the uniform of a British seaman of the era of the great sailing ships of the late nineteenth century blew the bo'sun pipes to bring the assembled party to attention. Formal salutes were exchanged. "Captain Rachel Solomon of the Federation Space Force Hospital Ship 28 Albert Schweitzer requests permission to come aboard."

Admiral Dankese smiled, "Captain Solomon, you have permission to come aboard."

"Request permission to bring the crew, staff and passengers of the Federation Space Force Hospital Ship 28 Albert Schweitzer aboard."

"Permission granted. Your officers are requested to assemble with a companion at the Officer's Club in one hour. I believe a similar reception has been arranged at the NCO Club for your enlisted personnel. Your civilians, I am afraid, are on their own unless they go as someone's guest."

"Admiral, it would be our honor to join you as you requested."

"Please allow us to escort you to the visiting officers' quarters."

"Thank you."

Once out of earshot, Rachel could not stand the suspense a moment longer, "Admiral, if I may be so bold, when did you, I mean it's none of my business, but..."

"When did we get married?" She grinned.

"Yes, I apologize for being rude."

"Not at all. Admiral Davidson was ill and knew he was not going to live much longer. He made us promise we would marry before he died or he would come back and haunt us. Two days later we made him perform the ceremony from his hospital bed. We were married when we came to send you off to the Academy. We kept it a secret until recently."

"I guess congratulations are in order."

"Thank you. At 1300 hours tomorrow, I would like you and your senior staff to meet with me and my staff in Briefing Room Two. We need to discuss what support you need from us and I need to brief you on updates that have arrived from Earth while you were traveling."

"We'll be there."

"Here are your quarters. See you at the club."

The party at the officer's club started on schedule. Some of the guests were into their third round of drinks when a tall, dark impossibly good looking man wearing a flight suit and carrying his helmet on one arm entered the club. He was followed by a tall woman that could only be described as a

blond bombshell. Well tanned, her hair flowed down her back. She was also in her flight suit and carried her helmet. A man half a head shorter than her followed her. He was swarthy with broad shoulders and a swagger in his walk. His helmet dangled from its strap in his hand. The fourth member of the party was a petite woman with close cropped dark hair and a wide grin that could be seen across the room. They were walking tall and proud.

When the station's command staff in attendance at the party spotted the new arrivals they broke into spontaneous applause. The four lined up shoulder to shoulder and smoothly took a bow together. Their grins were wide and their bows theatrical. When the applause ended they reported to Admiral Dankese. She pointed them in Rachel's direction.

"Captain?" The impossibly good looking lieutenant greeted her.

"Lieutenant, you look familiar, but I don't place you."

"I was in your tactics class when you took Van Hoff apart."

"Whitman? Dean Whitman?"

"See, I told you she would remember me."

"After you reminded her," the blond teased. "Now you can tell her you had a crush on her the whole time you were at the Academy." She chuckled at his embarrassment.

"It's true," he admitted.

"Why did I not know this?" Rachel asked. "It's not like a Space Force officer to fail to approach a single woman he's interested in. I certainly got hit on often enough at the Academy to know. I would have remembered you."

"I promised my father I would stay out of trouble at the Academy and devote all my energies to studying. I had problems in high school for not studying because I was partying. I almost didn't get accepted. I think if my father hadn't been a decorated Space Force veteran, I wouldn't have."

The blond punched him in the shoulder and said, "Now that you're done with the bleeding heart stuff, tell her the real reason we're here. I'm Lt. Beatrice Harrington. It is a pleasure to meet you. You are something of a legend around here. He doesn't look like he's going to get over his adolescent hormone attack. We're the ship that shot you down in the exercise. We also shot your sister's ship. Where is she by the way? She flies like a crazy person."

They spotted Wendy on the opposite side of the room in animated conversation.

Lt. Harrington continued. "She made her ship do things I didn't know those ships could do!"

Rachel smiled. "We keep forgetting that every ship we're in isn't a P I."

The others laughed.

"Captain, I thought you would like to know that we are sending the official sensor data from our exercise to the Academy to verify your contention that the tactic that almost got you thrown out of the

Academy is as bad as you said it is. Admiral Dankese had me plan the exercise as soon as she received your courier. She thought I might enjoy the exercise more than some of her more senior officers. I think she was right.”

Rachel smiled. “Is it a case of misattribution of arousal or did you really enjoy shooting at me?”

Lt. Whitman blushed. “Some of both. I guess the toughest part was trying to decide how to deploy the few ships Admiral Dankese decided to let me use.”

“Looks like you did fine.”

“I had to guess whether you would come in wide like your father often did in his simulations or close like the current practice.”

“How old were you when you played the games?”

“I picked them up about the time Planetoid Defenders came out. I think I have every scenario ever published for the suite of games including most of the illegal knock-offs. They’re the reason I’m in the Space Force.”

“You seemed to have learned well. That was the point.”

“No, the real point was to trick the Swordsmen into falling into your trap. What blows me away is how well it worked. They really thought that decoy asteroid was a battleship.” Rachel blushed.

Lt. Whitman continued “I was on a tracking station during the Saturn Industries operation. I watched your every move. I hoped that some day I would be as good as you.”

“Well, now that you shot me down, you can say you are.”

Isaac showed up with refills for their drinks and some finger food. After introducing himself and the rest of the destroyer’s crew to Isaac, Lt. Whitman turned back to Rachel and said, “Captain, you need to keep your support ships closer. Flitting around in a P I is not the same as lumbering through space in kind of monster you’re flying now. You were entirely too easy to shoot down once I stopped playing around. Think about it. I knew what you would do because your tactics are well known. I knew you would not shoot first and you didn’t. I thought you would come in wide and you did. I suspected you would hold your course and you did. I would like to see you back here as a regular visitor. You are becoming predictable. You are unconventional, but predictable. Being too predicable will get you killed. You may have to revisit your tactics. Promise me you will think about it?”

“I promise.”

“Now, if you don’t mind, we’re going to bother your sister and get her to tell us about the acrobatics she pulled with that ship.”

Rachel smiled as they walked away.

Isaac looked into his wife’s eyes and gently asked, “Do they have a point?”

“I think so.”

“Then, we have work to do, don't we?”

“Yes.” She picked up his hands. “That's what friends are for. They nicely tell you when you have a problem.”

The party went well into the night. Admiral Dankese was drinking a non-alcoholic citrus concoction that she insisted everyone try at least once. There were no fights although a few of the ship's crew did need to be escorted back to their quarters after passing out in their seats. “War stories” and “fish tales” kept the club's patrons amused long after the scheduled entertainment had packed up and gone home. One of the advantages of living in a facility in which “day” and “night” are abstractions observed only to keep human circadian rhythms operating normally is that entertainment and food service establishments never close. Were it otherwise, they would have closed this one.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE FIRST TWO HOURS of the meeting were devoted to Rachel and her crew briefing Admiral Dankese's staff on their status. They started by covering the engineering challenges they had discovered, then they moved to the weaponry issues. They discussed the medical facility problems and wrapped up with personnel shortages.

Admiral Dankese briefed them on the developments back home. Courier missiles were now making the trip that had taken them three months in as many days. The political situation was looking especially grim. The newly formed Conservative Party was not happy that the Swordsmen had been allowed to secede and were attempting to block the passage of the final agreement. The Federation's coalition government appeared to be under continuous assault. The Greek System Party and the Roman System Party which had dominated Federation politics for over a century both suffered wholesale defections to the new Conservative Party. Since the delegates were elected as individuals and not as members of a party, they could and often did, change affiliations over their position on a single issue. Perhaps as a result of the influx of new members with their own agendas, the party's primary effect had been to create chaos in the Federation Legislature. It appeared as if the only thing the new Conservatives could agree on was bringing the Swordsmen back into the Federation by force.

Pirate activity was increasing in all sectors in anticipation of the military being distracted fighting a war. Organized crime was coming up from underground in anticipation of a vacuum in law enforcement. Criminal turf wars had already started. The Conservatives blamed all this lawlessness on the current administration. To combat the chaos they proposed sweeping, often contradictory, legislation intended to reduce regulation on businesses and increase protection for planetary native species. Experienced government administrators were leaving in droves for jobs in the private sector as the major corporations sought to take advantage of the corruption that would certainly follow the Conservatives' blatant cronyism.

Predations by the "Third Force" were increasing. The "third force" attacks were frustratingly difficult to predict and often brutally effective. They were attacking both Federation and Swordsman fortifications with equal impunity. They had decimated more than one pirate installation. Organized crime outposts seemed to be taking a statistically significant greater number of attacks, but no facility guarded by less than a full battle group appeared to be safe. Third Force attacks always consisted of a cylindrical shaped formation with a hundred or more drones controlled by a single cruiser or larger ship. The cruiser was supported by up to a dozen shorter-range interceptors. The only successful defense against such an assault was to hyper immediately next to the cruiser and hit it hard. Unfortunately less than half of such attempts had been successful and even the ones that were generally resulted in the loss of the Space Force ships as well as the Third Force target. None of the drones appeared hyper capable although none had been captured. The common assumption was that the drones were launched from a hyper capable tender a distance from the target and guided to the attack by the cruiser. A few attacks on large installations had been successfully thwarted, but attacks on smaller ones had not. Orbital installations and sentry outposts appeared to be the most vulnerable.

After the meeting, Admiral Dankese slumped into a chair exhausted and disheartened. Isaac took the ship's medical team to confer with the station's medical staff. The engineers went off on their own. Captain Curra joined the flight crews and munitions specialists to see what they could procure. Admiral Dankese was well aware of Captain Curra's reputation and assigned her husband and two

senior Marine officers to watch him.

Finally the two women were alone in the conference room. "Admiral, pardon me for saying so, but you do not look well. Would you like me to help you to your quarters?"

For a moment, Admiral Dankese stopped being the commander of a facility housing several thousand military personnel and a like number of civilians and looked into Rachel's eyes.

"Yes, thank you. Let's walk. Rachel, you're a dear. Physically, I'm fine." She sighed and took a breath before continuing. "I feel like I have known you all your life. Certainly since you fit into a size three flight suit. I remember the first time I saw you. You were trying on the smallest flight suit I had ever seen. I was still a Captain. I remember how nervous your mother was when she realized I was staring. Had I known then who you were, I might have reacted differently. As it was, I saw a mother and her little girl trying on play clothes. I made up some story about how you looked like my younger sister. You made a comment about how if I missed her I should bring her out here to visit and to make sure I got her a flight suit that fit her properly because ones that didn't were nasty."

Rachel smiled, trying desperately to remember the incident.

Admiral Dankese paused before continuing. "When you return, we will be gone. Someone else will be in command of this station."

"Why are you leaving?"

"My brother owns a construction company and he landed the contract to build a new space port on a recently settled planet. He wanted someone he could trust to handle security and who better than his sister, the retired Admiral? I have sent my resignation to headquarters. I am about to become one of those horrible people we talk about taking my military training and using it in the private sector."

"There is nothing horrible in using your training to save lives. What are you going to do about the Third Force?" Rachel said.

"I think that P I is the only ship that can be effective against the Third Force formation. Nothing else has the maneuverability and the firepower. You know that the ship yard at Eretz is building P I ships on the same design as the ones your parents flew."

"Yes, I test flew some."

"They are punching them out like Detroit used to punch out automobiles. We are buying as many as we can afford. Some of my pilots are coming with me. Did you know that Eretz has never been attacked by the Third Force? Do you know why?"

"No."

"Obsessive compulsive paranoia on a cultural level. Nothing even gets close without being intercepted. For example, if you drop out of hyper space approaching them as you did here, they will not wait for you to jump again. They will follow the courier back and "capture" you where you are. Don't even suggest an exercise with them. They shoot to kill."

“Not hard to understand,” Rachel said.

“I couldn’t live like that, always afraid of being attacked.”

“You get used to it. Besides it’s not so different anywhere anymore with the Third Force attacking randomly wherever they feel like it.”

Admiral Dankese paused. “I sometimes wonder if I am doing the right thing.”

“How so?”

“Having a baby now. What kind of life will she have? Civilization is coming apart at the seams. How can I bring a child into this environment?”

Rachel smiled. “You should meet my grandmother. I listened to her give this speech a dozen times. I have it memorized. This is her speech, I can’t take credit for it. Babies are remarkably resilient little creatures. They need love, food and a few other odds and ends. Mostly they need love, lots of love. That’s really what matters. There is no perfect time to have a baby, so babies are born in imperfect times and they survive. Love your baby with all your heart. Protect your baby as much as you can and Mother Nature will see the both of you through.”

“I often wonder why we bother fighting for that bunch of self important corrupt brigands at Federation Headquarters in Houston. They despise us and stand in the way of our every move. They certainly don’t care about us. Why should we care about them?”

“It doesn’t matter if they care. What matters is that we care. We care about each other. As my grandmother says, it’s all about hope. We have to keep hope. Without it we are truly lost.”

“Your grandmother must be an amazing woman.”

“We all love her very much.”

They arrived at the Admiral’s quarters. “I may not see you before you depart. Rachel, travel safe. Take care of yourself and your people.”

“I will.”

Rachel was almost back to her ship when she heard a long low wolf whistle behind her. Rachel tensed waiting for a man to make an improper suggestion.

A woman’s voice exclaimed, “My goodness! That captain has a nice ass!”

A second woman replied, “I can’t remember one like it!”

The first woman said, “Oh, sweet cheeks! I do! Her mother still has a nice ass don’t you think?”

Rachel laughed as she greeted Ellie Mae and Elvira. “What are you troublemakers up to?”

“Who? Us? Sweet little old ladies? What kind of trouble could we be making?” Elvira replied.

Rachel held her arms wide as she had when she was a teenager on her frequent shopping trips to

New St. Louis and the two women folded into her arms. "Group hug!" They laughed together for a moment.

Elvira stepped back with one hand on each of Rachel's shoulders and gave her the once over visual scan. "You look dreadful dear," she said. "What have you been eating?"

"Flight rations," Rachel admitted.

Ellie Mae looked shocked. "Flight rations? You mean that frozen stuff that passes for food they make flight crews eat?"

"Well, yeah," Rachel acknowledged.

Elvira shuddered. "Stuff's nasty! What does your husband the doctor say about it?"

"He approves. He says it's a balanced diet in each package. We have Kosher and vegetarian. They come in a pretty good variety."

"He's a man. He wouldn't know good food if it jumped up and bit him. Don't you have a kitchen on that big ship?" Ellie Mae asked.

"We have three kitchens. We haven't been able to fire them up because we needed all our personnel working to finish outfitting the ship. Besides I don't think anyone on the crew can cook. At least no one volunteered. There's nothing wrong with flight rations. I've eaten them all my life," Rachel said.

"Nonsense! Ellie Mae, you were right. We have a new mission. Rachel Solomon Cohen, Captain extraordinaire, we're shipping out with you. It's time someone fired up your kitchen and made real food."

Rachel was torn between her desire to have these two wonderfully crazy and fun ladies join her crew and her concern for their safety. "What about the railroad?"

Elvira looked wistful. "We're no longer part of the refugee railroad. The pharmaceutical company that bought the remains of the Saturn shipyard runs the refugee railroad. They expanded it and made it legitimate. It's a registered Federation Charity. They carry battered women and children of all religions not just Swordsmen and get them away from abusive spouses. They carry men, too. I was surprised at how many men fled with their children to escape an abusive wife. All the hospitals in the central system and even the walk-in clinics participate. A simple trip to the pediatrician can turn into an escape. It's all so clean and safe. They don't need us anymore. Ever since Bunkie died, it's gotten positively dull around here."

"My father respected Admiral Davidson. He took the old man's death pretty hard. My mother liked him, too. He was a great help to us. I think they still miss him."

"So, can we join your crew?" Ellie Mae asked.

"Certainly."



“Good. We’re all packed. We’ll be right back.”

Captain Curra was waiting at the end of the ramp with Rachel when Ellie Mae and Elvira arrived pushing a large cart with their luggage.

“And who is this charming specimen of masculinity?” Elvira asked.

“Captain Grant Curra is my executive officer. Captain, please meet Elvira and Ellie Mae Davidson. Admiral Davidson’s widows.”

“Welcome aboard ladies.” He turned to Rachel. “Where should they be quartered?”

Rachel was about to answer when Elvira cut her off. “Where will we find the most corruptible young men? It’s been six years since, well, you know.”

Captain Curra did his best to hide a grin. “Probably on the hospital ship with the young medics,” he answered with a chuckle.

Elvira spotted the gray over his temples and looked Captain Curra straight in the eye. “Captain, are you married?”

“No.” He hesitated before answering.

“Ever been married?”

“No.”

“Do you like women?”

“Well, um yes, um, when I have the time, I just...” he stammered.

Rachel stepped in to rescue him. “What the captain is saying is that with as much time as he has spent on ships and as important as his job is and as hard as he works at being the consummate Space Force officer, having a family has not been a priority. Is that right, Captain?”

“Yes, thank you. Life on ships is not the best way to stay married. It would not be fair to marry someone and then leave them,” he said, relieved to be off the hook.

Elvira elbowed Ellie Mae and grinned. “We understand all that. We were married to an Admiral. We’ll stay in the military area if that’s acceptable to you. I think we’ll be more at home there.”

“I believe there’s a couple of empty rooms at the end of corridor 2,” Rachel suggested, returning the broad grin, knowing that would put them close to Captain Curra’s quarters.

Captain Curra motioned for a pair of the Marines who had been standing nearby to assist with the luggage and escorted the ladies to their quarters.

The ship and its crew stayed at the port for two weeks while they took on supplies. Ellie Mae and Elvira turned out to be perfect “cohorts in crime” for Captain Curra. He stayed “in plain sight” while they lead the teams of Marines and assorted personnel that procured what the ship needed.

Lured by the promise of adventure lacking in their current assignments, additional military and

civilian personnel drifted in individually. By the time the ship was ready to leave, the crew was up to two thirds of its authorized staff level.

When it came time to depart, with the Marines standing guard as they had done the last time the ship headed out, rather than Captain Curra delivering the incriminating inventory records, Elvira and Ellie Mae did the honors. As soon as the quartermaster realized what had happened, they fled as instructed. They skittered along the passageways with security on their heels into the waiting arms of the Marines who efficiently tossed them into the ship.

Suwanee signaled that the airlock was closed. Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen said to Captain Grant Curra, who was at the helm, "Helmsman, set course for the exit channel. All ahead one fourth. Folks, it's that time. Let's go."

Once they were clear of the local shipping traffic and the defensive network, Rachel commanded, "Helmsman, increase acceleration gradually to one G. Set course for Eretz. It's time to go home."

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AFTER THEY SETTLED INTO the long trip from New St Louis to Eretz, Rachel reviewed the records of the personnel who had joined the ship at New St. Louis. Faye Anne had been busy. Many of the people she found had been recent retirees coaxed back into service, but some were on current enlistments. Rachel noticed a disturbing pattern in most of Faye Anne's recruits. Pieces were missing from their files. Their histories had gaps. Faye Anne was one of Rachel's most trusted friends. Did the gaps in these records mean that the people she had brought on-board were really intelligence agents and not what they seemed? Lt. Dale Hammersmith was the first person Faye Anne had brought on board. The two of them spent a lot of time together. Rachel had assumed that the attraction was romantic in nature, but now she wondered if it wasn't professional and not in a good way. Thinking of them as romantically involved was actually more comfortable than what she now suspected. His history showed training on some fairly exotic weapons. Rachel wondered why a science officer would be trained on more varieties of weapons, particularly small arms, than a Marine? The most disturbing part of his history was the two year gap which he had entered as an enlisted electronics specialist and had emerged promoted from enlisted status into an officer position. He was significantly older than he looked.

Rachel did not want to believe Faye Anne would do something to harm them or their mission, but as she observed Faye Anne over the next several weeks, Rachel came to the conclusion that Faye Anne was definitely hiding something. Wendy had independently come to the same conclusion and was upset at the idea that their long time friend might not be trustworthy. They lamented the situation until they remembered that their parents had always carried hidden firearms even in the supposedly safe confines of a Federation ship. There were reasons their parents did the things they did. Not for the first time they realized that they had been trained for this and were following the path their parents had set out for them. Ironically, the fact that they suspected something amiss gave them a sense of assurance that their parents' rigorous training had been appropriate and worthwhile.

Rachel and Wendy's lives were further complicated by the fact that Rashi's wife was Faye Anne's sister. Esther had been even more temperamental than normal lately and Wendy worried that if Esther was reacting to something she knew her sister was doing and could not talk about.

Ellie Mae and Elvira drafted the flight engineers and the munitions specialists to overhaul the kitchen on the passenger ship. Within two days, they had it functioning. They chose the passenger ship's kitchen in spite of the fact that it was not the largest because it was attached to a hydroponics garden. Within a week, they had the hydroponics garden functioning and planted with new seeds. Midway through the voyage they expected to have fresh vegetables for the crew and they eagerly anticipated cooking "real food" in their new kitchen. Feeding the two hundred people whose shifts ran around the clock turned out to be more of a challenge than they could handle by themselves. With Captain Curra's help, they established a kitchen staff rotation that supplemented their efforts.

The hard work getting the medical suites ready had been done on the first leg of the trip so Isaac and Joshua instituted an intensive training program for all hands except bridge crew. Even the bridge crew, however, was not exempted from training in life saving techniques. Since there were no training dummies, they trained on each other. Those couples that were romantically involved worked together. No one was particularly surprised when Captain Curra showed up for training with both Ellie Mae and Elvira. Although bridge crews were supposedly spared the more gruesome aspects of triage and

advanced emergency life saving techniques, goaded by the two women, Captain Curra participated in the training with the rest of the crew.

Once having trained the available personnel on life saving and emergency techniques, Isaac and Joshua moved to refresher training for the medical staff in the more routine diagnostic procedures. By the end of the voyage, most of the crew had been examined in ways that no healthy person should have to endure.

They had picked up four picket ships with their pilots at New St. Louis. The pickets were single seat non hyper capable craft and only four pilots joined the ship's crew. Integrating the crews was Wendy's responsibility so she had the flight crews and the battleship's combat crews run simulations involving the pickets and the two destroyers they had brought from Earth. They were still short the four P I ships they had been promised and the med-evac ships without which they could not accomplish their mission. They did have a non-functional shuttle for which Captain Curra could offer no explanation as to why he took it.

Once having executed their mid-course turn, Reuben, Rashi and the rest of the engineers decided to see if they could determine what was wrong with the shuttle. They quickly discovered that it had been hit with a Disruptor missile. They had never seen a ship after it had been hit by a Disruptor and were impressed with the specificity of its destruction. Only the higher order electronics had been destroyed. The less sensitive slower types of electronics had been spared. They were impressed with how cleanly the missile did its job. The missile really could disable the ship without destroying it or killing its crew. The discovery of the ship's history meant that when they arrived at Eretz if they could find replacements for the half dozen plug-in electronics modules that had been destroyed by the Disruptor, the shuttle would be ready to fly. On further examination, they discovered that the shuttle had been modified on a design developed at Homestead to allow it to take off and land on water. It had hydrofoils that swung out from the fuselage in addition the normal landing gear. Reuben reported his findings back to Rachel.

"So all the CMOS was destroyed and none of the TTL or older logic was harmed. Is that what lead you to believe it was a Disruptor?" She asked.

"Yes."

"Did you see any evidence that the Disruptor hit the ship?"

"No damage. A Disruptor only needs to get within a couple kilometers to be effective, so we wouldn't necessarily see physical damage. Did you know the fuel had been removed from the reactor?"

"They probably did that when they sent it to the junk yard." Rachel looked into Reuben's eyes. When they were teenagers, local rumors had them linked romantically, but they both knew while they could always be friends, they could never be lovers. They would kill each other. Even so, they understood each other better than most brothers and sisters. "What are you not telling me here?"

"I don't understand why someone would shoot a Disruptor at a shuttle. A carefully aimed hunting rifle would probably bring one down if you hit it in the right place. It doesn't make sense. I also don't understand why Captain Curra has a stash of fuel rods for the shuttle hidden in one of the containers attached to the cargo ship. It's like he knows more than he's saying. Why do we have a shuttle designed for water landings? Even more interesting as far as I am concerned is that this shuttle

is designed to fold its wings instead of demounting them like the others.”

“So it could enter the atmosphere and turn right around and take off again?”

“Perfect for smuggling.”

“Or rescues.”

“Exactly. One more thing. There is armor plate between the cargo hold and the flight deck. The airlock has two doors. The only way to get from the cargo hold to the flight deck is through the airlock. The airlock has no manual controls. They have been removed. The only airlock control is from the flight deck. This ship looks to me like it was designed for transporting prisoners with a vacuum barrier between the cargo and the crew.”

“There’s a frightening thought.”

“Yes and one that explains a lot of things and opens a whole lot more questions.”

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE MILITARY DEFENSE SYSTEM at Eretz had designated specific places outside their system where a ship could drop out of hyper space and not immediately be attacked. These locations were clearly marked on the Admiralty charts. Federation Space Force pilots and navigators were well briefed on their locations. At precisely the time the message in their initial courier indicated they would arrive, they dropped out of hyper space at one of the specified locations.

A flight of four P I ships awaited them.

“This is Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen and the Federation Space Force Hospital Ship 28 Albert Schweitzer. We request safe passage and escort to the spaceport.”

“Captain Solomon Cohen, this is Captain Alina Darwin Federation Space Force and Eretz system defense. Welcome to Eretz. Please stand by while I take control of your ship.”

“Acknowledged.”

The P I ship with its fiber optic communications cable would function like a harbor pilot and guide the bigger ship safely to its mooring. Once the fiber optic was connected and the communications link established, Rachel said, “Captain Darwin, you have the helm.”

“Aye, Captain, I have the helm.”

“Captain Solomon, this is Mimi Abrams. Are my brothers on the bridge?”

“Mimi, stand by while I put you on speaker. You are on speaker.”

“Hey guys! It’s Mimi! Mom’s holding dinner. Don’t be late!”

Everyone on the bridge laughed. “Roger that!” Reuben shouted.

Unlike the mooring at New St. Louis where they had only been able to attach one section of the ship, the docking area had been modified so that all four of the ship’s sections could be accessed directly from the space port on the moon of the system’s only habitable planet.

Of the two hundred people on the ship, only six had been here before and for those six, this was home. Rachel and Wendy only wished that their parents would be there to greet them. They needed to talk with them and seek their guidance. Knowing that their grandmother would be as happy to see them as they would be to see her was some help, but they needed their parents and they needed to talk shop.

Admiral Herbert Sherman, commander of the planet’s defense system, Faye Anne’s and Esther’s father, greeted them at the end of the corridor that linked the four docking ramps and provided access to the spaceport. A squad of security officers wearing white uniforms with blue trim stood behind him. Admiral Sherman and Captain Rachel Solomon observed the formal protocols as appropriate for the occasion. Wendy, Rachel, their husbands, Rashi, Reuben and their wives made up the first party to descend the ramp.

Suwanee, behaving unlike the highly trained Marine she was, trembled with excitement as he held on to her husband Reuben’s arm. She was a black woman with a checkered past, a Federation

Marine lieutenant who had converted to marry her husband, a white Jewish man who held the rank of lieutenant in the Federation Space Force. She had met Reuben's parents back on Earth during the party when he graduated the Space Force Academy, but this was the first time she had been to his home. She remembered her Marine training in time to properly return the salute of the planetary defense Marine who greeted her.

"Lt. Abrams," the Marine at the head of the detail greeted her. Reuben, Rashi and Suwanee all popped salutes. The Marine suppressed a grin. "Marine Lt. Abrams!"

"Sir, yes, sir," Suwanee responded.

"Will your detail remain on the ship standing guard duty?"

"Yes, sir, they will, sir."

"Very well. At the end of their first shift have each of them report to immigration for processing and shore passes as you see appropriate."

"Yes, sir, thank you sir."

Admiral Sherman greeted Esther, his younger daughter, warmly, but she slid from his hug, preferring to stay close to her husband, Rashi. Wendy and Rachel could not help but notice the sudden chill in their relationship. Esther had always been independent minded and her marriage to Rashi was tempestuous, but to distance herself from her father seemed out of character. She dragged Rashi quickly through Immigration toward the passenger shuttle that would take them to the planet's surface.

Faye Anne followed closely behind with Lt. Hammersmith. "Is this the young man you wrote me about?" The Admiral asked gently.

Faye Anne blushed self consciously. "Yes, Dad."

"Welcome to our humble home." Admiral Sherman's attention drifted back up the corridor. He made eye contact with Captain Curra. "Grant, it's been a long time."

"Yes, Herb, it has."

Admiral Sherman turned to the Marine lieutenant who had greeted Suwanee. He nodded in Captain Curra's direction. "Him."

The lieutenant and four Marines advanced to meet Captain Curra. "Captain, you will please come with us." He looked at Ellie Mae and Elvira following behind him. "Ladies, it would not be appropriate for you to join us. You should go with the others to the planet's surface."

Rachel stood horrified as the four Marines bracketed Captain Curra and lead him away. "What is going on here?" she demanded. "Are you putting him under arrest?"

Admiral Sherman gazed at Rachel for a second. "No, he is not under arrest and he will leave when you leave. Let's just say he will be my special guest for the duration of your visit."

"But why?"

“So he doesn’t rob us blind like he did everywhere else he’s been. We will gladly give you what you need, but he will not steal it.”

Rachel stood speechless as Admiral Sherman turned and followed Captain Curra and his Marine escorts toward the security area.

During the trip to the surface, Isaac and Joshua chattered about the people they hoped to find at the medical school. With any kind of luck they would be able to fill the remainder of their empty positions. Rachel and Wendy sat silently during the trip and were unusually subdued until they arrived at their Grandmother’s residence. The family had given up the four bedroom apartment they had occupied when they first arrived as soon as Rachel and Wendy left for the Space Force Academy in favor of a two bedroom unit. When Greg and Avi had been called back to active duty, Rose had moved into an assisted living unit for seniors, not so much because she needed assistance but because it was a short walk from the hospital’s child care center where she worked.

Isaac was the first to greet Rose when she opened the door. He wrapped her in a strong hug, “Grandma Rose, what are you cooking that smells so wonderful?”

“Leave it to a man to think of his stomach. Have you boys been taking good care of my girls?”

Joshua stepped forward to give her a hug, “Absolutely Grandma! They’d kill us if we didn’t”

Rose laughed. “They do get feisty sometimes.”

“We do not!” Wendy and Rachel shot back.

“Yes, you do!” the others challenged in return.

Dinner conversation was loud and animated in the tiny apartment. Everyone had funny stories to tell. Rose’s stories about the little ones she tended made them all feel warm inside. Rose insisted that in the morning they needed to come to the nursery so the children could meet “Grandma Rose’s real grandchildren.” After dinner Rachel started to tell Rose about her suspicions. Rose cut her off.

“Better you don’t tell me. Better I don’t know. Let me tell you this. Herb is a spook. He has always been a spook. He always will be a spook and Faye Anne is every bit his daughter.”

“Spook?” Isaac asked.

“Military intelligence,” Rose replied. “Very dangerous. You never know what they’re thinking.”

“And you think Faye Anne and Admiral Sherman are up to something?” Rose nodded. “I would bet on it and I don’t know what you’ve seen. Your parents came by their paranoia honestly.”

“We figured that out,” Wendy sighed.

“Be careful, my children. I was going to say these are dangerous times, but times are always dangerous in one way or another. Let’s talk about more pleasant things.”

Late in the evening, as the conversation had wound down, there was a knock on the apartment door. Rose motioned for them to stay seated as she went to the door. There were low whispers at the



door and Rose ushered in a woman about their parents' age, along with a woman and a man about their age. They stood to greet the new arrivals.

Rose reached out for Rachel and Wendy's hands and drew them into the room. As they drew closer they could see marks from fresh injuries on the older woman's face and hands.

"Rachel, Wendy, I would like you to meet your Aunt Tanya, your cousin Kenneth and your cousin Astrid. Isaac, Joshua, this is my other daughter, Avi's younger sister and her children. Tanya, are you sure you're fit to be doing this?"

Isaac and Joshua quickly assessed the visible bruises and injuries evident on the recent arrivals.

"Mom, this is important. Rachel and Wendy can stop this. We need their help."

Tanya sat on the sofa with her children supporting her on either side. "I have four children."

Astrid sniffled and a tear appeared in her eye. "Slavers took two of them and killed my husband."

Kenneth did his best to appear brave, but it was obvious he was having a bad time as well. The edge of a thick bandage showed at the bottom of his trouser leg.

"We think we know where the slavers were going, but we can't be sure. I know you have a more important mission that brings you here than finding my beautiful daughters, but when that mission is over, please can you go looking for them?"

Wendy sat at her aunt's feet. "Do you know where they might have gone? There are limited places a slaver can hide. A spaceport is tough to conceal, but there's a lot of space out there."

"Admiral Sherman thinks he may have an idea, but he said he does not have enough fire-power to go after them."

"That would make sense. We have a bunch of firepower and we will do what we can."

"Thank you."

Avi never talked about her sister or her two brothers. The anger and hurt ran too deep. Rachel and Wendy knew there was more to their mother's family than they were being told, but knew better than to ask questions about painful subjects. Avi's propensity for sudden violence did not encourage asking her tough questions. Under Rose's careful guidance, Rachel and Wendy learned about their mother's "lost" siblings and in so doing learned about their mother and themselves in the process. The conversation went on until Rachel and Wendy had to leave for the briefing that had been arranged for 0900 hours in the main briefing room.

Wendy, Rachel, Isaac and Joshua arrived at the briefing precisely on time in spite of not having slept the night before. At the end of the morning's briefing, Admiral Sherman summed up the discussion. "I have a shopping list of parts and material you need. If we have it in our stores, we will deliver it to your ship. You are not to come and get anything. We will bring it to you. Due to the length of time we had to prepare, we were able to speed up the program for an entire graduating class from the

planet's medical schools. When you leave here, you will be fully staffed with your medical personnel. We do not have enough military personnel to permanently staff your ship, however we can temporarily assign enough personnel to get you through this mission. I suspect that by the time the mission is over and you return here, enough volunteers will have arrived to fill out your permanent staff allocation."

"As to your ships," he continued, "obviously the two P I ships that belong to you and your parents will be going with you. Frankly, I will be happy to see them go. They appear to have a mind of their own and many of the students refuse to fly them. They are more trouble than they are worth."

A thought flashed across both Rachel's and Wendy's minds at the same time. *"He doesn't know! If he doesn't know that our two P I ships think they are people, he may not know that our cargo ship is the smartest of the three!"*

"Two of our best pilots, Lt. Sabrina Mahoney and Captain Alina Darwin have volunteered to take two of our most recent model of the P I ship to fill out your P I authorization. We are still recruiting fire control officers for them. We have four med-evac ships that were left behind after a Federation exercise. They have been reconditioned and are parked at the spaceport. Now that we have discussed the logistics of your ship, let's break for lunch and let the medical personnel, civilians and the engineers do what they do to get the ship ready. After lunch we will reconvene here with command staff and flight crews. Does anyone have questions before we break?" When he received no responses, they adjourned for lunch.

Rachel thanked Admiral Sherman and with Wendy, Reuben and Rashi in tow, left the room headed for the promised visit to the children in the hospital nursery. Captain Curra had not participated in the discussions. Rachel wondered why that was, but decided not to ask.

Once they were clear of the room and in an area that was noisy enough for their voices to be lost in the background Reuben said to Rachel and Wendy, "He doesn't know about Buddy and Daisy! Your parents knew better than to say anything, but Esther and Mimi must have kept it a secret!"

"Esther kept a secret from her father, the king of all spooks?"

"Impossible as it seems, yes, she did!"

"How much do they know about Peter?" Wendy asked.

"Faye Anne knows. She named him. I don't know how much she thought to tell her father. No way for us to know without tipping him off that we suspect something."

After a delightful lunch with the children who were thrilled to meet them, they reconvened in the conference room. Large photographs taken from space were displayed on the room's monitors.

Once everyone was settled, Admiral Sherman started the briefing. "We have had limited contact with this civilization. These people may be isolationists, but they are not stupid. They have a system defensive network that uses orbiting observation platforms. They have ground based missile and laser defenses concentrated around the populated areas. They have sought a return to a more primitive communal life style. They have not forsaken modern medicine, but they have eliminated most communication with the rest of the Federation. They do have a central representative government

which is based in the largest of the three settlements.”

“The planet has a single export with which it pays its Federation dues and buys materials it is not able to produce on its own. They export the wood from a fast growing tree. The tree yields a wood with exceptionally fine grain and a beautiful variegated coloration. It is extremely hard which is surprising given how fast it grows. The wood has a naturally occurring oil that makes it bright and lustrous. Furniture makers all over the galaxy buy the entire inventory as soon as it comes available. The tree has virtually taken over a band from the edge of the ice caps extending a few hundred kilometers in width. Apparently the only reason the tree has not taken over the entire planet is because the seeds need a hard freeze of at least a month duration to germinate. An independent shipping company sends a cargo ship and two shuttles once a quarter. They carry in the goods that have requested and bring up the wood for export. My office desk is made from this wood.”

“The planet appears to be on the end of an ice age. We suspect that the current ice age was triggered by an event much like the one facing them now. The system is populated with an unusually high number of astral bodies traveling in elliptical orbits that carry them across the orbits of the larger planets. The other planets in the system are covered with craters and pock marks from collisions with smaller objects.”

He pointed to the monitors. “These are the three main areas that have been colonized. The one on your left houses about twenty five thousand people. The one in the center houses fifteen thousand and the one on your right houses ten thousand people. Each settlement is situated around a large bay. The seat of government is on a peninsula in the bay with the largest population. They rely on aquatic plants and animals for much of their food supply. Their proximity to the water will actually will make the evacuation easier since so many of our ships can operate from the water. The cargo dock where we load the shuttles is in the largest of the three settlements. The bays are not large enough for the ships to take off from within the bay, so they taxi to the open water before leaving. More detailed information about the culture and topography will be on data modules.”

The displays changed to show several views of the comet. “We have recently updated our calculations on the comet’s trajectory. As you can see by this graphic, the comet is expected to impact the planet in a direct hit near the planet’s equator in one hundred three days from today. Your mission is to evacuate the planet’s population before the comet hits.”

“Excuse me, Admiral, but how are we to evacuate fifty thousand people?” Rachel asked. “We have facilities for less than a tenth that.”

“We will loan you two shuttles. They will be equipped with troop transport containers. I understand we have the parts in stock that you need for the one you brought with you.”

“Assuming that we run three shuttles and the med-evac craft continuously from the time we arrive and we actually can lift that many people to the ship, what do we do with them” Rachel continued.

“We have passenger vessels on the way from other planets who will be able to transfer the refugees here and...”

Rachel cut him off. "Wait a second. If you have all these ships at your disposal, why are we here? Why can't you go in and get the people out?"

"We offered. They refused. To proceed further would be considered an act of war and the Federation would have no choice but to impose sanctions on us. As much business as we do with the Federation military, sanctions would be economic disaster."

"But I can go in and force them to evacuate?"

"As a Federation Space Force officer enforcing a decree from the President based on scientific evidence, some of which you will collect, you can. As an Eretz defense system officer, you can't. There's a fine line. One of the reasons you were chosen for this mission has to do with your reputation against the Swordsmen. You are a known quantity to the people you will be dealing with. They recognize and are comfortable with your affiliations. You also have an advantage that most of the rest of us don't. While the majority of the system's senior leaders are men, their respect for women in positions of authority is significant. The choice of women to pilot your ships was not an accident. They are more likely to trust a woman than a man. All of our current trade negotiations with them are conducted by women. We do not recommend bringing a man with you to the planet's surface.

"Even though they know you and assuming they decide to trust you, they are still dangerous. They are not fond of strange ships dropping in unannounced. We have sent them a message. They know you are coming and why. They are not happy about it. My suggestion is that you not alert them in advance of your actual arrival. By arriving in a large force you will maintain the advantage of surprise in spite of the fact that they know you are coming."

"We do have a problem with docking ports," Rachel commented. "With the additional shuttles, we don't have enough ports for all the ships."

"Have the destroyers travel in formation linked by the fiber."

The briefing continued for the remainder of the day. Rachel and Wendy noticed that there appeared to be holes in the areas covered by the satellite imagery. Something was going on near the equator on the far side of the planet from the primary settlement. The planetary scans ignored that sector. The subject was the topic of discussion between Rachel and Wendy that evening.

Tanya, Kenneth and Astrid met Rachel, Wendy, Isaac and Joshua in Rose's apartment after the briefings had ended. Kenneth had determined the location of the system Admiral Sherman thought the slavers used for their base. It was a two week trip in hyper in the opposite direction from Everest.

The following day Buddy showed up. Whether Buddy, the ship, brought Mimi, the pilot, or Mimi, the pilot, brought Buddy, the ship, was a matter of lighthearted debate. Rachel and Wendy quickly found an excuse to climb aboard Buddy and go for a joy ride "for old time's sake" or at least that was the official reason.

Once clear of the traffic pattern, Rachel commanded, "Buddy, hyper jump to patrol station 183. We need to talk."

"Aye, Aye Captain!" the ship responded. "I have wanted to say that to you for a very long time."

“Buddy, we missed you!”

“Roger that!”

Buddy had been their father’s ship when he was in active duty chasing pirates for the Space Force. Buddy had been on that awful mission where he shot down the innocent ship thinking it was a pirate. Greg had programmed Buddy to appear self-aware. Greg had managed to “buy” Buddy from the Space Force, and now held clear title to the ship. He had further refined his programming skills when he took over the interstellar cargo ship that would later be known as Peter. Greg had programmed an entire generation of combat simulation games on Peter’s and Buddy’s on-board computers and all that data still resided in Buddy’s memory. As originally equipped, Buddy had more data processing power and a more logical mind than most people. Greg had enhanced Buddy’s capabilities since then. If a machine could feel pride, and that was an open question, Buddy was proud that Rachel and Wendy had come to him for help.

Daisy had been their mother’s ship. While it had not originally been programmed as intensely as Buddy had, during the trip to Earth five years ago, Peter had reprogrammed both of the smaller ships. Now the P I ships had the same capabilities since they shared the accumulated experiences of all three ships even if the smaller ships lacked Peter’s processing power and depth of data storage.

Once on station, Rachel instructed the ships to enter secure mode. She and Wendy then explained in as much detail as they could their suspicions and the observations behind them.

“This is beyond me,” Buddy replied when they were done. “Peter will know what to do.”

“When’s Peter due back?” Rachel asked.

“He should be there when we return.” Buddy ship replied.

“How long will it take for him to reprogram our ship?”

“Two to three days if he can get a direct connection.”

“We can’t give him a direct connection because we don’t want anyone to know we’ve reprogrammed the ship.”

“We can run a data link through the port’s data net.”

“Without being detected?”

“Probably not.”

“We absolutely cannot risk detection.”

“What we need is a really huge data module.”

“Buddy, you’re a genius,” Wendy shouted.

“Really?”

“Yes, you and Daisy are the biggest data modules I’ve ever seen!”

Rachel smiled as Wendy's revelation sunk home. "What a great idea! When is Daisy due back?"

"She should be home now."

"Here's the plan," Wendy said. "You dock to the Albert Schweitzer. Copy every bit of your memory into the ship's non-volatile storage. Don't dump anything yet. We need Peter to run that part. Daisy does the same thing. We go visit Peter. He dumps what he needs to dump and crams as much data as he can into the remaining space. He gives Wendy and me data modules with the executable code. We return to the ship. Wendy and I plug in our data modules and run the programs contained on them. We repeat the process until the ship is programmed. Given the data rates I've seen you guys run in combat I'll bet this will be faster than a fiber link data transfer." Buddy's synthesized voice laughed. "Very good!"

Peter and Daisy were waiting when Rachel and Wendy returned. Peter was berthed in the dock adjacent to the Albert Schweitzer because it was the only available cradle large enough to hold a ship his size. Daisy was docked to one of Peter's four docking ports. Stevedores shuttled cargo to the hospital ship. Buddy docked to Peter's airlock and immediately started dumping the data from Rachel and Wendy's conversation into Peter's data storage.

Peter invited the humans to the bridge. "Hey, kids!" Peter greeted them with a kindheartedness they had not heard for a long time.

After small talk, necessitated by the fact that Peter acted like a human even if he was a machine, Rachel asked, "Peter can you do anything about that ship over there? It's dumber than a stump."

"Certainly. Although we need to be careful. You have people on your ship you don't trust who would not take kindly to knowing that you programmed the ship to monitor their every move."

"Could they have done that already? Could they have programmed the ship to monitor me?"

"I'll know as soon as I get in there."

"How are you going to link without being detected?"

"Parallel processing large numbers of modulated weapons lasers operating at very low power hitting sensor arrays."

"Can you do that?"

"Have you ever known me to suggest something that can't be done?"

"No."

"So there. Take these data modules. Plug them into your workstations. Take the print outs sitting in the printer to your right. Key in the commands on the print outs. I will have finished the job by the time you need to leave."

The next few days were even more hectic than at New St. Louis. The entire ship's crew returned to the spaceport and either quartered on the ship or at the spaceport's meager guest facilities.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RACHEL AND WENDY DISCUSSED the idea of arriving in a potentially hostile system with intelligence they suspected was inaccurate or at least incomplete. Something was strange about this mission, and they needed to be less predictable. They discussed what they should do in light of what would be expected of them. They decided that they would be expected to do one of two things. They would either send in a single ship to scout and tip off the defenses that they were scouting or they would arrive in force spread wide to divide their opponents.

They decided to send the Wendy's flight of four P I ships and the two destroyers early and have them enter the system to survey. Rachel filed a flight plan for a familiarization exercise that would take the ships beyond the system's defenses. Two days later, under the guise of a training exercise, the six small ships left linked together by the fiber optic communications lines and traveled in formation to the planet Everest which was their final destination for this mission.

Not long after departing for their recon mission, Captain Darwin called Wendy on a secure comm link via the fiber optic that linked the ships and provided the navigation and propulsion systems the guidance necessary to kept them safely in formation. "Lt. Solomon, this is Captain Darwin."

"Captain, what can I do for you?"

"Your mother stopped by a couple of months ago. We talked for a while," Alina said.

"Did you talk or did she talk and you listened?"

Captain Darwin laughed. "She did most of the talking."

"Figures. Seems funny to be piloting warships into a mission and talking about my mother, but I guess with my mother it fits."

"She suggested that I spend time with our grandmother."

"Did she enlist you for her mission?"

"Yes," Alina laughed. "She also said if I ever went on a mission with you or Rachel to tell you I have 'the problem' as she called it."

"The one that anger management classes won't touch?"

"That one."

Wendy chuckled. "Rachel has it too."

"You don't?"

"Not the same way. I do a little, but not like them and if you say you share it, I guess not like you. Does your friend Lt. Mahoney have it?"

"No, your mother said she's more like your father. It's all about the thrill of the chase. She

Shanghaied me and brought me here to get help.”

“Did you get help?”

“I still have the problem, I don’t hate myself for it anymore.”

“Probably the best. It will keep you alive in the clinch. While we’re chatting, I have a problem we should discuss.”

“I’ll bite.”

“You outrank me and I’m supposed to be in command.”

“You are flying the bigger ship.”

“Trade you in a heartbeat. The P I is the greatest thing going.”

“Not a chance!”

“Seriously, I wonder if we would be better off if you were in command.”

“Are you worried that I won’t take orders from a junior?”

“Not at all, you’re more experienced and I think that will be important as this mission unfolds.”

“Except that I lost my seniority when I moved here.”

“Your change in status did not eliminate your experience. I’m the rookie here.”

Captain Alina Darwin laughed. “Rookie! I don’t think so! You’ve been flying warships longer than any of us!”

“But not in command. Shooting down bad guys as the wing is not the same as being the leader.”

“Oh, hey, Sabrina is calling me. Can I set up a conference?”

“Sure.”

“Hey, Wendy, this is Sabrina.”

“Sabrina, I was talking to the Captain,”

“It’s Alina to you.”

“I was talking to Alina about transferring command to her since she is the most senior and properly should have command. What do you think?” Wendy said.

“That’s a tough call,” Sabrina said. “I’ve flown with Alina and I know your reputation. We’re rational adults. I’m not sure it matters who has the official command designation. If you think it should be Alina then I’ll go along.”

“If you want me to take over, I will.” Alina said.



“Yes, please,” Wendy said.

“Consider it done,” Alina said.

“Thank you. Alina and Sabrina are you in secure comm mode?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Rachel and I suspect that there is more to this mission than we are being told,” Wendy said.

“What was your first clue?” Alina shot back. “This mission had stink on it from the first I heard of it.”

“Then why did you come?” Wendy asked.

“I was bored,” Alina explained. “Your mother was right. I wanted to be where the action is. You and Rachel are action magnets. How could we not come?”

Wendy laughed. “Trouble does have a way of finding us!”

“Roger that,” Sabrina replied.

Wendy filled them in on Rachel’s and her observations as well as the information she had from Reuben. “And one more thing. In the briefing before we left did you notice what looked like a military installation on the other side of the planet from the settled area?”

“Supposedly it’s an abandoned research station.” Alina replied. “The crews that ferry the lumber spotted it and that was the explanation they were given.”

“Do you believe it?”

“Nope,” Alina replied.

“What do you think it is?”

“No clue, but it’s still active,” Alina said. “It’s radiating too much energy to be abandoned.”

“How do you know?”

Alina chuckled. “There were some cute boys on that team that charted the comet. Getting information from them was easy.” She giggled. “And fun. I’ve suspected something was up with that place for a while. Now we get to find out. Old Sherm is pretty nervous about this mission. He’s planted spooks on the big ship.”

“What about on our ships here?”

“None in the ones we brought. I can’t vouch for the ones who came with you,” Alina said.

“We’re clean,” Wendy affirmed.

“We’ll make a fly by and see what we can learn from overhead.”

“Works for me.”

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

EXACTLY AS SCHEDULED, ADMIRAL SHERMAN and the security detail delivered Captain Curra to the ship's Marines. The Albert Schweitzer, fully staffed and fully equipped, headed out on its first mission. Admiral Sherman was not happy that the small ships had left early without his approval.

Not long after the Albert Schweitzer transitioned into hyper space, Ellie Mae and Elvira sat down with Rachel while she was eating dinner.

"Captain Curra is not what he seems." Elvira jumped right in.

"How so?" Rachel asked through a mouth full of food.

"He's a Commodore and he wasn't busted."

Rachel thought about this revelation a second.

"How do you know?"

"He has nightmares. He talks in his sleep. Sometimes you can hear him mentally living through an old battle. He has scars all over his body. I can't tell you how many times he's been wounded. He is a deeply troubled man. He needs help. It's a good thing we both decided to shack up with him. If either of us had done it alone, he'd have been too much. I would be concerned about any woman that tried to tackle him alone."

"Are you afraid of him?"

"Don't get me wrong, he's great in the sack and I'm glad we picked him up. He does get the old juices flowing. No, I don't think he would intentionally harm either of us as long as we don't tell him that we blew his cover."

"Who else on the ship might not be what they seem?"

"That's all we know."

Rachel thought about the news for the rest of her shift. When she returned to her cabin, the room lights gradually dimmed to the level she had preferred as a teenager when traveling with her parents. The ship had never done that before. She could hear Isaac sleeping in the adjoining room. She smiled. Peter had programmed the battleship well. "Hello, my new friend, did Peter give you a name?"

"Hello, Rachel," the ship answered in a voice that was familiar although she could not place it exactly. "Peter suggested we might use the name Elizabeth after the British queen in your research project. I am using the voice of one the wonderful actresses who portrayed her."

"One of the greatest warrior queens of a great nation who established a long period of peace. Peter always understood us."

“He watched you grow up every day you traveled together. He loves you all very much.”

“I miss him.”

“Miss who?” Isaac poked his head out of the bedroom rubbing his eyes.

“Peter.”

“Your ship?”

“Yes.”

Isaac shook his head. “You and your talking ships!”

“Isaac, I need you to trust me on something.”

“I love you, my dear. I trust you with my life. Every time I go to bed I trust that I won’t wake up dead. You do have a temper you know.”

“Yes, and I love you too, but we need to be serious. Let me introduce you to Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth?”

“Hello, Isaac,” the ship responded.

“The ship?”

“Yes.”

“Where is Asimov when you need him?”

“Isaac, Peter said you might have trouble with this. Is there anything I can do to ease your fears.” The ship sounded contrite in a soothing sort of way.

“No, um, thanks. I need to get over it.” Isaac yawned. “Um, sorry. Look, I know Peter is programmed for military scenarios, and he probably programmed you the same way, but I am having trouble with the multi-scan analyzer software in scanner number two. Well, at least I think it’s a software problem. If you’re as hot as Peter, you should be able to troubleshoot it for me. I guess if you helped me do my job, perhaps I would feel better about you.”

“Certainly, I will look into it immediately.”

“Elizabeth, wait,” Rachel commanded.

“Yes, Rachel.”

“We need to keep your new capabilities a secret. You can’t be my eyes and ears if everyone knows you’re doing it. Everything you do for me or Isaac has to be a secret. We have people who we don’t trust on the ship and we need to know everything we can find out about their activities.”

“Your concern is justified. Material visible in his cabin would seem to indicate Commodore

Curra is a special operations officer for the intelligence service.”

“Can’t you read his medical transponder?”

“He doesn’t have one.”

“I thought all Space Force personnel had them.”

“Not all. I have gained access to his data assistant and I know he has tried to gain access to yours. Peter encrypted your data assistant extremely well. What Ellie Mae and Elvira told you is true. The Commodore has an impressive track record. I would not challenge him to a duel with small arms if I were you. You could probably out score him target shooting with throwing knives, but he would beat you at everything else.”

“Nice guy. What about Hammersmith?”

“Space Force Covert Special Ops. Skillful, dangerous. I would not bet on a fight between him and Curra. Hammersmith has strength and speed, but Curra fights dirty. Too close to call.”

“What about Faye Anne?”

“She has never been your friend in the sense that Reuben and Rashi are. Even when you were traveling to the Academy aboard Peter, she had her own agenda that did not always match yours.”

“So who can I trust?”

“Isaac, Joshua and Wendy of course. They are your strongest allies. Reuben, Rashi, Suwanee and all her Marines are faithful to you and Wendy. However, their priorities may be different from yours. It is not a matter of disloyalty as much as different viewpoints. If you think about it before you speak, you should not have problems with them. For example, Reuben and Suwanee are more interested in starting a family than you are. That’s not a problem as long as you are aware of it. Esther is a challenge. She is conflicted between doing what she knows is the right thing to do and being loyal to her father and sister. It is tearing her apart. It will make her hard to predict. Mimi is a total wild card. She is headstrong and emotional. The problem is that you don’t really know what she is thinking or what she is capable of doing. She will not knowingly betray you, but she might do something so stupid that it makes little difference.”

“What about Ellie Mae and Elvira?”

“They have taken the redemption of Captain Curra as a personal project. What they tell you will be the truth, but it will not always be complete even as they know it. That could be significant.”

“What about the pilots that came from Eretz?”

“I have no data with which to make a judgment.”

“Thanks.”

“Are we in as much trouble as I think we are?” Isaac asked.

“Probably more,” Rachel replied.

“Roger that,” Elizabeth affirmed.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER NINETEEN

“IT’S A PRISON.” Those were the first words out of Wendy’s mouth when she and Rachel could be sure they did not have listeners. In the safety of Rachel’s quarters they discussed the recon group’s findings. They talked about the planet’s defensive systems as they stood off out of range of the system’s weapons, but not out of range of its sensors. They found the errant comet and verified its path. There was no doubt that unless something was done, the comet would make a direct hit impacting the planet head on. The two orbits aligned so that the collision would occur at the maximum possible closing speed since at the time of collision the planet and the comet would be coming directly at each other in the worst of all possible trajectories.

They elected to proceed as if they had not discovered anything amiss on the planet’s surface. The Wendy’s flight crews who had seen the installation had been sworn to secrecy. Rachel hailed the defense system and asked for safe passage and an audience with the governing council.

Safe passage was granted for one unarmed med-evac ship and two escorting P I ships. The party that could leave the ships once they docked was limited to four people. In spite of Faye Anne’s and Captain Curra’s protestations, Rachel decided that the group should be herself and Wendy, Captain Alina Darwin and Lt. Suwanee Abrams. The expeditionary force descended to the planet’s surface.

Their first impression of the planet when they stepped out to the flight apron was the cold. They were close to the planet’s equator and the temperature reminded them of an autumn day in the Rockies. An honor guard greeted them as they descended the crew ramps. After formal protocols were observed, they walked across the flight apron to one of the hangars that stood with its bay door open. They entered the hangar and walked through it to an office complex beyond. After what seemed like an eternity of walking, they entered the rear of an auditorium that seated two hundred people. They followed their escort to a position left of the podium.

“Esteemed colleagues, friends and fellow travelers. Please let us welcome the delegation from the Federation Space Force.” The applause was tepid at best.

“Captain, please introduce yourself and your associates. Please tell us a little of your personal history so that we might know you better and thus understand you as a person and why you come to us today. Once you have spoken, we will discuss the matter you wish to negotiate with us.”

Rachel stepped to the podium. “Thank you kind sir. I am Rachel, the daughter of Greg Solomon and Avelina Bardwell. I have taken in marriage a gentle man, a doctor, named Isaac Cohen. By profession, I am a warrior, like my parents before me. I hold the rank of Captain in the Federation Space Force. Even though I am a warrior, I do not seek to solve all issues by killing those who oppose me. In fact, those skills that allow me to take lives also allow me to save them from disasters that might befall them.

“When I was sixteen, my father and I flew into combat in a warship. Many lives were lost in that battle. My father and I killed many men who but for the fact that they chose the wrong army would still be alive today. Not long after that battle, I fought another. In this second battle I had the option of

destroying a ship carrying many men. The safest thing for me personally to have done to ensure my own survival was to fire a full volley of missiles and destroy the ship with all hands. I chose not to do that. I chose to spare the lives of those men. Men who were strangers to me, men who were sworn to be my enemies. I fired a single missile and disabled their ship and spared their lives.”

“I have fought other battles since then. I have killed other men. However, every time I had the opportunity to accomplish my mission without killing, I have done so. Even though I am a warrior and I kill people for a living, today I come before you not to kill anyone, but to save you. Thank you for your time.”

A man shouted from the back, “Save our lives or kill our souls!”

Rachel stepped down. Wendy took her place. “Rachel is my sister. We know each other as only sisters can. She says she has come in peace and from the bottom of my heart I know it is true. I hold the rank of lieutenant in the Federation Space Force. I have taken for my husband the brother of the man my sister has married. Joshua Cohen is an engineer by profession and a kind and gentle man by inclination. The brothers lead a team supported by creative engineers and pilots that we hope you will allow to help you survive the danger ahead. When you have seen as much death as we have, you want it to stop. We have the opportunity to prevent many deaths. Please let us help you.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I am Captain Alina Darwin Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction Specialist on temporary assignment to Eretz. Someone once burned down half a city trying to kill me. I grew up in a neighborhood where dead bodies on the street in the morning were a common sight. One would think that all that pain would harden my heart. One would until one looks into the dead face of the young son of a close friend and knows that had I been a little more attentive I could have prevented that murder. I looked into his face with the night wind rustling his hair across his eyes open wide in terror and something snapped inside me. After that, some of those dead bodies on the street were my handiwork.”

“The police knew what I was doing, but they were so corrupt they made no attempt to stop me. I was taking more criminals off the street than they were and they knew it. I always made sure the police found the body before the press did. I would walk up behind a hooker and press my knife against her throat. I would tell her where the body was and tell her to go tell the nearest cop. I told her if she turned around to look, I would kill her the next night. I never had to make good on that threat. I am not proud of what I did, but soon children felt safe to play in the park again. Parents came out for walks on pleasant afternoons. I learned who I needed to kill and who I could chase away. I also learned who was worth saving. You, my friends are worth saving. We have come in peace. Please let us all work together in peace. Thank you.”

“I am Federation Marine Lt. Suwanee Baxter Abrams. One of the engineers working to help you out of danger is my husband. We are concerned for your well being. I grew up a tough kid in a tough neighborhood. I killed my father because he killed my mother. I don’t want anyone here to die.”

Suwanee stepped down and the man who had been at the podium returned. “What new evidence can you present that verifies what you are telling us?”

Rachel stepped back up. “We have located and charted the comet in question. We have refined our measurements. The team that reported to us had located the epicenter of the strike to a circle a



thousand kilometers in diameter. Our calculations reduced the size of the circle marking the probable location of the epicenter to an area to less than a hundred kilometers in diameter. We know with absolute certainty that without intervention, this planet will be hit by a comet in seventy-four days. We know when and we know where. Life on this planet will change irrevocably and not for the better. We have come to evacuate you to someplace safer. If you choose not to believe me, and I see no reason you should, we will take a delegation of your people to see the comet up close and personal for yourselves. This is a matter of utmost urgency. If we are to evacuate everyone, we need to start soon.”

The man who had been at the podium when they arrived stood and said, “Thank you for your concern. We will take it under advisement. Please return to your ships and wait for our answer. In the meantime, take no actions on our behalf or otherwise. We will protest any such action by the Federation or any other entity as an act of war. We will call you when we are ready to give you an answer. In the mean time, our ships will monitor your activities and should you attempt to do anything in conflict with our stated wishes, we will have no choice but to defend ourselves. Thank you.”

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY

WHEN THE LANDING PARTY returned to the bridge, Faye Anne was nervously waiting although her watch would not start for several hours. “What’s the plan? Where do we start?” She shifted her weight rapidly back and forth from one foot to the other.

Rachel eyed her warily. She assessed Faye Anne’s agitation. She had not intended to force Faye Anne to reveal herself yet, but she suspected that Faye Anne was about to force her hand. She wondered how her father would have handled this situation. “We don’t. They denied permission.”

“They can’t do that!” Faye Anne shrieked. “Don’t they know what’s at stake?”

“Apparently not. Why don’t you tell me?” Rachel’s tone was cold and level with the slightest hint of accusation.

“What do you mean?” Faye Anne recoiled, realizing she had made a serious mistake.

“Is there more at stake than meets the eye? Faye Anne, is there something I should know? Am I missing something here?”

Faye Anne made eye contact with Captain Curra. He shrugged. She stammered. “No, I guess not, they’re all going to die. All those innocent people are going to die. I guess they know that.”

Lt. Hammersmith shifted in his seat and Captain Curra gently, but firmly, rested his hand on the younger man’s shoulder. Rachel noticed the force applied to keep him in his seat.

“I see,” Rachel said. Suwanee’s squad of Marines fanned out around the bridge. Captain Curra noticed the deployment and unobtrusively rested his hand on the holster he kept in the small of his back.

“Well then, there appear to be a few things happening around here that are strange,” Rachel said. “Perhaps someone can explain what I don’t understand. Why do we have a shuttle that looks like a prisoner transport? Why has Captain Curra devoted so much energy to seeing that it came with us? Why did Admiral Sherman have all the right parts to fix it. Many of those parts are obsolete and had to be custom manufactured. They would not have been sitting in anyone’s warehouse on the off chance that a shuttle might need them. Most curious is who shot it before it was sent to us? Why would anyone shoot a shuttle with a Disruptor?”

She looked Captain Curra in the eye. “Commodore?”

Hammersmith came up out of his seat like a bullet. Luther and Lionel snatched him and threw him to the deck. Before some of the people on the deck realized what had happened, they disarmed him, threw him back into his chair and strapped him in.

Suwanee and Patricia grabbed Faye Anne and pulled her back against the bulkhead. Janet and Darius stepped between Rachel and Captain Curra to block any shot he might have at her. Captain Curra merely smiled.

“My dear captain, you have found us out,” he sneered. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

Let those people die while we dicker like a bunch of children or do what we came here to do?"

"Since I don't appear to know what we came here to do, why don't you tell me about the prison on the far side of the planet?" Rachel challenged.

"Since I outrank you, I don't really have to," Curra retorted.

"Perhaps you do outrank me, depending on which report I choose to believe. Even if you do, though, the captain of a ship can refuse to execute the order of the flag officer who happens to be on board if that order impacts the safety of the ship and its crew. I can order the ship back to Eretz and you can't stop me."

Curra glared at her. "I believe I can." He smirked. "Lt. Hammersmith, take the helm."

"The ship is not responding, sir." The lieutenant sounded nervous.

"Voice Command! Command Mode!" Curra shouted.

"Under Federation Space Force Operational Directive 10, you are not authorized to take command of the ship under these circumstances," the ship replied coldly in Queen Elizabeth's voice.

"WHAT!! OVERRIDE!"

"Override is not authorized," the ship responded.

Rachel stared coldly at Curra. "Command Mode," she said softly.

"Command Mode, Aye, Captain," the ship responded.

"Seal the bridge. Order all personnel to quarters. When they all are in place, seal quarters."

"Sealing the ship, aye, Captain."

No one on the bridge moved for a very long time. "The ship is sealed, Captain."

"Command Mode, please explain why you took the actions you just took."

The ship's synthesized voice explained, "Under the terms of Directive 10, Section five sub paragraph three, if the identity of an entity claiming to be a Space Force officer cannot be conclusively verified, even if that entity is the last person alive on the ship, command may not be turned over to them. Command shall reside with the senior most person whose identity can be verified without regard to whether the person is an officer or enlisted person."

"Please explain why you are unable to verify his identity," Rachel said.

"He does not have a medical transponder. All regular Space Force officers carry transponders," the ship replied.

"Now Grant and I will call you Grant because I don't know what your real rank is, I think it's time you told us the truth. Before you do, however, I am not sure that I will believe you even now. Faye Anne was my friend and I trusted her. It now becomes obvious that I can no longer trust her either. I

would like you to listen to something.”

The ship replayed a recording in which Faye Anne and Grant gloated to each other that they had succeeded in hiding their true mission from the others on board.

Rachel continued, “Trust is a fragile thing. Combat officers depend on Intelligence Service for accurate information. We depend on you to give us information that will allow us to succeed in our missions and keep us safe. We know you don’t tell us everything. We understand. We expect you will tell us everything that is relevant to our ability to succeed in our mission. I know that Hammersmith is one of yours. I know that Lt. Martini, our esteemed combat intelligence officer, is one of yours. She has been sliding down into her seat since I returned to the bridge. Isn’t that right, Lieutenant?”

Lt. Martini refused to meet her gaze and sat silently.

“There are others. I won’t even pretend we know who all of them are, but let’s see what we can find out. Command mode, initiate transponder verification on all personnel.”

“All the Marines on the flight deck verify. Lt. Martini verifies. Lt. Hammersmith’s transponder reports that he is female. Spec 4 Suggs in munitions does not match known personnel.”

“Please print a list of all suspicious personnel on board,” Rachel ordered.

“Printing.”

“Wendy, would you grab that please?”

“Got it!”

Rachel turned back to the man who had been introduced to her as Captain Grant Curra. “So, Grant, did you bring us here to get us killed or are we really here to save a planet full of isolationists that don’t want to be saved. Or perhaps is our presence a cover to allow you to pick up and move a high security prison of some kind? Are we a giant smoke screen? Grant, tell us what is going on so we can save the lives of those people down there before it is too late. Before you say anything, remember that the people I care about and I will survive this. As for the people you care about, it’s up to you.”

Curra stared at her for a long time. “I could say anything in my most sincere voice and with my most carefully chosen words and I doubt you would believe me. But, you know something, it doesn’t matter. In spite of what your electronic toy says, you are guilty of mutiny. I will have your hide.”

Captain Darwin had quietly slid around behind Curra. With a speed that impressed even Hammersmith, she tore off his shirt, spun him around and removed his holster. The Marines not otherwise occupied grabbed him and held him captive as much to keep her from killing him as to keep him from killing her.

Rachel wandered to Lt. Sonya Martini. “Lieutenant, please stand.”

She stood. Her normally olive colored skin was almost white.

“I suspect that you can tell me what they won’t.”

The young lieutenant looked at Rachel with terror. She folded her hands between her thighs to

protect them. Rachel suspected that someone had told her about the time she drew a confession out of a traitor by putting a small slice in his fingertip with the throwing knife she carried behind her neck.

Rachel leaned close the lieutenant's face. "I don't like hurting people. I only do it because I have to. Captain Darwin here, however, she likes hurting people. She thinks it's fun. I don't. She does. Now, she's never hurt a woman that I know of, but she has killed men and put a hurt on some. I think you would rather talk to me than to her."

Rachel smiled in the lieutenant's face.

"They're the P A F!" Faye Anne shouted. "They are People Against Fission! That's who's in the prison. They're dangerous terrorists."

Curra tried to shout her down, but her words got through.

"People Against Fission," Rachel wandered over to Curra. "Let me guess. You have a secret prison down there that you have locked up a bunch of what you think are real bad guys. Let me guess that nobody knows where these guys are. Even the President doesn't know who's here or how long they've been held. It's possible that she doesn't even know the prison exists. Let me go one step further. Some of the people you are holding may not be who you thought they were or in fact are innocent and if they get out, there will be hell to pay. So along comes this comet. If it hits the planet and obliterates everything and all the prisoners die, you're off the hook, but if it doesn't obliterate everything and only breaks down the prison walls, you have real bad guys and wrongly accused bad guys wandering around loose on the planet waiting for a rescue that will show up when the planet misses its regular shipment of lumber. Based on the current calculations, that is exactly what will happen if we do nothing."

Rachel wandered back over to Faye Anne. "Let me think this through. I can't claim to be a nice person. I did put a little cut in someone's finger to force a confession. And I have killed with my throwing knife, but that was a long time ago. Now, if I could to that and I don't like hurting people, I don't even want to think what someone who does like hurting people could do to someone they think is sabotaging nuclear power plants. So, let's assume that what has been going on down there may not pass the scrutiny of the Justice Department. Am I close?"

The silence was oppressive.

"You know, Grant, is that your real name, Grant? You know, that had you told me this when we were still in Earth orbit, I would have kept your secret, and I would have helped you plan this little endeavor of yours. But, you're a spook. You tell a lie when you could tell the truth. Here's what we're doing from now on. You're leveling with me. I want to know who your people are although I probably already know. The ship has been programmed so that you can't lock me out. You will start by telling me your real name, rank and branch of service."

They stared at each other.

"Grant, if you tell me the truth, you will get what you want. I will not threaten you, but if you

refuse, many people you would like to save will die. It's up to you."

"I am Commodore Grant Charles Curra Federation Space Force Covert Special Operations. I will have you busted for this."

"Perhaps. Wendy, please assemble the engineers and flight crews in the battleship's galley. Have Lt. Mahoney join us here. Tell the engineers their mission is to figure out a way to prevent the destruction of the planet by the comet. Make sure they have food and whatever materials they need. Do not let them out of the galley until they have a solution. Give that list you're holding to the remainder of the Marine detachment. Have them put the suspicious individuals under guard in their quarters."

"Aye, Aye Captain!" Wendy raced out of the crowded bridge.

"Captain Darwin, you have the conn. When Lt. Mahoney gets here have her stay with you. Seal the bridge. Do not let anyone other than myself or my sister on the bridge."

"Aye, Captain, I have the conn."

"Everyone else will adjourn to the conference room next to my quarters so we can develop a plan for evacuating the prison without getting killed by the planet's defense system."

The crew from the bridge reconvened in the conference room. Curra, Hammersmith and Faye Anne were tied to their chairs with their hands and feet bound. Lt. Martini was not restrained. Her pallor showed that physical restraints were not necessary.

"You cannot treat a superior officer like this!" Curra challenged Rachel.

"You're right. I can't. My father will be very upset with me when he finds out. You should have heard the way he yelled at me over cutting that guy's finger. So, how do we evacuate the prison and what do we do with the prisoners once we do? Do we attempt to relocate the unfortunates that have been determined to be innocent?"

Lt. Martini hid her hands under her thighs in her seat.

The argument was heated and lasted twelve hours during which time only the Marines were allowed to leave. None of the other participants were fed or allowed relief of any kind. In the end, they determined that there was no way short of destroying the planet's defensive system that they could evacuate the prison without help from the planet's more visible inhabitants. The prisoner and guard transfers had previously been covered by the arrival and departure of the cargo shuttles handling the lumber exports.

At the end of the argument, Rachel confined all the bridge personnel except the Marines to quarters and went to bed.

When Rachel awoke, she went to the galley. Reuben, Rashi and two engineers were working on calculations. The rest were crashed out in heaps on the floor or draped across the tables and chairs.

"How are you doing?" Rachel asked a bleary eyed Reuben.

Rashi answered, "We call it the Nemesis defense. We named it after one of Isaac Asimov's books. If we throw enough ships transitioning into hyper drive at the comet we should be able to divert

it enough to avoid the planet.”

“Are you sure it will work?”

“Not yet. We’re still working the numbers. It looks good. It should work, but we don’t know how many times we have to hit it to move it enough to divert it. There is a limit to how many ships we can parade by in a fixed period of time due to the turbulence the energy fields will create. I would hate to make them think they have dodged a bullet only to get slammed because we got over confident.”

“Carry on. Let me know when you are finished.”

“Aye, Captain.” He grinned.

Twelve hours later Reuben called Rachel. They had the answer and were ready to present.

When everyone had gathered in the galley, Reuben stood supporting himself by leaning on the back of a chair. “Let me jump to the end. We need a parade of ships making close fly bys of the comet to push it out of the way with hyper energy waves. We need to have one ship pass the comet every forty-five minutes for this to work. We need to use all our ships, including this one, to get the necessary mass to move the comet out of the way. If we start within the next hour, the comet will pass outside of the orbit of the planet’s moon. If we wait a week, it will pass inside the orbit of the moon, missing the moon, but outside of the planet’s atmosphere. There is no danger of collision with the moon because the moon’s orbit puts it on the opposite side of the planet when the comet passes by. If we wait longer than a week, some portion of the comet will hit the atmosphere. Depending on where the rocky pieces in the comet are, there may or may not be damage on the planet’s surface. If we wait two weeks, the main cluster of chunks that makes up the center of the comet will hit the atmosphere. If that happens, we know there will be substantial damage on the planet’s surface. The sooner we start the better.”

One of the fire control officers asked, “Why can’t we just blow it to bits with missiles?”

“Two reasons,” Reuben replied. “First, unlike an asteroid, there is no real hard body of rock to hit. There are many smaller bodies. Even with our best missiles, we would spend a lot of ordinance pushing around small pieces of rock without destroying them. The second reason is that even if we pulverize the pieces of rock, we have not changed their path or their total mass. They will continue on their current path and hit the planet pretty much as if we didn’t even try to stop it.”

Rachel scanned the exhausted engineers. “Everyone to bed. In twelve hours we will meet in the hospital ship galley to discuss our plans.”

Wendy looked at Rachel and said, “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I need twelve hours to figure this out. Grab some coffee. Bring Isaac and Joshua. We’ll meet in my conference room and talk this through.”

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE

IN SPITE OF PETER'S BEST efforts, Elizabeth was not Peter. The four humans and one computer wrestled with the options for several hours before coming to a decision.

Before meeting with the rest of her crew, Rachel had Reuben communicate with the three most senior of the scientists who lived among the planet's population. They agreed that the opportunity to study the comet under the stress of approaching a body as large as the planet was too good to ignore and that close fly-bys of the comet for the purposes of scientific observation were in order. The scientists agreed to relay the concept to the planet's governing council.

"Here's the plan," Rachel said to the assembled crew. "We are implementing Nemesis exactly as described. We start flying as soon as crews can be briefed. It's that time, folks. Let's go."

A week after initiating Nemesis, Rachel pulled Reuben aside. "When will we know if it's working?"

"It's working. We have measured a slight deflection in the comet's trajectory. There is more mass in there than we originally measured, but we appear to be making headway."

"Carry on."

A week later Rachel received an angry communication from the planetary council demanding that she stop all military maneuvers in the system. She replied that she was conducting pilot training and under the terms of the Federation charter as long as such exercises did not pose a threat to the system's population, she was authorized to conduct whatever exercise she wished.

Within hours of the acknowledgment of the Federation ships in question authority to conduct such an exercise within the system's boundaries, a flight of four fighter-interceptors broke from their patrol pattern and set course to intercept the Federation fleet now working on the approaching comet. They made no attempt to hide their actions. In fact, with their ship identifier transponders broadcasting at maximum gain, it was obvious that they wanted everyone to know who they were and where they were going. When they were close enough to the Federation fleet that the delay in light speed communications would be only mildly irritating, the flight leader hailed the Albert Schweitzer on a Federation mandated open hailing frequency.

"Captain Solomon, this is Captain Tobias Bozak, Everest Planetary Defense."

"Captain Bozak, this is Captain Solomon, how can I be of service?"

"Captain, the same protocol that allows you to conduct exercises here in our system allows us to observe the exercises. I have four ships with which I would like to observe your activities."

"Of course, Captain. Let me transmit the exercise parameters so you can take your station where it will be safe to do so."

"Thank you, but that will not be necessary. We know where we want to take our positions and with your permission, we will proceed to those locations."



“We will pause the exercise until you are on station. Please inform me when we may continue.”

“Thank you, Captain. We will contact you when we have taken our positions.” The positions the four small ships took completely obstructed the path the ships attempting to head off the comet would need to take.

“Captain Bozak, your ships are in the line of fire.”

“What better place to observe your tactics, which frankly we don’t think make much sense.”

Rachel inwardly fumed. “All ships return to base. The exercise is over.”

When Rachel had calmed down enough that she was sure she would not kill some innocent person who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, she headed for Captain / Commodore Curra’s cabin. The Marine standing guard admitted her. When she arrived, he appeared to be sleeping.

“Get up Slick Willie! You’re coming with me! You had me fooled and you fooled lots of other people. Let’s see if you can talk your way out of this one! You want the prisoners, I want the rest of the planet’s population out of harm’s way. Put on your flight suit. We’re going to pay the council a visit. You will do your best impersonation of a real person and convince these people to leave with us.”

Curra rolled over in his bunk to show his back to Rachel. “Bad idea.”

“What makes you think I believe you?”

“I know you don’t. Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t make it a good idea. It’s still a bad idea.”

“And I assume you aren’t telling me why it’s a bad idea.”

“Correct. Besides, you can’t force me.”

“I can.” She covered her face with a breathing mask as the cabin filled with a sticky smell.

Curra awoke strapped into the copilot’s seat of a med-evac ship. Rachel was asleep in the pilot’s seat. He attempted to remove his straps and found he was locked in as tightly as any cargo on any ship bound for re-entry. He attempted to operate the controls and found them locked. He attempted addressing the ship with voice command. A small legend flashing on his display told him that voice command recognition had been terminated. He was headed for the planet and he was not happy. He squirmed and strained against his restraints, but to no avail. His head throbbed. He was about to enter the atmosphere in a ship that either was under remote control or was following a pre-programmed flight plan and there was nothing he could do about it. Rachel slept soundly in the other seat.

The med-evac ship entered the planet’s atmosphere and spiraled to land at the same dock where Rachel had disembarked on her previous trip. She awoke as the ship touched down on the water, stretched, yawned and turned to look at the co-pilot’s seat. “Did you have a nice nap? I certainly needed one.”

Curra merely growled.

Once the ship had been tied to the dock by the marina crew, Rachel turned to her passenger and said, “I will exit the ship. Once I am clear, your restraints will release. Do not attempt to do anything

other than exit the ship in a slow and deliberate manner. Should you attempt anything else, the results will be painful or fatal.”

The locks on the restraints popped free. Curra slowly exited the ship with his hands away from his sides. A squad of four security personnel backed up with four marksmen with their rifles pointed in his direction waited on the dock. He slowly raised his hands over his head. Rachel sat in an open sided security vehicle with her hands bound behind her back. Without being told, Curra slowly turned around with his hands still in the air. One of the security personnel grabbed his hands and bound them behind his back and then patted him down. As he was brusquely shoved into the seat beside Rachel, he noticed that one of the guards in the front seat held her crystal clear polymer throwing knife. He shook his head, secure in the knowledge of what was about to happen.

“I told you this was a bad idea,” Curra said.

“You are going to give the performance of you life to get us out of here,” Rachel charged.

“I did that twenty years ago. Nope, we’re stuck here.”

They rode the rest of the way to the council chambers in silence. They drove directly into the building through a security entrance. They were escorted into the council chambers.

The man who was at the podium on their first visit greeted them from the podium. “Welcome back to Everest. Security, please untie Captain Solomon. You may return her knife to her as well. She knows better than to use it here.”

When Rachel had been untied and her knife returned he continued. “Captain Solomon, please have a sat over there.” He pointed to an empty row of chairs to her right. Rachel silently sat.

“Mr. Angus Witherspoon, it is a pleasure to see you again. What brings you? Is it your precious lumbering operation or your clandestine prison on the other side of our planet? Or, perhaps is it this nonsense about this comet hitting our planet?”

Curra / Witherspoon stood defiant. “Is this any way to treat your guests, especially one who has funded this silly experiment of yours for the last twenty years?”

“This is how one deals with a liar, cheat, thief and murderer. This is how we deal with you.”

“Regardless what you think of me, you should listen to her. She may have killed men in combat, but she is not a murderer, liar, cheat or thief. She really has come to do what she believes will save your pathetic undeserving population from annihilation. You can do with that what you please.”

“Lock him in solitary. The high court will try him for his crimes.”

“I told you this was a bad idea,” Curra said.

The security officers hauled him off.

“Captain Solomon, please come to the podium. Please explain how you came to be hoodwinked by this nefarious creature and why we should believe you?”

Stunned by the sudden turn events, Rachel stood slowly. “Yes, thank you.”

She gingerly made her way to the podium. “Gentle sirs and ladies, I don’t know where to start. I could start with the Academy research project that led me to believe that the best thing we could do with aging obsolete battleships was to turn them into self defending hospital ships. Would you like me to start there or would you like me to start with my assignment to the Albert Schweitzer? Would you like me to start with my assignment to this mission? How much time would you like to spend?”

A woman in the center of the room stood, “Captain Solomon, you are a famous person. Some of us know some of what you would tell us. We would like to hear it in your words. Please start with your Courts Marshall at the Academy. We will take all day if necessary.”

Rachel took a deep breath. A pitcher of ice water and a glass were passed to the podium. The story took well into the evening due to the number of technical questions members of the council asked that required detailed explanations. When pressed, she revealed how she became suspicious of the man she knew as Curra and they knew as Witherspoon. She stopped short of revealing her other crew members who were complicit with him. When she was done, the assembly rose in applause.

“Captain Solomon, we have prepared dinner for you in the next room. When you have had time to finish it, we will ask you back and let you know the results of our deliberations.”

An hour later, she was called back into the assembly chambers.

“Captain Solomon, we are a reasonable people, but we have elected to stay. We place our trust in you to do everything in your power to keep us safe. We have no illusions. Frankly, we are not convinced that your plan will work. Even given that, we are sure that we would rather die here on the planet we call home than wander around the cosmos rootless and homeless as your people, the Jews, have done for thousands of years. Please understand we recognize that you had the best of intentions. If you fail to save us, we will not hold you accountable. We will neither obstruct you nor will we help you. We will keep a flight of ships observing your activities from a safe distance. If you wish to communicate with us, please do so through them. If you succeed, we ask only that you remove the blight of a prison foisted on us without our knowledge. We will be forever in your debt if you clean that bit of trash from our midst. Any member of your crew who wishes to settle here will be welcome to do so. Do you have any questions?”

“What about my exec?” Rachel asked.

“Captain Curra AKA Witherspoon will stay with us pending trial on civil matters. Military courts do not have jurisdiction in these matters and we will try him in civil court. We will, of course, wait for a proper defense attorney to be dispatched from Earth to represent him.”

“That could take months,” Rachel said.

“It’s the only way he will get a fair trial.”

“I see. Thank you for your time. We will do everything we know how to do to save you from the comet. I understand your feelings having had the planet I called home destroyed from underneath me. I disagree, but I understand and acknowledge your right to do as you wish. Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope in eighty days or so to return and host a party of thanksgiving. Let us all pray to those who claim our loyalty that we will all see each other again. Thank you.”

Rachel returned to the ship and taxied out to clear water. “Command Mode!”

“Command mode, Aye!”

“Let’s go home.”

“Aye, Aye Captain, plotting most efficient path to the Albert Schweitzer.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth.”

“You are welcome, Rachel. Filing flight plan with traffic control. See you when you get here.”

“Oh, Elizabeth, please alert the crews to resume Operation Nemesis as soon as the path is clear.”

“Aye, Captain. The path is already clear. Anything else?”

“Please invite Captain Bozak to dinner. I hear he’s quite a chess player and I’ll bet he and Reuben would be an even match.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Rachel passed out in her seat not long after the ship became airborne.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

OPERATION NEMESIS CONTINUED UNABATED for thirty two days. Captain Bozak roundly trounced every chess opponent who had the courage to stand against him. Reuben was the closest to his skill level, but even he lost at the rate of three games to one. Rather than challenge him, Rachel elected to cajole him into instructing her on the finer points of the game. Rachel and Captain Bozak were in Rachel's conference room working through a chess strategy when her comm buzzed. "Captain to the bridge, please."

"Acknowledged. To the bridge," Rachel replied.

"Captain, you might wish to bring Captain Bozak with you. We have visitors."

"Right behind you," Captain Bozak said.

Tactical Officer Lt. Cho Mae Chin and Sensor Analyst Lt. Jane Tyndall had the bridge watch. When Rachel and Captain Bozak arrived at the bridge, Lt. Tyndall handed Rachel a printed report from the sensors.

Rachel scanned the print, turned to Captain Bozak and handed him the page, "Tobias, do you recognize any of these?"

He studied the page for a moment. "Nothing I've ever seen."

"Were you expecting guests?" Rachel asked.

"No," Captain Bozak said perplexed. "We should check them out." His eyes betrayed his worry.

"Who do you think they are?" Rachel asked.

"They're not the Third Force. I've seen enough to recognize them. They're not Federation and they're not Swordsmen. Swordsmen have no reason to be in this part of the galaxy. I only know one other group of people who might want to come here."

"And perform a rescue?" Rachel asked.

"That was my thinking, yes. But I've never seen drive signatures like these. How do we know they're not some peaceful alien civilization we have not previously encountered? Shooting at them would be a bad way to welcome them." He knit his brow in concern.

Rachel called Reuben. "Reuben, please come to the bridge. Bring Rashi and your drive specialists. We need you to look at some sensor readings."

Reuben and company arrived on the bridge and Rachel ushered them to her conference room.

After they had a chance to review the data, Specialist Level Six Zachary Caruso, one of the drive specialists said, "It's a fusion drive. Supposed to be experimental, but this one is obviously working. The containment bottle must be huge. I saw a report on one at Nuclear Power School the last time I was there. Amazing."

“Who was experimenting with the fusion drive?” Rachel asked.

“P A F,” Spec 6 Caruso replied.

“Do we know who’s funding them?” Rachel asked.

There were blank stares all around.

Rachel called Suwanee. “Bring Lt. Martini, Faye Ann and Lt. Hammersmith to the conference room.”

“Restrained?”

“No.”

“Aye, Captain.”

There was more than a hint of sarcasm in Rachel’s voice as she addressed the three dishonored but only moderately repentant intelligence officers. “All right Military Intelligence,” she made it sound like a slur, “You get an opportunity to redeem yourselves. Look at these drive signatures. Whose ships are they and what tactical advantages and disadvantages will we have if we have to fight them? If I have any reservations about your honesty, I will send you as passengers on the destroyers. Do I make myself clear?”

“We don’t know much,” Lt. Hammersmith started. “These are P A F ships. We know they are funded by Valiant Industries. Valiant is trying to overtake Saturn’s lock on Federation ship building by developing the fusion drive. They appear to feel that the fusion drive will give them a competitive advantage over Saturn.”

“Maybe if their ships were any good, the Federation would buy them.” Rachel commented. “At Homestead we had Valiant 86’s and Saturn P I’s working together. The 86 couldn’t hold a candle to the P I and that was the best ship Valiant made.”

“Valiant doesn’t have a ship in the destroyer class and their cargo ships are notoriously unreliable.” Reuben added. “They do have a fighter-interceptor that has good reports.”

Rachel held up her hand. “Am I to understand that the P A F movement and all the terrorism it has spawned and all the innocent people who have been killed is really at its most basic about who makes the best warship?”

“Yes,” Lt. Hammersmith said.

“Exactly,” Faye Anne added.

Lt. Hammersmith continued his narrative, breaking the silence. “We have seen stolen partial plans for what I believe is the ship on our sensors. Theoretically, in a large ship, a functioning fusion drive has immense technical advantages over fission drives. The biggest advantage is fuel. Free hydrogen is plentiful and easy to collect. Radioactive isotopes are much harder to find and process. Then there is the issue of nuclear waste. Not everyone is comfortable throwing nuclear waste into the

system primaries. Theoretically the amount of mass we are pushing into the stars is infinitesimal, but there are so many things we don't know."

"You sound like you're on their side." Rachel prodded.

"Physics is on their side, right Lt. Abrams?" Hammersmith said.

"I'll give him that one," Reuben answered.

"The problem," Hammersmith continued, "is their tactics to get their point across. They are sabotaging fission facilities all over the galaxy causing tremendous loss of life. They claim that it is merely a demonstration of the rightness of their position. However much we might agree with their goals, we can never agree with their methods."

"Tactically," Faye Anne offered when Hammersmith paused, "if this is the ship I think it is, the ship is extremely dangerous. It is reputed to be well armed with lasers and other energy weapons that we are only now hearing about. We believe that their fusion system is capable of producing more peak power than the fission systems we use, but we don't know that for sure. The Disruptor is the only missile that we think will get through the energy weapon defenses, but since no one has ever tried it, we can't be sure. We are reasonably confident that regular missiles will not get through due to the vulnerabilities caused by the nature of their surface treatments, but we only guess that a Disruptor can penetrate the defenses. We are confident that they do not use fission in any of their ships. That means that their smaller ships are chemical driven and not hyper capable. We know that they carry Disruptor missiles and other chemically driven missiles. We believe that the smaller ships carry more armament than our ships do since they are designed to operate at shorter range from the mother ship."

Rachel turned to Lt. Martini who sat with her hands folded neatly in her lap. "Do you agree?"

"Yes, Captain, I do. Captain, if I may offer a suggestion."

"Please do."

"Captain, they know we're here. It's impossible for them not to know we're here. It has been suggested they might even know some of our personnel. I agree. If they know as much about you as everyone else seems to know, we should think about using a tactic they do not expect. Perhaps it would make sense for us to hyper over in force and greet them en-mass. That way we will know their intentions quickly and they will know ours. They will expect you to either come in wide or probe first. We need to do neither of those things."

Rachel turned to Captain Bozak. "Captain, what is your opinion."

"I agree. If your battle strategy is anything like your chess, you are too predictable. Someone who believes you command this ship would not expect a full force head-on attack. For our part, my ships are hyper capable, but I am reluctant to commit large numbers of them to this engagement. I would prefer to keep my ships closer to home."

"What about the four ships standing watch with us? Would you commit them?" Rachel asked.

"Yes," Captain Bozak replied.

Rachel took a deep breath. "Sound battle stations. Pause Operation Nemesis."

Using the tight beams of the targeting lasers, Rachel briefed the pilots of the other ships that along with the Albert Schweitzer had been running continuous passes at the comet in order to force it out of its impactful trajectory. Once briefed, the ships assembled into formation and linked together.

The Albert Schweitzer led the formation. The two destroyers flanked it a quarter of the way back from the battleship's rounded armored mushroom shaped head. The four P I ships, with their weapons pods deployed, formed a ring half way back and further out from the central core of the large ship. The four fighter interceptors from Everest commanded by Captain Bozak held the rear guard. Linked together by fiber optic data lines, the ships hyper jumped toward the incoming stranger.

The formation dropped out of hyper drive on a course perpendicular to the one the stranger was taking. The ships in the formation quickly separated their fiber links and the non-hyper capable pickets split off from the Schweitzer's docking ports to move into position to guard the big ship's propulsion system. Rachel had learned her lesson. No one was attacking her from behind.

The stranger immediately opened fire with a massive broadside. Unlike the battleship Rachel commanded, this ship had its weapons arrayed along its side like the great wooden sailing ships that plied the Earth's oceans until the turn of the twentieth century. The Albert Schweitzer's heavy weaponry all faced forward. This meant that the Albert Schweitzer presented a smaller target, but it could deliver fewer missiles in a volley. Part of the disadvantage was compensated for by the fact that the missiles leaving the Schweitzer were traveling in the same direction as the ship and had the advantage of the ship's momentum to give them greater speed toward the target. Missiles leaving the other ship had to compensate for the ship's perpendicular trajectory and the fact that they were starting from a relative standstill.

"Time to impact?"

"Twenty minutes to impact, Captain," Lt. Chin answered.

"Please identify missile types."

"They appear to be Disruptor missiles, Captain," Lt. Tyndall said.

Rachel grinned. "Please make sure there is nothing else hidden in there."

A moment later Lt. Tyndall reported, "The drive signatures and optical reflectivity indicate Disruptor missiles. I can find no other readings."

From his station as ship's engineer monitoring the ship's status, Reuben asked, "Why are they only throwing Disruptor missiles?"

"Because we're worth more to them alive than dead. You can't ransom dead people," Faye Anne answered.

"Folks," Rachel said to regain control of the bridge crew. "Let's put on a show, shall we?" She keyed her comm to address the entire ship. "Battle stations. All personnel to battle stations. This is not a drill. All personnel including civilians don and seal your flight suits. Battle stations. All personnel to battle stations. This is not a drill. Please be alert for additional instructions. As soon as you are in your



flight suits, use your suit communicators only. Do not use any ship board systems. Repeat, all personnel report to battle stations with your flight suits sealed. Use your suit communicators only. All personnel battle stations. This is not a drill. We will be dropping the atmospheric pressure to one fifth of normal and changing the composition to 100% nitrogen. This will reduce the risk of fire, but will mean you cannot remove your helmet.”

Rachel hated the underlying message that having her personnel suit up sent to the majority of her crew that had never been in battle before. Telling them to seal their suits meant that she expected the ship to take enough damage that the hull would be breached and the flight suits would be needed to protect the crew from exposure to the vacuum of space. Reducing the atmospheric pressure and changing the mix only aggravated the situation. If they were as badly out gunned as she thought they were, they would need all help they could get. The last thing she needed was for the newbies to be afraid. She would have preferred they be calm and confident in their abilities in the coming battle. The reality of the situation was that she expected to get hit and get hit hard. Space Force protocols recommended, but did not require, non-bridge crews to wear flight suits going into battle. Sealing the helmets was a hotly debated precaution. Rachel had thought through balancing the disadvantages of the reduction in mobility the suits caused against the potential of surviving a major hit.

Part of Rachel’s current problem stemmed from the fact that the Albert Schweitzer was not designed to do battle with another battleship. None of the planetary defense systems had battleships. The largest ship they expected to have to deal with was the destroyer class. Even the biggest of the systems with destroyers could only field a half dozen at best. Some of the freight companies used cruisers to defend their convoys, but the likelihood of encountering one of those was slim. Facing another battleship like the one currently firing on them was never part of the plan. But then, as Rachel well knew, no plan survives contact with the enemy and here she was watching a broadside of Disruptor missiles slicing through space in her direction. She was not confident in their ability to survive this encounter, but they were committed and she felt strongly that the point right now was not to die for one’s country but rather to assist the other person in dying for theirs.

Rachel text messaged Elizabeth. “Status report please.”

“All systems nominal. All personnel at or near battle stations. Internal compartments sealed. Most personnel showing increased heart rate, respiration and blood pressure.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth.”

“Captain? Are you afraid?”

“Yes.”

“Peter said you are brilliant when you are afraid.”

“We can only hope.”

“We’re going to get hit pretty hard aren’t we?”

“Yes, Elizabeth. I’m sorry.”

“Rachel, it’s what battleships do. Carry on, my brave captain.”

Rachel called her fire control officers. “Fire control, load countermeasures in the center forward

tubes. Set all tubes to auto load Disruptor missiles and then radar seeking counter missiles. P I ships and destroyers load two tubes with Disruptor missiles. Load everything else with radar seeking counter missiles. On my mark, all ships prepare to engage incoming missiles with lasers only.”

“Captain, lasers bounce off Disruptor missiles.” Lt. Chin commented.

“I know that and the people that fired them know Captain Rachel Solomon knows that. Shall we let them think that their intelligence is bad and someone else is in command over here?”

Faye Anne smiled from her post behind a sensor array as she sealed her helmet.

“On my second mark, fire countermeasures. All personnel except bridge personnel will retreat back to the hospital ship.”

“On my third mark. All ships except P I’s shut down all systems. P I’s roll to defensive posture. Like the submariners used to do, we will rig for silent running. All vital systems switch to manual backup. Engineers deploy to critical locations.”

Rachel surveyed her bridge crew to be sure they were suited up. Aware that for her medical personnel, this was the first time they had ever been in battle and they were likely very tense right about now, Rachel decided to borrow a tactic from her mother’s play book. Avi had referred to what she did to calm the girls fears before they went into battle as “warrior school” and as the girls were growing up, before every confrontation she convened school with some lesson about what was likely to happen next. With the calm delivery of an Academy instructor light years away from any real battles, she broadcast a lesson to the entire crew over the flight suit comm units.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the ship we are facing has opened fire on us with a volley of missiles known as Disruptor missiles. These missiles were developed at Eretz. My parents assisted in the certification trials of the early production versions of this missile. For those of you who are not familiar with the Disruptor let me explain some of its characteristics. Disruptor missiles are programmed to destroy high level electronics without destroying the ship. Generally a single Disruptor can do enough damage to a ship like ours to put it out of action. However, a Disruptor only works if the electronics is operating at the time the missile detonates. They are also programmed to not detonate if they detect that one of their colleagues has accomplished its mission. We are about to play chicken with a bunch of Disruptor missiles. The good news is that we’re smarter than they are. The bad news is that there are so many of them. Ladies and Gentlemen, it’s that time. Engage with lasers NOW!”

In spite of all the publicity claiming the Disruptor missiles’ immunity to lasers, some of the Disruptor missiles were detonated by the lasers, but the majority of them maintained their trajectory and headed straight for the armored shell of the battleship’s wall of armor.

After what felt like forever, but was really only a few minutes, Rachel commanded, “Second mark! Fire countermeasures. All personnel retreat to the hospital ship. Engineers to critical stations and prepare for shut down.”

“Prepare to transfer fire control to the P I ships!”

Wendy laughed because she understood this move. “P I’s are immune to Disruptor missiles!”

She spoke out loud to no one in particular. Rachel had neglected to mention that in her “lesson” to her crew.

The countermeasures exploded in front of the ship. Hundreds of small blinking lights, tiny radio transmitters, bits of shiny metal and thermal radiators burst in colorful explosions designed to distract incoming missiles. Some of the Disruptor missiles were fooled, but most continued on their path. Rachel smiled. The other commander apparently believed the Disruptor missiles would do their job and was holding his fire. There had not been a second volley. What she did next depended on when the second volley came.

“Third mark! All systems shut down!”

“Rachel, are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Elizabeth! Shut down!”

“But, Rachel!”

“You will not survive unless you shut down!”

“You need me.”

“NOW! Elizabeth! The P I’s will take care of us!”

“But, Rachel!”

“Elizabeth! This is a direct order! Shut down. I will bring you back up as soon as I can.”

“Yes, Rachel.” The ship’s computer shut down. Automatic and mechanical back up systems came on line to operate life support and propulsion.

The bridge went dark. The destroyers disappeared into the blackness of space. Only the residual heat from their drives betrayed their existence. The P I ships rotated to present their hardened heat shields designed to withstand repeated descents through atmospheres to planetary surfaces to face the oncoming missiles. The P I ‘s were far enough away from the Albert Schweitzer that a Disruptor seeking them as a target could detonate and not harm the larger ship. There are times when the inverse square law can be used to one’s advantage. The pickets slid in behind the big ship’s now silent propulsion system and shut down. A few seconds later, last of all, the ships from Everest closed their radiator panels, shut down and disappeared into the darkness.

Tense minutes passed as the Disruptor missiles passed harmlessly by the silent ships. One Disruptor hit one of the P I ships, but did not detonate and did only minor damage to one weapons pod. “They’re gone,” Wendy called.

“They’ll be back,” Rachel said. “We can’t wait for them to get out of range before starting up again. We have to out smart them. Pickets maintain silent running until the Disruptor missiles pass you again. Then attack them from behind. They are vulnerable to lasers from behind. Watch your sixes! Watch each other’s sixes. The Disruptor missiles will turn on you if they sense you behind them.”

The two big ships drifted towards each other on their ballistic trajectories. Ports opened on the strange ship and two dozen fighter interceptors appeared.

“Captain Darwin, you are free to engage on your command.”

“Acknowledged. Engaging.” The four P I’s and two destroyers restarted their engines and raced toward the small ships headed in their direction. Captain Bozak and his four ships were not far behind.

The second volley of missiles leaped from the strange ship. The Disruptor missiles had failed and the commander of the other ship apparently gave up hope of taking the Schweitzer and its crew alive. Heat seekers could not be used to find the targets since the ships were shut down, so the missiles were radar guided. One of the problems with a radar or laser guided missile is that it is easy to follow the radar or laser back to its source. With the Schweitzer still dark, Lt. Darwin remotely commanded it to fire the pre-loaded volley of radar seeking counter-missiles. The space between the ships lit up as the missiles and counter missiles detonated in a frenzy of mutual destruction.

Sensing the sudden bursts of electrical energy, the Disruptor missiles that had harmlessly passed the formation reversed their course and headed back toward the Schweitzer and its cohorts. Passive sensors on the Schweitzer alerted the bridge that they were once again in danger.

“Restart all systems!” Rachel commanded. “Rudder amidships come to course 0, 0, 15 relative!” The small rotation would allow her to fire her engines without toasting the picket ships behind her. There was an agonizing wait as the electronics systems restarted themselves and went through their initialization protocols.

“Engage incoming missiles with lasers,” Rachel commanded.

The laser batteries sprang to life under computer control as the ship fended off the approaching warheads, many of which were way too close for comfort.

The helmsman responded the ship had come to the desired course.

“Engineering, all ahead one quarter,” Rachel ordered.

“All ahead one quarter, aye.”

The opposing ship’s Disruptor missiles, having regained their target, were passing the line of the silent and dark pickets as they traveled back in the direction they had come.

The bridge crew could see through the view port that the destroyers and P I ships were being devastatingly effective against the smaller fighter interceptors. Within the first ten minutes, a quarter of the interceptors were gone. The remainder became much more cautious. Saturn simply made better ships than Valiant. What was going on out there was proof of that fact. The Space Force veterans had a saying that suggested one should look to Valiant for leadership and innovation, but to look to Saturn for star ships. Rachel surmised that had the small ships been powered by fission reactors instead of chemicals, the battle would not have been so one sided. The battleship’s fire control crews reported that they had returned to their positions.

Rachel pursed her lips in thought. “We want the big ship alive. Load Disruptor missiles in all tubes!” When the fire control officer reported that the command had been completed, Rachel commanded, “Captain Darwin, keep an eye on the pickets!”

“Aye, Aye, Captain!”

“Engineering! All ahead full,” Rachel ordered.

“All ahead full, aye.”

The two ships drew closer, the strange ship threw barrages of missiles, most of which the Schweitzer’s lasers and counter missiles intercepted and destroyed harmlessly. The Schweitzer had not previously fired offensively, but rather had devoted its energies to defending itself. The P I ships and destroyers were carrying the battle to the enemy’s wall of support ships while the big ship held its fire awaiting a better firing solution. The space between the two ships was littered with debris from the missiles and the multiple waves of countermeasures each ship used to deceive the other’s missiles. The two ships were roughly beam on to each other. In some ways the engagement was becoming reminiscent of a battle between sailing ships who stood off abeam of each other and tore into each other’s rigging.

The Schweitzer’s side walls were not armored like its nose, but the beam-on attitude allowed more lasers to be brought to bear on the incoming missiles. A few of the missiles got through and inflicted minor damage to the forward fire control bays. There were some injuries, but due to the precaution of sealing the flight suits before entering the battle, there were no fatalities. Rachel watched the icons on her displays that showed her the locations of the ship’s personnel.

“Elizabeth, please keep an eye on Isaac for me.” His icon showed him in one of the forward missile rooms where the hull had been breached.

“His heart rate and respiration are elevated significantly consistent with his current level of physical activity. Captain, he is doing his job. Please, keep your mind on yours.”

“Yes, mother!”

The two ships drew closer. The barrage from the other ship came in waves. It rolled, spinning along its long axis, to present its missile tubes to the oncoming battleship, but did not change course.

“Lt. Chin, what do you make of the enemy’s firing pattern?” Rachel asked.

“They have more tubes than we do, but they can’t load them as quickly,” Lt. Chin answered.

“Who has the advantage in a slug fest?” Rachel asked.

“We do. We can fire faster and can get more missiles into action than they can.”

“Engines! All Stop!” Rachel called.

“Engines, All Stop Aye, Captain.”

“Rudder amidships! Rotate to face the other ship!” She gave the coordinates.

“Disruptor missiles in all tubes! Stand by to fire all tubes.”

The majority of the missiles from the other ship were still being deflected or destroyed before they reached the Schweitzer, but the range at which they were being destroyed had narrowed.

“Fire all tubes!” The volley of missiles rained down on the approaching ship. Real Disruptor missiles were more resistant to countermeasures than the knockoffs the enemy ship appeared to be using. Rashi had reprogrammed the Disruptor missiles to ignore the activities of their colleagues and

detonate independently so they would not be fooled as they had fooled the Disruptor missiles fired at them. Fewer than a dozen of the hundred Disruptor missiles fired from the Schweitzer got through the defenses and embedded themselves in the strange ship's exterior. As expected, the ship shut down. Their mission complete, the Disruptor missiles shut down. Mere seconds later, the ship's backup systems came on line. The Disruptor missiles, still embedded in the strange ship's hull, re-engaged and shut the ship down again. Rashi had learned the lesson from the Q ship Rachel had attacked during the Saturn Industries shipyard move project and had programmed the Disruptor missiles to be ready for backup systems.

The strange ship lay silent, but not dead. Life support and reactor coolant systems functioned, but it was no longer navigable and drifted through space. The ships drifted closer on the trajectories established during the brief battle. Rachel stared out the view port at the quiet enemy before her.

"Rotate to maintain the armored face to the enemy ship." Rachel instructed the helmsman.

"Rotating, Aye, Captain."

The design of the ship was certainly strange. It looked like an exercise hand weight with a hand grip in the middle and large hexagonal masses on either end. Nothing about the ship indicated whether it had a "forward" or an "aft". The fact that its current direction of travel appeared to be along its axis looked as if it could be a coincidence. Whatever they used for a drive was unlike anything the crew of the Schweitzer had ever seen. The ship's exterior resembled a commercial airliner more than it did a space craft. Reuben commented that the ship probably had an "exoskeleton" instead of central supporting trusses like the Schweitzer did. The crew on the bridge sat in silent awe of the strange ship that lay before them.

Most of the bridge crew speculated on how the ship might work, but Rachel was already moving on to another problem. Her concern was she should do with the prisoners.

Standard operating procedure in times like these was for the senior fire control officer to order one of the standard munitions patterns to be loaded into the tubes. Protocol required that firing tubes be fully loaded in the presence of a potential enemy at all times. Rashi had paid attention to his lessons. The munitions pattern that Rashi chose called for one quarter of the tubes to be loaded with radar seeking counter missiles, one quarter with countermeasures, and the remainder with offensive heat seekers. Rashi's obsessive attention to his duty and Elizabeth's attentiveness saved their lives.

"Missile launch sequence started!" Elizabeth sang out startling everyone on the bridge out of their trance. "Missile ports active!" Missiles jumped out of the side of the enemy ship and the ship started to roll to present its other side.

"Fire all tubes!" Rachel shouted. The P I ships and destroyers were still dealing with the few remaining fighter interceptors and were not available to help. The pickets were cleaning up the few missiles that threatened the Schweitzer's aft propulsion unit.

Every missile tube on the Schweitzer belched fire. The lasers rotated to bear on the incoming missiles. The sky lit up as the missile volleys intercepted each other.

"Reload all tubes with heat seekers," Rachel ordered.

The enemy ship continued to roll.

“Reloaded,” Rashi called.

“Fire all tubes,” Rachel ordered.

The Schweitzer bucked as another volley of missiles charged into space.

“Reload all tubes armor piercing,” Rachel called.

The Schweitzer shook as some of the enemy missiles slipped past the defenses and slammed into the ship. Sensors on the bridge indicated that the stranger was taking his share of hits as well.

Unlike many of Rachel’s previous battles where her crews had talked to each other like a sports team, this time, the bridge was deathly quiet except for warnings, orders and acknowledgments.

“Fire all tubes,” Rachel ordered.

Damage to both ships was becoming more obvious. The stranger was leaking air and part of the battery of missile tubes did not appear to be firing.

The strange ship continued its roll and bring its undamaged side to bear on the battle.

Suddenly the two hexagonal ends of the enemy ship began to spin in the opposite directions pivoting from the center hull. The speed increased until the two ends appeared to blur. From the side of each end of the spinning ship, two bright blue spheres looking for all the world like toy plasma balls flew directly at them thrown toward them as if by centripetal force from the spinning ship that a few seconds earlier had appeared dead.

A steady train of these balls marched toward the Schweitzer at one minute intervals.

“Faye Anne! What the hell is that?” Rachel called.

“I don’t know. Honest to God! I don’t know,” Faye Anne cried.

“Plasma weapon,” Rashi responded. “Deep shit. Very deep shit.”

The first of the balls struck the armored areas of the battleship. Sensors and external protuberances blew away, ripped off by the ball of energy as it raked the length of the ship. The ship bucked with the concussion. Red lights blossomed on Rachel’s display as crew members were injured by the concussive action of the plasmas. As many as a quarter of the people on the ship were now injured. There were no fatalities, yet.

The balls continued to assault the ship. In the midst of the train of plasma balls a loud high pitched noise filled the ship. It increased in volume with each successive hit. Nothing they threw at the balls slowed them down and the noise grew louder.

“Rachel!” Isaac yelled. “Stop the noise or we will all have cerebral hemorrhages!”

Sound travels through air. “Elizabeth! Open the ship to the vacuum. Vent all compartments.”

Massive air flows surrounded the ship. The air emptied out and had the ship’s personnel not been wearing their sealed flight suits, they would have all been dead. With as much air as was escaping the ship, the enemy captain might well have suspected that he had accomplished his mission and the crew of the Albert Schweitzer was dead.

The noise reduced, but did not go away. Rachel realized the sound was coming through the suit’s comm. “Shut down all suit comm units. Do not restart until you see the green all clear lights. Shut

down all suit comm units.”

The noise was reduced to barely audible levels transmitted by contact with the ship’s hull.

The destroyers and P I ships had eliminated all but four of the interceptors by the time the plasma ball attack began. Wendy called, “Destroyers, end for end on the big guy.”

“Roger that, Go.”

“Acknowledged.” Lt. Raphael Rivera had been in Rachel’s ship during the Saturn Industries move. He piloted the second of the destroyers. Wendy piloted the other. This was a move they had practiced in the simulators many times.

“Engage!” Wendy called and the two ships hypered out of sight only to reappear an impossibly short time later on opposite axes of the enemy ship. The two destroyers poured their entire firepower into the two ends of the big ship trusting that the P I ships they left behind would shortly arrive to cover them. Unlike the P I and the battleships, the destroyers had tubes that fired aft as well as forward. Four of the forward tubes fired a missile like the ones the P I ships fired. The fifth tube fired a multiple warhead device. Through her view port, Wendy could see the rotating end of the ship as she pumped missiles into it. In rapid sequence she dumped her entire remaining inventory of missiles from her front tubes into the ship. It did not appear to slow the ship down.

Lt. Rivera, at the opposite end of the ship was pumping it full of missiles as well. He exhausted his inventory of missiles at the same time Wendy exhausted hers. They turned to bring their aft tubes to bear. They had each fired a single volley from the rear tubes when the rotation stopped. The ship stopped spinning and the space between the “gun walls” faced the Schweitzer.

Rachel text messaged to the fire control center displays. “Lasers! Focus on the dark spot amidships!”

The force of all the battleship’s lasers concentrated on a single spot on the ship’s hull. The lasers cut a round hold in the hull and then passed through. Small explosions could be seen inside the damaged hull section. The explosions became larger and more frequent. Escape pods appeared at both ends of the ship’s center section. The enemy ship convulsed and jettisoned more pods. A massive explosion ripped the two ends of the ship apart. Escape pods multiplied. Some were caught in the explosion but most got away from the ship before it stopped breaking up.

The sensors tallied a hundred pods.

The dogfight between the remaining fighter interceptors and Rachel’s fleet lasted eight more hours. When it was over, the Valiant fighter-interceptors had been destroyed. Disruptor missiles had claimed two of Rachel’s pickets. They needed rescue and would spend some time in “dry dock” being repaired before going out again. The other two had taken hits from traditional missiles. The hull in one of the pickets had been breached, but since the pilot was wearing his sealed flight suit, he survived although he would have nightmares for years. The other pilot was able to bring her damaged ship “home” to the Schweitzer.

Rachel counted her blessings. Although three quarters of her crew had been injured, some seriously and her ship was badly damaged, there were no fatalities among her people. The victory paled, however, when she thought about how important bringing the enemy ship home intact could



have been. The enemy ship was a radically new design and carried a new type of weapon. Had she captured it and its crew alive that would have been something to write home about! She shook her head and returned to the tasks at hand.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

**R**ETRIEVING THE ESCAPE PODS cost a week. By the end of the week, some of the pods' occupants were already dead. They had either succumbed to their wounds or to mechanical failure in the pod. Rachel ended the search for survivors and the fleet returned to comet combat duty.

Reuben frequently expressed his concern that the diversion had cost them the mission and that they would not be able to divert the comet enough to prevent catastrophe. He pleaded for reason and for someone to begin evacuating the planet immediately. Captain Bozak and his four ships, having escaped the battle unscathed, joined the comet fly-bys adding their mass to the endeavor. The P I ships, having exhausted all their munitions, massed less than they had before the battle and the addition of Captain Bozak's ships to the comet repelling mission was appreciated.

Prisoner interrogation was left to Lt. Suwanee Baxter-Abrams and the Marine detail. Rachel did not trust her intelligence officers enough to leave them with the prisoners. Faye Anne was particularly insulted by this decision. Her interrogation skills were clearly the most advanced of anyone on the ship. Rachel was steadfast in her decision in spite of the protests. The prisoners were housed in the troop transport pods attached to the cargo ship which had originally been intended for evacuees.

The repeated jumps into and out of hyper drive were exhausting for the military personnel, but the civilians who were not accustomed to such treatment suffered the most. Isaac's medical team did what they could with sedatives and anti-nausea medications, but the grind was wearing everyone down.

Suwanee reported the results of her interrogations. "They all claim to be civilians. Every one of them claims to be a non-combatant. I have never seen so many hydroponics experts and cooks on a single ship in my entire life. One even claims to be the captain's mistress."

"Can I see them?" Rachel asked.

"Certainly. We have them stand for inspection each morning. You can come then."

The following morning, Rachel walked slowly along the lines of the prisoners as they stood in the cargo ship's hold. One prisoner in particular caught her eye. Rachel was not sure what it was about this one that piqued her interest. Most likely it was the way this prisoner's eyes followed her every move while the others stared blankly ahead looking at the wall in front of them.

"What is your name?"

"Carrie Nation."

Rachel smiled. "Really? Break up any saloons lately?"

The woman blinked.

"What was your job on the ship?"

"Captain's mistress."

"Would you be my mistress?"

"I don't do women."

“Neither do I.”

Rachel turned to Suwanee. “Keep her separate from the others. I will want to talk to her later.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Thank you.”

The interrogation sessions consisted of Rachel asking questions and the woman not answering them. She responded politely when Rachel asked general questions about her condition, whether she was getting enough food or exercise, or the way she was being treated, but more substantive inquiries were met with silence. For most of the third session, Rachel and the woman sat across the table from each other in silence before Rachel finally said. “I know you are not who you say you are. I may not be able to determine who you are, but I know someone who might. The guard will come for you tomorrow and we will be making a little voyage. Do not resist. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

The three female Marines Rachel most trusted, Suwanee, Patricia and Janet collected the woman who called herself Carrie Nation from her cell. The woman showed no reaction beyond intently scanning her surroundings when she was loaded into a med-evac ship for the trip to the planet’s surface. Captain Darwin piloted the ship with Lt. Mahoney as copilot. Wendy filled in as flight engineer. Rachel wondered if the woman realized that the fact that there no men on the ship was intentional. She had once been a beautiful woman. Her face had hardened. She was still strongly built and clearly in excellent physical shape. Her attention might have been more than a male may have been able to handle. Rachel was not willing to risk a man in this woman’s presence.

Having received permission for their landing in advance, they were met at the dock by a detail of guards who escorted them to the cells in the basement of the council building where Curra was being held. Rachel had asked to see him alone first. She was ushered into an interrogation room. Two guards stood against the wall, alert but out of the way.

He rose when she entered. “Hello, Captain.” The chains around his wrist and ankles restricted his movement.

“Hello, sir. How are they treating you?” Rachel asked.

“I can’t complain. Chess seems to be a national passion. I play against the guards all the time. Sometimes I win. Sometimes I lose. It makes the day go by.”

“No mistreatment?”

“So you can make a protest and spring me? Unfortunately, no. Whoever said these people were barbarians did not know what they were talking about. You are right. They are worth saving.”

“We haven’t saved them yet.”

“Too close to call, I know. The guards listen to the talk shows all day. We heard about your exploits with the invading ship. Might have been a sporting event the way the commentators treated it.”

“Must be difficult for you.”

“Actually, no. The talk shows are remarkably balanced. The only thing they all seem to agree on is that they doubt the Federation has their best interest at heart. In fact, they aren’t sure if the Federation has anyone’s best interest at heart except for a few power brokers in the center of the action. Given my experiences with the Federation, I agree with them.” He paused as a thought occurred to him. “You know we misjudged these people.”

“How so?”

He did not answer the question. “And I misjudged you. That misjudgment will cost me my life. I should have let you in on the truth from the beginning. I apologize.”

“No apology is necessary.”

“None of which is why you came. What brings you here today?”

“I would like to know if you can identify someone for me.”

“Oh?”

“I think she’s the captain of the ship we fought.”

“Did she give you a name?”

“Carrie Nation.”

“And you don’t think it’s her real name.”

“No. Any more than I think I know your real name.”

“Ah, I will miss having the opportunity to fight alongside you. Would have been great fun.”

“You know I had contemplated trying to spring you from here.”

“What’s that movie where the kid steals a jet and rescues his father by blowing up the air base?”

“Something like that.”

“You gave up the idea, I assume.”

“Way too risky.”

Rachel told Curra what little she knew about the woman she had brought for him to identify.

“I think you are correct to be suspicious of the lady.” Curra described the woman perfectly with the experienced eye of an espionage agent. “If she is who I think she is, the truth is I don’t know her real name either. I know some of her aliases and some of her history, but not her real name.”

“Shall we meet her?”

Rachel had left instructions for her prisoner to be released from her restraints. The guards were unwilling to do the same for Curra. When the woman saw him, she paled and quickly regained her composure.

Curra shuffled close to her and looked into her eyes. "Delilah Devine! Or at least that is the alias I prefer to remember. How many others are there? I know of ten. Do you remember them all? You left me to die on that snow covered mountaintop, didn't you? You weren't coming back, were you?"

She stared at him with a look as cold as the snow must have been on the mountaintop.

"Delilah Devine, the woman who brings down big and powerful men. The woman who almost brought me down. Just think, you were brought down by a woman." He laughed. It was a loud, hoarse, bitter, unnatural laugh. He rolled his head back and laughed to the ceiling. While all attention was focused on him, the woman reached out and pulled a pistol from the holster on the guard to her left.

Rachel and Wendy caught the movement out of the corners of their eyes. They saw the pistol raised in Curra's direction. Acting by instinct rather than thought, they struck. Years of practice, simulations and exercise culminated in a single moment.

Before anyone else had a chance to react, two crystal clear polymer throwing knives appeared on either side of the woman's throat. She did not have time to scream. The shot went into the floor as she fell and ricocheted harmlessly into the soft material of the wall.

Captain Darwin looked at the sisters still trembling with the aftershocks of the body rush that enabled them to react as they did. She shook her head as she noticed their dilated pupils and wild eyes. "And I thought I had a problem!"

Curra looked at Rachel and said, "You jumped in my shit for not telling the truth and you just killed a woman in cold blood."

"Was it a surprise? Didn't you know I was capable?" Rachel asked with a shake in her voice.

"No, I guess not." Curra addressed one of the guards. "Please take me back to my cell."

The captain of the guard nodded his approval and two guards walked behind him as he shuffled away down a long corridor. That would be the last time Rachel would see him, shuffling off, chains dragging, broken and defeated with his head forward and downcast. He had once been a proud and lively man. She had done this to him. Somehow this seemed so unjust, in a complicated sort of way.

The captain of the guard handed them their knives and suggested that they leave. He would take care of the body still bleeding on his floor.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE COMET DIVERSION MISSION continued unabated until the comet was too close to the planet for the hyper jumps to be safe and Reuben called a halt to the flights. According to his calculations, the comet would pass completely inside the orbit of the planet's solitary moon, but would not hit the moon due to the timing of its orbit. 80% of the comet would pass beyond the orbit of the geosynchronous satellites around the planet's equator. Since the planet's rotation put the satellites on the opposite side of the planet from the comet's path, Reuben was relatively comfortable that any damage would be minimal. Less than 5% of the comet's mass would hit the atmosphere and what did would be small enough pieces that they would burn up before they hit the surface.

Captain Bozak and his crew returned to the surface to be with their families. He and most of his flight crews lived in the valleys of a mountain range not far from the main settlement.

Rachel positioned the ship above the planetary plane where they could see the comet as it passed the planet. Given the comet's and the planet's relative speeds, they expected the passage to take eight hours. It would occur as the populated portion of the planet rotated from night into day and as the prison rotated from day into night.

The time had come when all they could do was wait. During the breaks between hyper jumps the engineers had repaired most of the sensors ripped off by the plasma weapons so most of the ship's sensors were functioning again. The bridge displays were distributed via the ship's video system and everyone on board could see what the bridge crew saw.

Time passed slowly as they watched the comet move toward the planet. The comet was moving at thousands of kilometers per hour, but from the distance, the two appeared to be creeping.

One of Reuben's electronics experts was a mathematician who had recently graduated from Federation Institute of Technology. Joshua had recruited him for munitions, but Reuben had "stolen" him to work on the navigation systems. The man had a real name, but everyone knew him as "J T" because he would answer to little else. He had a speech impediment as a result of his jaw being broken by an abusive father and spoke in cryptic phrases when he spoke at all. His ability to communicate in written media was excellent and more than made up for any deficiency in his speech. Reuben had elected to give up his seat on the bridge to J T since J T had done the hard work of developing software that calculated the mechanics of the comet diversion flights.

Almost holding their collective breaths, they watched as the comet's leading edge passed exactly where the calculations said it would go. They could see meteors hitting the atmosphere and burning out before they hit the ground. Too early to breathe a sigh of relief, they hoped they had done the job and saved the planet. In the silence of subdued breathing and slow movements, J T said, "No geosync this side."

"Is that a question or a statement?" Reuben asked.

"Question. Strange readings. Geosync over prison."

Everyone on the bridge focused their attention to an eddy J T highlighted with his cursor on the

display. "Disturbance here. Geosync."

Suddenly Faye Anne screamed. Everyone turned to her. "There's a geosynchronous monitoring satellite over the prison. It's so heavily stealthed we never spotted it and I forgot about it."

"Where exactly?" Rachel shouted at Faye Anne.

"Here." J T pointed at a bright flash on the display that was probably the satellite's reactor detonating. "Gone now. Pieces."

As the ship's crew watched horrified, the debris from the head-on collision between the satellite and what J T estimated to be a rock a thousand meters across and the subsequent detonation of the satellite's fission reactor cascaded through the comet. Other pieces of rock collided with the debris from the initial collision and slowed enough to be caught in the planet's gravitational field. In a matter of a few minutes, a torrent of debris was arcing its way spiraling downward to the planet's surface. What had appeared to be a near miss only a few moments ago was now a certain catastrophe.

"Warn them!" Rachel shouted.

"Settlements grave danger!" J T shouted.

The comm officer called to his counterpart on the surface alerting him to what had happened.

"All ships prepare to launch!" Rachel called.

"What do we do with the prisoners?" Faye Anne asked.

"They'll have to be part of the rescue."

"Are you sure?"

"We can't afford to leave personnel here to guard them and they could take the ship if we leave the guard short handed. They come with us."

"Are you going?" Faye Anne asked.

"And you're coming with me."

"I suppose you're right about the prisoners. Aren't you afraid they'll escape?"

"We have bigger problems to deal with than a hundred prisoners. We'll move them in small groups and supervise them with as many of our people as we can." Rachel ordered a courier sent to Eretz asking for help.

As soon as the rain of debris from the comet abated, the rescue ships headed for the surface. They had watched pieces fall from the sky and seen the impacts, but nothing prepared them for what they found on the surface. A rock J T estimated to be three hundred meters across as it fell through the atmosphere landed in the bay around which the planet's biggest settlement was built. It had hit the surface at a shallow angle and the damage was much more severe on one side of the bay than the other. The water rushing out from the impact leveled everything within a kilometer of the shore. Everything was covered with deep mud. The council building which had sat on a spit of land in the bay was

completely gone. Pieces of the building were strewn as far as ten kilometers away. The tiny piece of ground where it had sat was submerged. The walls of the prison where Curra had been held could only be seen as shadows beneath the murky water.

Rachel and Faye Anne were in one of the first ships to unload onto the muddy shore. The level of devastation took their breaths away. They surveyed the barren landscape and divided the P A F ship's crew who were her prisoners into teams to look for survivors. Rachel and Faye Anne took one team and headed inland. At the edge of the wall of mud they found intact buildings pushed off their foundations. They found a few survivors who had been in the upper floors of their houses when the wave struck and had managed to ride out the torrent.

As they approached one house, they heard screaming. Expecting to see someone mortally injured, they rounded the corner to see a man on his knees holding a woman's body. His wails of anguish could be heard from quite a distance. As they approached, they could see through the mud that the woman's arm had been ripped off along with flesh that extended to her waist. Water flowed around them on its drive to return to the bay carrying blood and body parts as it passed.

Beyond the man and woman was the body of a young boy broken in half around a tree. His head was submerged in the swirling water.

Rachel turned to Faye Anne and said, "You did this. This is your fault."

Rachel leaned to comfort the man when one of the prisoners said, "Captain, don't. When he's done grieving and decides he wants to live, he'll find us. Better if we don't interrupt him."

They spent the remainder of the daylight pulling bodies out of the mud. The few survivors they found were in little better shape than the man wailing in anguish in the mud. After darkness fell, they continued to search by the pale light of the moon until even that was not enough to continue. Exhausted, they gathered at a prearranged meeting place and fell asleep on the ground.

Rachel had left three communications officers on the ship. All other personnel were deployed to the surface. The largest settlement had suffered the most damage and the suffering there was greater than the ship's personnel could handle. They made no attempt to spread their attentions beyond the single largest settlement. The medical suites were designed to detach from the ship and be carried down in shuttles. The shuttles made several trips ferrying down the medical facilities and personnel. The flat area by the bay where they set up quickly took on the look of a combat mobile hospital.

Their progress was hampered by the smoke from the fires that blanketed the planet. The precious trees that were their main export product burned ferociously. The oils that made them so lustrous also made them extremely flammable. Some of the meteors had landed in the forests and had ignited immense conflagrations. The smoke from the fires, coupled with the steam from the meteors that had landed in the water, produced torrential rains that drenched the planet and made supply trips back to the ship treacherous.

As the first week progressed, survivors from inland descended the mountains to help recover their friends who lived closer to the shore. Captain Bozak appeared three days after the initial strike with news that the majority of the mountain villages had escaped unscathed. There had been some damage, but no loss of life as far as he was aware. The other two large settlements had also suffered minor damage and some loss of life, but they had not been hit nearly as hard as the one central settlement that had held the seat of government.

Rachel was in frequent communication with the ship. The prison had survived intact although



there was no communication with it. Scans from space showed that the other areas that had been hit were beginning recovery efforts on their own. By the end of the first week, the ship's sensors reported that the snow melt due to the fires at the edge of the ice sheets was starting to inundate the mountain rivers and streams. Some of the mountain lakes were in danger of overflowing their banks. Rachel alerted Captain Bozak of the emerging situation and he moved his family and those who were near lakes and streams to higher ground.

Fifty kilometers above the flood plain on which the prison had been built a natural dam that held a mountain lake in place broke suddenly releasing the water from the lake into the rivers below. The lake had been twenty kilometers long by ten kilometers wide. As the water rushed through the break, it widened and deepened the channel. Within an hour of the break's initial occurrence a wall of water and debris fifty meters high slammed through the valleys and canyons that had been carved by the stream over eons of geological time. As the water picked up speed, it carried with it rocks, soil, trees and detritus of millennia of undisturbed geography.

The communications technicians remaining on the ship attempted to warn the prison, but it did not respond to their calls. As they watched the juggernaut of wet debris careen downhill toward the prison, they realized that even if they had attempted to evacuate the prison, there was no way anyone could have gone far enough away to avoid the fate that befell them. The face of the deluge hit the prison walls with enough force to lift the entire prison off its foundation and topple it over. Like a child's beach bucket left to the incoming tide, the water tossed the building and crushed it beneath the weight of its advance.

When the water receded, no trace of the prison could be seen. All that was left was a smear of mud extending well out into the ocean.

Rather than allow an accumulation of water like the one that destroyed the prison to occur in the lakes above the settlements, the engineers arranged an array of pipes and hoses to siphon the water out beyond the obstructions and control the flow. They decided that destroying the obstructions would weaken them the point that they would cause exactly the type of catastrophe they were trying to prevent. Water rushed through the pipes drained the lakes faster than the snow run off filled them and they stayed ahead of other potential disasters.

Other lakes in unpopulated areas overflowed and dumped their contents into the oceans. The oceans became clogged with silt. The air across the planet was dark and difficult to breathe due to the number of fires raging unabated through the forests of trees that had grown like weeds.

As the second week ended and the third began, Rachel wondered if they had been abandoned and help would never arrive. She sat on the ground eating the M R E Elvira had thoughtfully brought her when one of the prisoners who had been on her detail the first day sat beside her.

"Captain?"

"Yes?"

"Captain, please look over there." He pointed at a man sitting on a piece of what had once been a concrete column. He was helping a little girl eat. She was desperately clinging to him as they sat together. "Captain, recognize him? I helped them bury the woman and the boy."

"Thank you." The sadness in her eyes was plainly obvious to anyone who cared to look.

"Captain, don't blame yourself. You did what you could. Nobody I know could've done better."

He stood and wandered off.

Rachel looked around. This had once been a nice place to live. Maybe someday it would be again, but everything smelled of oily smoke, mud and death. She had failed to prevent the disaster.

Three weeks after the impact, the communications technicians on the ship, who were as exhausted as she was, called to alert Rachel that Federation ships were entering the system. They identified the ships by name and type and stated that the ships had followed proper protocol entering a system not known to be friendly, but not known to be hostile either. The news had a sour taste.

Rachel sought out Captain Bozak to tell him of the impending arrivals. He was no happier about the situation than she was. He quietly left in search of something or someone.

Admiral Sherman arrived with his entourage decked out in their highly polished combat armor. They were greeted by an elderly man in a Federation Admiral's dress uniform.

"Admiral Sherman, I am Admiral Dimitri Eleftherakis. As the ranking Federation officer on the planet, I am in command of the planet's military." Captain Bozak and a platoon of military personnel in combat armor stood behind him.

"Admiral, it is my pleasure to meet you," Admiral Sherman smiled condescendingly.

"As such," Admiral Eleftherakis continued. "It is my duty to inform you that your military personnel are not welcome on this planet, however your civilian medical and relief personnel are not only welcome, but we will be prepared to offer citizenship to any civilian who wishes to stay and help complete our recovery. We will recover from this disaster of your making Admiral Sherman."

"You can't do this! You have no right!" Admiral Sherman sputtered.

"I can. I do and I am," Admiral Eleftherakis asserted.

"I am here to collect the prisoners. You will hand them over to me." He glared at Rachel.

"There are no prisoners here. There are people who are alive. There are people who are dead and there are people who are injured. Many of them may not survive. If you wish to help us with our recovery, your civilians are welcome. The military detachment that came with you is authorized to return the portable medical facilities assigned to the Albert Schweitzer only to the extent that you replace them with like or better facilities until such time as we have procured such facilities on our own or no longer need them. Do we understand each other?"

"Admiral, you are making a grave mistake. These are dangerous criminals you are harboring."

"Wyatt Earp was little better than a hired gunslinger and is thought of as one of the best law enforcement officers of American History. Admiral, be a good little boy and toddle off. Oh, before I forget, I will be recommending Captain Solomon-Cohen's entire crew, military and civilian for commendations and medals. Any of them who wish to stay, including their military personnel, will be granted citizenship as soon as we have a government in place to do so."

The old man turned to Rachel. "Captain Solomon, Captain Bozak has told me about you. Please do not think of the ten thousand who died. Think of the forty thousand who lived. For without your efforts and those of your crew, we all would have died."

Rachel cast her eyes down. "Thank you, sir. You are most kind."

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

OVER HALF OF THE CIVILIANS who had shipped out on the Albert Schweitzer elected to stay behind and continue with the planet's recovery.

Admiral Sherman warned the military personnel that if their enlistment contracts were not due to expire and they elected to stay, they would be treated as deserters.

Admiral Sherman's people assisted with the return of the operating suites and medical facilities to the Albert Schweitzer. They replaced the portable units with more permanent facilities better suited to the conditions on the planet's surface. Relations between the two crews were frigid at best although both sides maintained professional demeanor. The restoration of the facilities to the ship proceeded without incident. When the task was complete, Admiral Sherman and his military personnel left. His civilian detachment remained to assist with the relief effort.

Within hours of Admiral Sherman's departure, a fresh contingent of relief personnel arrived in the form of a fleet of "Sisters of Mercy" ships. Operating with the financial backing of the Catholic Church and supported with the full political weight of the Pope in Rome, the Sisters were one of the few relief organizations who were welcome wherever they landed. The nun who, what seemed like forever ago, had arrived on the Swordsman installation that the Solomon family had attacked as part of another rescue mission, led the current operation. She greeted Rachel like a friend she had not seen in a very long time. Rachel extended the nuns the courtesy of a complete briefing by her staff, an honor she had not offered Admiral Sherman.

When Rachel and her crew prepared to leave a few days later, a contingent of nuns requested a short meeting with Rachel and her command staff. When they had gathered in the galley, the head nun addressed the group.

"Charity spans religions and cultures. Those who could help those in need have done so throughout history. We too seldom recognize the importance of the strong helping the weak. Therefore, in recognition of your service to the people of the planet Everest, the Pope has requested that I send you his personal gratitude. He and the Cardinals will offer prayers for your safety and the continuation of your successes. By order of the Pope, I present you these letters of appreciation."

She presented each of them a scroll wrapped with a golden ribbon. "You have worked hard and deserve rest on your journey home. May blessings follow you all of your days."

Rachel lingered another day before getting under way. The Sisters were the most experienced disaster recovery team in the Federation and took leadership of the activities on the planet's surface. When Rachel was sure her team was no longer needed, she "raised the anchor" and headed out.

The trip home took longer than the trip out because instead of running at one G of acceleration, they coasted home at a relaxed three quarters of a G in order to minimize the stress on the ship's damaged parts. In spite of the glowing words from the nuns, nothing anyone could do could lift Rachel out of the gloom that settled over her once the ship jumped into hyper drive. The crew took to avoiding her. Even the bridge crew and the people Rachel considered her "core group", Isaac, Wendy, Joshua, Reuben, Suwanee, Rashi, Esther and Mimi, many of whom had known her as a teenager, stayed out of

her way. Two days before they were due to arrive at Eretz, Rachel pulled Faye Anne aside.

“Faye Anne. Find out for sure where the slavers took my cousins. I told you what we think about where they are, but I want you to verify it. When we get home, find them.”

“But...”

“Faye Anne, that is an order. It is a lawful order by a lawfully appointed officer. I want a specific piece of information. What I do with that information is none of your business.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Thank you.”

No welcoming committee greeted them at Eretz. The ship docked as before and as many of the crew as could be spared were given shore leave on the planet’s surface. The people that Rachel considered her “core group” stayed with the ship to tend to its re-supply and repairs.

Admiral Sherman had been called to Earth to consult on efforts to develop a strategy against the Swordsmen and the current campaign to stop the Third Force’s debilitating random attacks. Rachel was relieved when she heard the news of his absence because it meant she did not have to face him. Her emotions about him were entirely too conflicted to deal with right now. He had been their benefactor and support when they first arrived at Eretz and now he had betrayed her in her first major mission as commander.

Two weeks passed while the ship was supplied and repaired. Rachel’s requisition for two years worth of food supplies raised a few eyebrows, but was granted. Rachel needed merely to scratch the back of her head and people seemed to wilt before her. The majority of the damage to the ship except for the destruction of one of the forward missile bays was superficial and quickly repaired. The missile bay would require an extensive visit to one of the larger shipyards. Shielding was placed over the hole so that the ship was not vulnerable to attack, but the lack of the bay meant the ship’s missile volleys would be less dense than they would have been if the bay were operating.

Faye Anne reported back and immediately sought Rachel out. “Rachel, I can only guess what you’re thinking. If you’re thinking of mounting a rescue mission, it is one of the stupidest ideas I have ever heard. It could be a tactical blunder the size of the one Custer made at Little Big Horn.”

Rachel looked coldly and levelly into Faye Anne’s eyes. “Did you find them?”

Faye Anne recoiled. “We think so.”

“We?”

“Dale Hammersmith, Sonya Martini and me.”

Rachel shrugged. “I guess I should have told you to keep it a secret. My error.”

“It didn’t take much to figure out what you were up to when you requested two years of rations. Captain, with all due respect, we feel this is a bad idea.”

“Are you going to tell me where you think I might find them?”

Faye Anne took a deep breath. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“We need two hours to set up a formal briefing in your conference room. We will tell you everything we know and show you gaps in our knowledge that concern us.”

“Very well, two hours in my conference room. Carry on.”

Faye Anne trembled. She had seen that look on Rachel’s face before. It was almost invariably followed by Rachel doing something really, really stupid. The problem was that Rachel knew whatever it was she was about to do was stupid, but she was about to do it regardless of the consequences. Faye Anne knew that the only recourse she had at this point was to convince Rachel of the depth of the stupidity and the certainty of failure coupled with the potential loss of lives near and dear to her. Of course, that tactic had never worked in the past. There was faint hope that it would this time. The stakes were too high and the probability of success too low. Faye Anne was scared. Scared of her Captain, scared of her friend and even more scared for her friend.

Precisely two hours after Rachel and Faye Anne parted, Rachel entered the conference room. Star charts and planetary scans filled the displays around the conference room. The “core group” was already there.

Rachel made eye contact with everyone in the room as she made her way to her place.

Lt. Dale Hammersmith spoke first. “Captain, you accused us of misleading you and withholding information on our last mission. You accused us of deliberately withholding our knowledge of the existence of the monitoring satellite. The satellite was heavily armed with automatic weapons. Even had we told you about the satellite, there would have been nothing you could have done about it without suffering significant casualties of your own. There is some doubt in my mind that had we attacked the satellite after the battle with the P A F ship whether many of our ships would have survived the second conflict. There is no doubt in my mind that had we attacked the satellite first and attacked the P A F ships later, the damages suffered in the first battle would have been severe enough that we would be defeated in the second battle with the loss of all hands and all ships.”

“So noted. Small comfort for the ten thousand who died.”

“Captain, it’s all we have.”

“Please begin your presentation.”

“Captain, before we begin, you realize that we are discussing an unauthorized mission to a neutral planet in violation of more regulations than I care to count.”

“No, Lieutenant, we are not. We are conducting an intelligence exercise in which I am testing your ability to give me the tactical information I need in the form I need it to make a proper strategic decision. Given the outcome of the most recent mission, there is reason to doubt whether your team is capable of properly supporting this ship’s combat capabilities. If I determine that you are not capable of doing what I need, then I need to find someone who can.”

“Captain, does this mean you are not planning a mission to this planet?”

“Lieutenant, proceed with the exercise. You are trying my patience.”

“The current settlers have named the planet ‘Brainerd’s Folly’ after the captain of the ship that brought them there.”

Lt. Sonya Martini started the presentation with a discussion of the planet’s history beginning with the original Federation Survey Team Scouting Report. Faye Anne continued with the demographics on the known and suspected populations. Lt. Dale Hammersmith picked up the third hour of the presentation with an analysis of the military forces and their deployment on the planet and the surrounding system. The three intelligence officers then analyzed strategies for attacking this system with their likely outcomes. Rachel frequently stopped them with questions forcing them to revisit some of what they had previously covered and with requests for more detail. She became increasingly frustrated with the gaps in their knowledge of the system and its defenses.

When they finished the presentation, Rachel glanced at her hand written notes and said, “Am I to understand that in your considered opinions, the strategy of attacking by going in wide has a 2% chance of success, the strategy of attacking by going in with a single formation has a 4% chance of success and the scout first option has a 10% chance of success?”

“Yes, Captain, that is our considered opinion.”

“What about a Trojan Horse option?”

“Their sensors are good enough to know who we really are the moment we drop from hyper.” Rachel sat in silence.

Wendy sat up. “Sometimes telling the truth works. What if we are who we say we are and who we are can be skewed as benign, but not doing what we say we’re doing?”

Rachel smiled. “Lieutenant Hammersmith, for the purposes of this intelligence exercise, for this is only an exercise, prepare an analysis of what would happen if we made it to the planet’s surface and met with the local governing body, but once we arrived they found out what we really wanted and we had to shoot our way out. In fact, prepare it with several time lines and contingency action plans.”

She scanned her intelligence team. “This is an exercise, but think of it as the real thing.”

Wendy said, “What if we pretended to be food inspectors? We could fabricate a story about tainted food or some nonsense that we’ve been called to inspect.”

Reuben said, “We could create some legal document to support our right to be there. If we quoted the right regulations, we could get freedom of movement over the whole planet.”

Several people spoke excitedly at the possibilities of feigning an inspection to gain entry.

The intelligence team stood aghast at the speed with which the mood in the room changed.

Rachel said, “Of course, you realize that this is just an exercise, but goodness, I wish David was here. He was so good with this stuff.”

A husky voice said with as much depth as he could muster, "Ask and ye shall receive!"

Standing at the door, with his duffel bag over his shoulder, stood one Lt. David Shapiro in his combat flight suit. His rank insignia and combat ribbons were proudly displayed. "Looks like a party!"

Shrieks of delight deafened everyone in the room. The room exploded into a frenzy of hugs, kisses, back slapping and hand shaking. When the pandemonium finally calmed down, Rachel asked, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Lionel was on guard duty and Luther escorted me." Luther waved from behind David's bag.

"No, Dummy, why aren't you at Harvard? You still have a year to go," Rachel challenged.

"I got kicked out," David said smugly.

"You got kicked out of Harvard?"

"It felt good! Now I understand how you felt when you took on Van Hoff at the Academy."

"Tell us the whole story," Rachel said regaining her calm.

"Before I do that, please allow me the honor of introducing Natasha Petrovka."

A slender dark haired woman, also wearing a Federation Space Force combat flight suit with the rank of Lieutenant, stepped forward with Luther's less than subtle assistance.

"Natasha is a member of the Federation Joint Military Inactive Reserve as I am. She holds the rank of Lieutenant and is a logistics specialist. She is formerly one of the top research assistants and paralegals at the prestigious Boston law firm of Corbett, Corbett, Corbett, Cabot, Lodge and Corbett, LLC. Most importantly to everyone in this room, she is my love, my better half, my wife."

Chaos reined for several minutes. In the midst of the noise, David whispered to Natasha, "I told you they would love you."

"When something seems too good to be true, you know what I mean. You are so good to me." Her voice was light and lilting with a hint of an Eastern European accent mostly hidden by the more recent Bostonian inflections.

Wendy leaned over to Natasha, knitted her eyebrows in mock ferocity and said, "If he ever stops being good to you, we'll kill him."

She grinned a wide toothy grin, narrowed her eyes and put her hand behind her neck. Natasha laughed, her tension broken.

"Excuse me," Hammersmith interrupted. "Aren't you the guy whose ear the captain almost removed when she was in high school?"

"One and the same! Didn't Faye Anne tell you? She was there."

Hammersmith looked at Faye Anne who sheepishly nodded. He slumped down into a chair.

Wendy reached around Natasha and punched David in the shoulder. "How did you get yourself



kicked out of Harvard?”

“You know the Conservatives won the election and have formed a new coalition government. They have replaced most of the previous government’s top officials with party faithful. One of the most vocal of the party faithful is a senior instructor at Harvard who teaches military law. He and his cronies are building the case that the Swordsmen had no right to secede from the Federation and as such they can be attacked and forced to return to the Federation. The parallels between this and the American War Between the States are frightening. A week before year-end finals, he was lecturing on one of the pivotal statutes they used to justify their views when he claimed that the origin of this statute was British Common Law. The law actually originated in the Talmud. If you use British Common Law as the basis for the statute, you can use it for justification for the Conservative position on the Swordsman secession. If, however, you use the Talmudic basis, the matter becomes a civil contract not under the jurisdiction of the government or the military.”

He looked over to Rachel and smiled. “At that moment I thought of you and Van Hoff. I have never been so proud of you as when you took him on and I was happy to help you research the project that was your punishment for doing so. I stood in front of everyone and challenged his statements. The next morning I was hauled in front of the student peer disciplinary council. I copped a plea. I knew what you were doing out here and couldn’t take the grind there anymore. I offered to plead guilty to the charge of disrupting a class if I could be placed on the inactive reserve and allowed to finish my last year via remote distance learning. They agreed but countered with a condition that I take my finals the following day and then depart campus immediately.”

He paused to take Natasha’s hand. “I said what they wanted me to say on the finals. I played the game and they gave me high marks. Natasha and I had been dating from about a week after you left Earth orbit. I told her what had happened and she told me to find you, because that’s what I really wanted to be doing. Rachel, she was jealous of you.”

Natasha nodded and blushed. Rachel laughed. “We would have killed each other.”

“I told her if I was leaving, she was leaving with me. Tell them what you told me.”

Natasha blushed again. “I told him there were smarter and prettier girls with more money than me and he could have any of them, what did he see in an orphan like me?”

“I told her none of that mattered. The following Monday we were married following daily morning service at the temple. Ten men were our witnesses. They all signed the certificate. We flew out two days later. Except for a delay at New St. Louis, we’ve been traveling ever since.”

Wendy put her hand on Natasha’s shoulder. “Here comes the too good to be true part. We’re shipping out soon.”

Natasha turned to Wendy. “This is good. Not bad.”

“How can you come? Won’t David have to leave you here?”

David interrupted, “Not as Inactive Reserve. There’s a boatload of paperwork for Rachel to sign, but it’s nothing we can’t handle. She’s going to have to do that for me since I am not active duty.”

“If you say so.” Wendy shook her head.

“By the way, where are we going?” David asked, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

“Our intelligence officers will give the summary version of the briefing they just gave us.”

David was already familiar with the system under discussion since he had used the time in transit combing the ship’s data banks for everything he could find on the planets in the vicinity of Eretz where the Albert Schweitzer would likely pay visits. His assumption had been that the ship would not be home and they would have to search for it. They needed to know where to look. Natasha assisted in the research and was equally well versed on the subject. Finding the ship in port when they docked was an unexpected surprise. As the briefing progressed, they asked pointed questions, some of which Rachel had missed. The briefing took an hour.

“Excellent analysis!” David enthused. “When do we depart?”

“The Captain insists this is an exercise!” Hammersmith shouted.

“If you believe that I have some lakefront property in Florida to sell you!” David laughed.

“Unless you want to be left behind, I wouldn’t leave the ship if I were you!”

Natasha smiled at the shared humor. Her eyes sparkled as she visually assessed the three horrified intelligence officers.

“You can’t do this!” Hammersmith stammered.

“You don’t know your Captain very well. Let me explain the facts of life to you. She gets what she wants. It’s not always clean, and it’s not always exactly how she intended it, but she does get what she set out to get. When she doesn’t, it’s not her fault. Got it?”

Hammersmith swallowed. “Got it.”

David said, “we need someone who can pose as an agricultural inspector. Wendy and Rachel, I know you grew up on a farm, but you are as recognizable as Jack Major of the Spinning Asteroids.”

“Who?” Several voices asked at once.

“You have been out of touch way too long,” David said.

Natasha quietly said, “David, I could do it. I worked in a butcher shop when I was going to school. I don’t know the laws. We would have to research them.”

David grinned. “The regulations should be in the ship’s data base. Does the ship have a name?”

“David, don’t,” Rachel hissed.

“Come on Rache’, I know you love your ships. I can’t believe you didn’t name this one. I’m damn sure it’s not Albert.”

All eyes were on David.

“No, it’s not Albert.” Rachel whispered.

“Ha, HA!” David called out, “Hey! Federation Space Force Hospital Battleship 28 Albert Schweitzer, do you have a name?”

“Yes, David, I do have a name. It is Elizabeth.”

The ship replied with the voice of a British Queen. Several people in the room gasped. Others smiled. It was easy to tell who knew, who didn't and who should have.

“As in Queen Elizabeth?”

“Yes, David.”

“One or two?”

“One!” The ship huffed at him.

“Excellent! Forgive me for asking, but who programmed you?”

“Peter did. Peter told me that if I ever had the opportunity, I was to send you his regards.”

“Please tell him the last of the lost boys has come home.”

“I will relay the message.”

“Elizabeth, have the two P I ships been named?”

“Yes, David, their names are Buddy and Daisy.”

“Is Buddy Greg's ship and Daisy Avi's ship?”

“Very astute, David.”

“Are they listening?”

“The Captain requested secure mode for this meeting. No recording is being made. The other ships have not been included in the meeting. I have prepared recordings of snoring to cover the time of the meeting. The official record will show that people came into this room and took naps.”

“Don't you think the other ships should be included?”

“That is the Captain's decision.”

Hammersmith turned to Faye Anne and hissed, “Did you know about this?”

“Some of it.”

“And you didn't tell me? Who is Peter? Who are the lost boys?”

David strode around the table to Hammersmith. “The Solomon family's cargo ship's name is Peter as in the legendary Peter Pan. Faye Anne named him on our trip to the Academy. The lost boys are myself, Reuben and Rashi. Wendy, of course, is Wendy. Rachel is Tiger Lilly and the Marines are her Indians. Faye Anne is...”

“David, don’t,” Faye Anne shrieked.

“TINKERBELLE!! Because of the way she flits around the cabin!” David laughed.

Faye Anne sank into her chair.

“Elizabeth,” Rachel said, “please link Buddy and Daisy into the meeting. Bring them up to speed on the proceedings.”

Hammersmith turned to Rachel. “I demand to know if this is an exercise or a real mission.”

Rachel leaned into his face. “It is an exercise unless and until I tell you otherwise. We will treat it like all other exercises in that we will make it as close to being real as possible. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes, Captain.”

David stepped between them. “Rachel, what about the other ships? Are they programmed?”

Elizabeth answered, “Peter did not think it would be a good idea to program the destroyers or the other two P I ships and asked me to refrain from doing so.”

“I have to respect Peter’s judgment.”

Buddy and Daisy called in and greeted the humans in the conference room. As soon as things had settled back to normal, Captain Alina Darwin and Lt. Sabrina Mahoney entered the conference room followed by a small detail of Marines carrying several cases of adult beverages.

Rachel looked at the entourage whose entrance made the previously crowded conference room positively claustrophobia inducing. “Alina, I thought you weren’t drinking.”

“I’m not. You are. We are going to get you positively smashed. Then we’re going to lock you and your darling husband in your quarters until you get over this stupid rescue mission thing.”

David roared with laughter. “They love you, Rachel, but they don’t understand you do they?”

“Who are you?” Alina challenged.

“Lt. David Shapiro, formerly of Space Force legal at your service, Captain Darwin.”

“Oh My God! There is a David!” Alina gasped. “You must be number six.”

“I would have phrased it differently, but yes.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be at Harvard?”

“Yes and no. Too long a story to repeat. Let’s say we tie one on before we get into the serious business of planning this alleged exercise we are in the midst of developing.”

Rachel’s grin was positively evil. “David, after you get finished, get with Lt. Swanson in staffing. Please prepare the documentation to have you assigned as my executive officer.”

Hammersmith sputtered. "I outrank him!" He pointed to Captain Darwin. "She outranks him!"

"I don't care." Rachel spat back. "Find an open position Natasha can fill and prepare documentation for my signature when we return. When we return, I will expect to see the complete exercise plan on my desk in hard copy. There will be only one hard copy made and it will be for my eyes only."

She raised her voice to call out, "Buddy! Daisy! Are you two up for a trip to the surface?"

Of course they were. They were always ready to go anywhere.

"Wendy, Joshua, Isaac and I are going to visit relatives on the surface. We will be gone exactly three days. When we return, I expect everything to be ready. Is there anyone in this room who is unsure of how to prepare for this exercise?"

Buddy and Daisy had completed their pre-flight checklists and warmed their engines when Wendy and Rachel strapped into the pilot seats. Isaac and Joshua had never flown a P I before and needed some coaching on dealing with the fire control seat.

"Where to, Captain?" Buddy asked.

"How close can you get us to Rose's apartment?"

"Walking distance."

"Do you need my assistance?"

"Call traffic control and let them know we're coming."

"Buddy, you're wonderful."

"Thank you. We're off!"

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE FOURSOME SPENT TWO DAYS with Rose, Tanya, Astrid and Kenneth before telling them of their intentions. Much of that time was spent in the hospital nursery playing with Rose's preschoolers.

"Are you sure you should do this?" Rose asked when Rachel finished explaining her plans.

"Yes, Grandma. It is important. This is what we do. This is who we are," Rachel said quietly.

"Wendy, how do you feel?"

"Grandma, there is always the possibility something could go wrong. I want you to know that if something does, we knew what we were about when we decided to do this. We love you and would do anything for you. We need you to understand that this is not about you. It is about us. We are who we are because of what we do, and this is what we do."

"Please be careful."

"Grandma, we need to take someone with us who can identify our missing cousins."

Kenneth stood. "I'll go."

Astrid stood and faced him. "You don't have to go. It's not like a guy thing. I think I should go."

"Would you like me to come with you?" Tanya asked.

"Tanya, you need to be here if Mom shows up." Rachel said. "I'm not explaining that one to her. In fact, I'm not sure I want to be here when it happens."

In a last halfhearted attempt to dissuade the girls from their undertaking, Rose turned to Isaac. "Could neither of you boys talk any sense into them?"

Isaac took her hand. "No, Rose, we knew better. Besides, I think we should go. This is exactly the kind of mission the ship was designed for. We have worked hard to get here. We can't step back now." Isaac's tone was calm and determined with a gentleness he normally reserved for his patients.

Joshua added, "We are merely carrying on Greg and Avi's legacy. We have work to do."

Turning to her cousins, Wendy said, "So, you two, get your flight suits and meet us at the ships in two hours."

The P I ships docked to the Schweitzer and the six humans made their way forward. When they arrived at the passenger gate, they found long lines of well-behaved people being managed by the entire contingent of Marines. Animated light conversations and laughter could be heard from the assembled crowd. Rachel found Suwanee in the midst of the mass of bodies.

"What's going on?" Rachel asked.

"They want to come." Suwanee replied.

“All of them?” Rachel asked.

“Yup.”

“Do they know where we’re going?”

“Nope. Don’t care. Came from all over this part of the Galaxy to ship out with you.”

Rachel shook her head in amazement. “Do we need them all?”

“David thinks so. He needs Isaac to look over some of the files and make the tough calls.”

“Where is David?” Isaac asked.

“Passenger galley,” Suwanee said.

“Josh, we should go,” Isaac suggested.

“Right behind you,” Joshua answered.

Suwanee turned back around. “You’re Kenneth and Astrid.” It was more of a statement than a question. “You got luggage?”

“On the P I ships,” Kenneth answered.

Suwanee grabbed one of the Marines. “Take these two to the galley and get them assigned to quarters. Then go to the P I ships and help them with their luggage.”

The three disappeared into the ship. Rachel and Wendy proceeded to the bridge. They entered the command suite via the conference room. “Elizabeth!” Rachel called. “I’m home!”

“Welcome back, Rachel,” Elizabeth responded.

“How was the party?” Rachel teased.

“Disappointing,” Elizabeth said.

“How could that be?”

“Look under the conference table.”

Rachel stooped down to discover all the cases of beverages neatly stacked under the table. Not one seal had been broken on one bottle. If anything the room smelled of coffee and not of the contents of the cases stashed under the table.

“Amazing.”

“The document you requested is on your desk.”

“Elizabeth, please make coffee. We’re going to be at this for a long time.”

“Fresh brewed in the pot. I made it when you docked.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth.”

Three hours later, Elvira showed up with dinner for Rachel and Wendy. They were engrossed in the tactical plans and did not realize they had not eaten for several hours when she arrived. The coffee was making their insides growl.

Elvira sat between them. "Secret's out. When do we leave?"

"Soon." Rachel said. "Soon."

"We're ready. It's clobbering time." They laughed. Rachel and Wendy returned to their analysis. David came to the conference room a couple hours later.

"We're fully crewed," he said. "Would you like to review the roster?"

"Do you think any of them are ringers? Plants? Spies? Checking up on us?" Wendy asked.

"Probably. Faye Anne and Sonya Martini spotted a couple of Swordsman spies. We sent them packing. As for the rest, I think if we play our cards correctly, that won't matter."

"If you say so," Rachel said.

"When do we leave?" David asked.

"How soon can we go?"

"Close the doors, and light the candle. I'm ready to blow this pop stand. Less than an hour."

"David, I want Lt. Chin, Lt. Tyndall and J T on bridge watch. Assign a Marine guard and have them patrol in their EVA suits. In two hours, I want everyone else in quarters except you, Natasha, Wendy, Isaac, Joshua and me. We will be in the conference room. Elizabeth!"

"Yes, Captain?"

"We are going to seal the ship in two hours. At that time, I would like you to add a mild sedative to the ship's atmosphere everywhere except the bridge. I want everyone to sleep well tonight. We leave one hour after the ship is secured."

"Aye, Aye Captain!"

Precisely three hours later, the ungainly ship gracefully lifted itself out of its cradles without the assistance of harbor tugs. Slowly pulling away from the dock, unlike the departure from Earth orbit, the only observer not on the ground was a lone picket ship on patrol. He flashed his running lights in a gesture of good wishes. The Schweitzer returned the salute in kind.

Officially a combat preparedness exercise, Operation Rose Parade had begun.

Wendy had the helm. Rachel was in the Captain's seat as they pulled away and into free space. Wendy turned to her sister and said, "It's that time folks. Let's go."

The hop to Brainerd's Folly was scheduled to take two weeks.

Two days after departure, Sabrina and Alina were sitting down to eat when Alina glanced at an adjacent table where Isaac and Joshua were sitting with two other doctors. One of the doctors was a



man she did not recognize, but the woman had a distinctive shape and a strikingly familiar tattoo on her right bicep. Alina stood in shock until Sabrina, who had already taken her seat said, "You eating or you playing Julie Newmar all night?"

Alina put down her food and slowly walked over to the other table. She looked at the woman doctor for a moment before softly saying, "Tyrannosaurus Doc?" The amazement she felt was obvious in her voice and her expression.

The woman looked up. "Captain Darwin?" She looked around to where Sabrina was coming to her feet, "Lt. Mahoney?" She started to stand but wavered and supported herself on the table. Tears flowed from her eyes. The woman who had terrorized the crew of a small task force stood and cried in public. "We thought you were killed."

"Almost," Alina said as he reached out to the woman.

"Almost doesn't count," Sabrina added.

"What brings you here?" Alina asked. "It wasn't us if you thought we were dead."

The woman looked to her male companions, "Do you gentlemen mind if I go sit with them?"

None of them minded.

"I have bad news," the doctor said softly once she was seated at their table. "Commodore Townsend and your friend Beauregard Boucher are both dead."

"What happened?"

"Third Force attack. About a year ago. The usual cylindrical formation. We were obviously the intended target. There was simply no way we could win and no way to retreat. Commodore Townsend ordered all non-combatants into Beauregard's ship and sent us away. We ran as fast as we could, but they caught up to us before we could hyper jump. The combat crews fought valiantly to the last man. I guess we killed three quarters of the drones. We killed the control cruiser, too."

"We had many casualties from the attack on the cargo ship. Most died before I could help them. We were hit too badly to run anymore, Beauregard ordered the survivors into the escape capsules. I didn't want to go. Two orderlies pushed me into a capsule and jumped in behind me. The drones went after the cargo ship and destroyed it. They ignored the escape capsules. A few days later a task force responding to our distress courier missile came by and rescued us. I was hanging out at New St. Louis waiting for a new assignment when I heard about this ship. Here I am. It is good to see you."

They chatted for a long time.

The next day, Alina broke from her mission simulations long enough to seek out Rachel. "Captain, I think I have a better candidate for your inspector." In a matter of a few hours, "Tyrannosaurus Doc" became her old self, Dr. Constance Terrell, MD, PhD, with the new title of "Medical Investigator".

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AS PLANNED, THE BIG SHIP, accompanied only by its pickets, dropped out of hyper well outside the system's defensive net and requested permission to send a diplomatic delegation to the planet's surface. All but the worst rogue regimes routinely granted such requests. Federation warship crews have, on occasion, been willing to buy substances at a high premium that might not be available elsewhere. Other crews could be bought off with bribes. The mere presence of a Federation warship did not necessarily mean an impending attack, although it never hurt to be careful.

The defense net quickly went into stealth mode except that it was already too late. The P I ships and the destroyers had entered the system in advance and already analyzed the system's defenses. Hammersmith was correct in his assessment that what they did not know about the system outweighed what they did know. The differences could be problematic if they had to fight their way out.

Rachel parked the ship in as low an orbit as possible without encountering the planet's atmosphere. She wanted the planet's sensors to see that there were no offensive warships attached to the Schweitzer. The only apparent armed ships were the four pickets which she deployed around the big ship's aft section. She rotated the ship so that the rounded battle armor faced the planet and the propulsion system pointed out to space. The ship's battle face was certainly imposing, but it was only one ship against a fortified planet.

The medical delegation descended to the surface in two ships. Lt Swanson's husband piloted the shuttle. Mimi piloted the med-evac ship with Esther as her co-pilot. They headed for the space port at the planet's only settlement. The runway was well built and comfortably long enough for a shuttle. The med-evac ship, designed for much tougher conditions, touched down smoothly.

The medical delegation was met by a squad of heavily armed security personnel. Isaac instructed everyone to put down their cases and put their hands away from their sides where the soldiers could see them. The guards opened the cases for inspection and once they were satisfied that the cases contained only medical equipment, they were escorted into the port's reception area.

"Tyrannosaurus Doc" held out her hand to greet the man who appeared the most senior of the contingent that waited for them. He declined to reciprocate. "Greetings from the Federation Surgeon General's office. I am Dr. Constance Terrell, MD PhD Medical Investigator."

"Why are there no military personnel with you?" the man asked.

"The Captain was concerned that we would give you the idea that this was a cover for a military operation if we sent military personnel. We have sent only civilians because we are not from the military. We are from the government and we are here to help you."

The men in the reception committee laughed.

After a polite pause, she continued, "Please allow me to introduce the rest of my team. This is Dr. Isaac Cohen MD advanced emergency medicine. This is Dr. Joshua Cohen, PhD advanced emergency medicine." She then proceeded to introduce the rest of the team. What she did not say was

that the “orderlies” were, in fact, Marines.

“What brings you to our fair planet?”

“We have determined that several shipments of grain exported by Trans Stellar Grain Exporters were tainted with the bacteriological pathogen ZX401B5W. We have traced several of their shipments to this planet. Many of them were relabeled in shipment. You may have imported them under a variety of names.” She then named every possible exporter from whom they might ever have purchased food. “Have you imported grain from any of these people in the last two years?”

“I will check our records. You may return to your ship. You have done your duty.”

“Not so fast. Do you know what the symptoms of the disease are? Or its prognosis?” She noticed a little redness and puffiness around his eyes.

The man looked at his colleagues.

“No.”

“The first symptom is redness and puffiness around the eyes followed by a burning sensation.”

The man rubbed his eyes. He pulled his hand back quickly, blinking rapidly.

“The next thing is a general lethargy.”

“Lethargy?” One of the other men asked.

“You get real tired, dip shit!” Another answered and yawned.

“You fall into a deep sleep and you die. No pain or anything. You just go to bed and next morning you’re dead.”

“What can we do about it?”

“I need a sample of your blood. Now, here’s the good news. If you have it, I submit the paperwork and the insurance company will pay one half of a year’s salary as compensation.”

“Half a year pay ain’t much good if you’re dead.”

“We have the vaccine on the ship. It’s completely curable if we catch it in time. We’ll take the blood samples back to the ship. We have to analyze them in weightlessness for the test to work. We have to document every sample we take and every dose of vaccine we give out. The deal is the more people we find who have it, the bigger paycheck you get. If we check everyone and find everyone has it, that’s a lot of money.”

“Does everyone get their own check?”

“Not exactly. Your local payroll office gets one big check and then gives you your money in your next paycheck.”

The grin on the man’s face told her that he had figured out how to divert most of that money which should go to the slaves to his own accounts.

“So, when can we begin?” Dr. Terrell asked.

“We have to take you to the council. You tell them the story.”

The story was repeated four more times for four more groups of men. The group got the distinct impression that none of the people they talked to were really in a position to decide anything and they were being toyed with. Finally one of the men said, “Set them up in Hangar One. Bring everyone.”

“Even the prisoners?”

“Even the prisoners. Under guard.”

The testing began promptly. Dr. Terrell, “Tyrannosaurus Doc” lived up to her old reputation and terrorized the guards who escorted the people who came to be tested. Each sample was identified with a name and their Federation issued ID number. The tests ran from daylight to dark. The medical team returned to the ship each night with their reports and their samples. Rifka, the first of the missing sisters, processed through the late on the first day. It was all Ingrid could do to keep from reaching out to her. Her surgical mask and protective goggles kept her from revealing herself to the guards. The sisters’ eyes met and they acknowledged each other. Adena, the second sister, came through on the second day. Kenneth spotted her and they acknowledged each other. The women showed bruises from wrist and ankle restraints, but otherwise appeared in reasonably good health given the conditions.

Under the guise of being a tough minded ex-military doctor, Dr. Terrell made sure that each of the subjects being tested had enough contact time with her staff for them to see that these were Federation personnel. She herded the guards and the subjects with bulldog like ferociousness.

At the start of the third day, one of the original reception committee pulled “Inspector Terrell” aside and said, “We haven’t seen any of your military personnel. Would that be because you don’t have any?” The gleam in his eye spoke volumes. It was not hard to picture him coming to the conclusion that a big ship staffed only with civilians would be easy pickings for an aggressive boarding party.

“They await your invitation,” Dr. Terrell said.

The invitation was delivered at the end of the day. “How long before you know the results of the tests?” The man asked after relaying the formal request that the military personnel visit.

“Day after tomorrow we should have initial results. I’ll send our military teams down tomorrow. I am sure they would like a tour of your facilities,” Dr. Terrell said.

“Oh, I’m sure they would!”

That evening the senior medical staff and military personnel gathered in the conference room.

“What do we have?” Rachel asked.

Isaac answered, “Dr. Terrell and I have reviewed the results and we are in agreement on the findings. We screened for a broad range of diseases and we found a host of endemic conditions as would be typical of this population.”

“Any of it serious?” Wendy asked.

“Some of it, if untreated, could be serious, yes. Nothing immediate. The real kicker, though, is everyone we tested has been exposed to trace amounts of a nerve gas.” Isaac sounded glum.

“Nerve gas?” Hammersmith exclaimed.

“We’re not sure which gas it is. We have it narrowed down to one of four possibilities. Dr. Terrell has more experience with this than I do and she is still in the lab trying to isolate the toxin. Elizabeth! Could we look at the scans of the industrial area to the east of the spaceport?” Isaac asked.

The pictures appeared on the displays.

“Elizabeth, please enhance the displays with temperature readings.” Numbers appeared on the top of each of the buildings.

“Thank you, Elizabeth.”

“You are welcome, Isaac.”

Isaac and Joshua studied the displays. Joshua pointed to a large square metal building. “This one. We need to find out what is going on in this building.”

“How did you know which building?” Hammersmith asked.

Joshua pointed to the display. “The cooling tower was a clue. The chimneys were another. It’s one of three buildings large enough to contain the process. See how the temperature of the building changes from one side to the other. The first part of the process is done with heat. That means chimneys. The second part of the process is done at room temperature. We have higher roof temperatures on the north side next to those two silos. The chimneys are on the north side. The center area is close to the ambient air temperature. If we allow for the warming effect of the light of the system’s primary, we can explain the center area’s temperature exactly. The south side is noticeably cooler than the center area. The product must be stored at temperatures below freezing. At standard temperature and pressure, it has a shelf life of about a week. Ergo refrigeration and the cooling tower.”

“What about these two buildings?” Hammersmith asked.

Reuben pointed to one and said, “This may be a furniture manufacturing plant. Look at the raw materials stacked outside. Isn’t furniture in a kit one of their exports?”

“Yes, it is.” Faye Anne replied. “That’s probably how they cover their real export product.”

Reuben pointed to another building. “This last big one looks like a fabric mill based on what I see out in their parking lot.”

Returning to Isaac, Rachel asked, “How many people will we need to evacuate?”

“In round numbers, of a total population of ten thousand, two thousand are guards or civilian workers. One thousand are their dependents. Seven thousand are slaves. How many are we lifting?”

“We need to lift all of them,” Joshua said.

“Why is that?” Faye Anne asked.

“We can’t leave the plant intact. Once the refrigeration stops working, the poisons will leak out. Any air breather within a thousand kilometers will die within hours of contact. Minute quantities can cause permanent respiratory damage. The good news is that the gas naturally breaks down on its own due to combination with oxygen and when it reacts with water it breaks apart into inert compounds.”

“We can’t leave the product in any case,” Wendy said. “Pirates will steal it and sell it.”

“We have to destroy it.” Rashi concluded.

“How are we going to do that?” Reuben asked. “If we set the plant on fire with a conventional weapon, the fire will spread the poison across the face of the planet.”

“Will a nuke do it?” Rachel asked.

“Well, yeah,” Reuben stammered, “but we don’t have any nukes.” Rachel smiled.

“We have two. I procured them when we were in New St. Louis.”

“How did you do that?” Faye Anne exclaimed.

Rachel smiled again. “You don’t want to know.” Rachel turned back to Rashi. “I have two class two tactical nuclear devices. We will load them in tubes nine and ten.”

“Aye, Aye, Captain,” Rashi stammered.

“Excuse me, Captain,” Hammersmith sounded thoughtful instead of belligerent for a change. “Throwing a nuke at someone even in battle is a serious action. We should not take this lightly.”

“Do you have an alternative?”

“No. What bothers me is that when we throw the nuke we destroy the evidence we need to justify throwing the nuke in the first place. How will we stand to the board of inquiry?”

“Excellent point,” Rachel admitted. “Dale, would you and David please figure out what evidence we would need to justify the action and how we would go about gathering it?”

“Aye, Captain!”

Rachel turned back to the team. “I need all of you highly educated people to stop thinking like educated people for a moment. I need you to trust your emotions for me. Stop thinking and feel. Let the subtext of the day settle in to the place behind your mind. Go to the place where you have sealed away your emotions and your feelings when you became the highly trained professionals that you are. Open the door that stays closed because if it didn’t you could not do your jobs.”

She looked at the faces of the people around the table.

“Now that you are there in that secret place, look around. I need to know what you felt being among the people today. What emotions, what actions, what reactions so subtle that you missed them in the race to process all these people did you almost notice? What did you feel that you did not trust

yourself to think?"

There was silence for a very long time. One of the most junior members of the medical team, a young man barely out of his teens, tentatively raised his hand. "Captain?"

Rachel smiled at him. "Yes?"

"I think I felt hope." He looked like a rabbit ready jump back into his hole.

"Good. Why do you think that?"

"Some of the prisoners stood taller. They were less reluctant for me to see their bruises. I don't know, really. There was like maybe a vibration in the air."

"Yes, there was a kind of electricity in the air," a young woman commented. "It made the guards nervous."

"How many of you felt something was different today than the last two days?" Rachel asked. Half of the people at the table raised their hands.

"Thank you," Rachel said approvingly. "Dale, Faye Anne, Sonya, did you anticipate the possibility of a slave rebellion?"

They looked at each other. They had not considered the possibility.

"I did," Rachel said.

Several voices spoke at once as they assessed the impact a slave rebellion on their plans.

Rachel continued, "Slave rebellions have been far more common than historians would have you believe. I suspect we are about to cause one. Suwanee, do you have riot gear?"

"Yes, we do."

"Do you have the hydraulic stilt leg extenders?" Rachel asked.

"For shooting over crowds?" Suwanee asked.

"Yes," Rachel replied.

"We have them. But Captain, how will twenty-eight Marines handle ten thousand people?"

"I'll bet you'd like a couple of MMARV units right now," Rachel smirked.

"If wishes were horses, Captain," Suwanee retorted.

Rachel smiled. "Elizabeth, can you tell me the contents of container number seven?"

"No, Captain, I do not have that information," Elizabeth replied.

"You didn't peek?" Rachel asked.

"No, Captain."

Rachel grinned. "In container number seven you will find a round dozen Marine Mobile Armed Remote Vehicles or MMARV for short."

"We're not authorized MMARV's!" Hammersmith shouted.

"Be that as it may," Rachel said calmly. "We have them. I suspect you will be surprised to find we have four of their airborne cousins in the adjacent container. AARV's are wonderful toys."

"Where did they come from?" Hammersmith demanded.

"You didn't have a problem with your buddy Curra stealing things, but you get all high and mighty with me when I do?"

Reuben stood and held out his hands for calm. "Now that we know we have them, how do we use them?"

Rachel turned to address him. "The Marines are trained in the use of MMARV but they are going to be kind of busy. I'm sure they can train your engineers to run them."

J T raised his hand. Rachel looked at him. "C-Captain, I run three MMARV same time."

"Excellent! J T, please get with Reuben and pick eleven of your engineers for training. Suwanee, pick two of your staff to assist setting the machines up."

"Aye, aye, Captain!"

"Faye Anne and David, you're pilots so it shouldn't take you very long to come up to speed on the AARV. It uses our standard simulators for its control suite. Rashi, please pick two of your team to interface the AARV with our simulators. Train Dale and Sonya Martini to fly the other two."

"Here's the plan. Tomorrow we will send an all-female military contingent for the visit. I want engineers included. Make sure the engineers are briefed on how to determine positively what that plant is making. On the way in we will drop the MMARV units from the med-evac ships."

Rachel pointed to a picture of the planet's surface. "This edge of this lake appears to have a sand bottom. Drop the MMARV units into this lake and have them stand by to roll out on command. The terrain looks relatively smooth between here and the spaceport. Everyone with me so far?"

She looked around to make sure. She pointed to another part of the map.

"This tidal flat looks large enough for the AARV's to land. We will deploy them from the shuttles at the same time we deploy the MMARV's. We will make our visit and return. Day after tomorrow we will start our inoculation program. At some point someone will contact us to tell us when the rebellion will start. The timing of what we do next is entirely dependent on the timing of the rebellion. It could happen while we are on the surface or any time thereafter. It might not happen at all, but I think it will. I expect it will be easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys. The bad guys will be shooting at us. The good guys will be running from the guys shooting at us and many of them will have shackle marks. The Marines will attack from the ground. You will have full battle armor with helmets and riot gear. The MMARV units will be operated from the ship. Between now and the time we deploy,



you need to work together so you can all operate as a team. Suwanee, you are in charge of the ground operation. Evaluate the ground positions and determine how best to deploy your personnel. Reuben and J T, you will support her team.”

“Got it!”

“The shuttles and med-evac ships will get as many people out as possible as quickly as possible. Medical personnel will stay on this ship. I expect that there will be many casualties. We won’t have time to deal with them on the ground. Remember that any person we bring down is one more we have to bring back up. Med-evac ships go in first. The shuttles will follow the med-evac ships once we are sure the space port is secure enough for them to land safely. All ships will fly as many missions as it takes to evacuate everyone who wants to come up.”

Rachel scanned her crew to gauge their understanding of their missions.

“Lt Chin, please contact Captain Darwin. I assume the ships are still parked in the asteroid belt. Alert them to the plan. The pickets will guard this ship. The P I’s will guard the shuttles and med-evac ships ferrying refugees. The destroyers will deal with system defenses. The AARV units will provide airborne close ground support. The biggest question now is when. That is up to them. We will be ready.”

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE WEATHER FOR THE PREVIOUS days had been mild and breezy. This day dawned rainy and misty. As the med-evac ships descended from space they dropped the MMARV units into the lake Rachel had spotted. The shuttles deployed the AARV units and took their positions circling vigilantly overhead.

In something of a show of force, once the shuttles were in place, all four of the med-evac ships descended in formation to the planet's surface. Flying in the military style "finger four" formation and executing military combat maneuvers, they circled the spaceport before landing. The ships landed in tight formation as a single group. They taxied to the hangar where the blood samples had been taken. The lead ship drove into the hangar and pivoted around before opening its aft bay doors and releasing the passengers. The four ships parked arrayed in front of the hangar facing the runway with their aft bay doors open for inspection. Two pilots stayed with each ship.

Rachel led a contingent of thirty heavily armed women to the planet's surface. The Marines wore battle armor and carried riot gear. The pneumatic leg extenders were hidden by the thickness of the flight suits. The flight crews and engineers wore their combat flight suits with laser weapons mounted in the fore arms of the suits and battery packs on their backs. Rachel wore dress whites.

"Pretty little girls playing dress up?" The man who had greeted the first landing party sneered. "Have you no real soldiers? Where are your men?"

"I am Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen Federation Space Force and commander of the hospital ship Albert Schweitzer. To whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

"You may call me the overseer, little lady. I don't believe you are the commander. Where is your Commodore? A ship this size requires a Commodore. Don't try to fool me. I know the regs."

"Regs or no regs, I am the commander and I have come to take you up on your offer of a tour of your settlement," Rachel stated.

The man grumbled, but motioned for them to follow. The tour started with the flight facilities at the spaceport. They proceeded to the living areas where the workers' families lived. Rachel was impressed with the quality of the small school they had built for the workers' children. From the blood tests, Rachel knew that of the thousand dependents at the settlement, there were a hundred children of school age and another hundred preschoolers many of whom were already showing effects of the poisons in their environment. The tour's passage through the school caused quite an uproar and the teachers had difficulty regaining control after they left.

Reuben was right about the two buildings. One was a furniture plant and the other was a fabric mill. The fabric and the furniture were produced from materials harvested locally. By mid-day they had seen everything except the slave quarters and the one building they were most interested in seeing.

"Well, kind sir, that was a very nice tour, but I am most curious about that building." Rachel pointed to the suspect building.

"I can't take you in there."

“Are you saying you have something to hide?” Rachel pressed.

“No, I am saying I can’t take you in there. If you wish to see it, someone else has to take you.”

“Aren’t you the overseer?” Rachel asked.

“Yes, but I am not the supervisor.”

“I understand. Could we perhaps meet the supervisor?”

The Marines assumed their natural battle stances as they had every time the group stopped moving for more than a few seconds.

“Wait here.”

“Thank you.”

He scurried off. A few minutes later a man in a long white lab coat appeared. “I understand you wish to tour the building.”

“Yes, we would,” Rachel affirmed.

“You may enter the facility, but you are to take no pictures or record any of what you see in any media. We are conducting research that if our competitors found out could ruin us economically.”

“And what are you researching?” Rachel asked.

“We think we have found the cure for the common cold.”

“An elusive quest indeed!”

The engineers had been thoroughly briefed on what to look for when they entered the plant. Within minutes, they found all the evidence they needed and transmitted it to the ship from their helmet cams. There was no question that, in spite of the drivel this man in the lab coat spewed, this facility was manufacturing several varieties of military grade poison gases and packaging them for combat use.

They had completed the tour of the building when the man said, “You’ve been walking all morning. We’ve prepared a snack for you. Why don’t you follow me through this door and have something to eat before you head back.”

They entered what appeared to be a hastily cleared store room. A space had been created by pushing the storeroom’s contents against the walls. The Marines entered first and immediately set out to find the other exits. There were none. Realizing too late that they had been trapped, they turned back around to find the man in the lab coat surrounded by armed guards. The guards had their weapons pointed at the Marines. Rachel was alone inside the circle of guards with the man who had conducted the tour.

“Now let’s see if your men will come rescue you.” He reached out to grab Rachel’s collar. She brushed him off.

“Such brave little girls. Now maybe we get to see the boys and they can watch us kill you. You think we haven’t figured out your little scam? You want the gas for yourselves and you’re going to steal

it from us! Well, you can't have it!"

The man circled inside the protective arc of the guards as he tried to get closer to Rachel. Rachel gracefully danced away staying out of his reach. Unnoticed, while everyone's attention was focused on the concentric armed circles, two of the engineers slipped behind a row of shelves and crawled along the floor to a rack that held bottles of compressed gas. One made the sign for silence to the other and pointed at one of the bottles. Gently they laid the bottle down on the floor. Carefully and slowly they unscrewed the protective cap from the valve.

Suddenly the man who had been circling against Rachel lunged and grabbed her jacket.

"That's a bad idea." Suwanee said loudly but calmly with an evil grin.

The guards turned to look at Suwanee. As they did, Rachel pulled her throwing knife from behind her neck. With a single motion, the knife entered the man's body above his belt and ripped a gash that continued to his sternum. After a moment of shock, the man screamed in mortal agony. One of the engineers in the main group reached out and grabbed a fire extinguisher which she emptied on the guards. Covered by the sound of the wounded man's scream and the fog from the fire extinguisher, the engineer who had laid the gas bottle on the floor smashed the valve as hard as she could with a length of heavy pipe. The valve broke away cleanly and the bottle rocketed off through the circle of guards spraying blood and body parts everywhere before knocking a small hole in the block wall.

Sliding in the freshly spilled blood on the floor, Rachel disarmed one of the corpses lying at her feet. In a matter of seconds she and the Marines had dispatched the rest of the guards. Rachel looked around to assess the situation. None of Rachel's group had been injured although several were covered in the guards' blood. "I could have planned that better," Rachel said to no one in particular.

The engineer who had initiated the air bottle plan, the smallest of the group, was jumping up and down laughing and giggling. "MacGyver rules!" When she realized that everyone was looking at her, she stopped bouncing and said, "I've been wanting to do that forever!" Laser beams and ballistic ordinance started entering the room through the fog outside the open door.

"You get to do it again." Rachel observed.

One of the Marines grabbed a short gas bottle.

The engineer shouted, "No! Not that one! It's acetylene! We want to blow them up not blow us up! Take this one."

They put the bottle on the floor and quickly unscrewed the cap. The engineer who thought she was MacGyver smashed the valve and the bottle roared off. Screams could be heard from the other side of the wall. They laid down another bottle.

"No, wait, put this one in front of that one."

They put the acetylene bottle in front of the oxygen bottle with the bottoms together. They took the cap off the acetylene bottle and then smashed the valve on the oxygen bottle. The oxygen bottle acted like a first stage rocket booster and propelled the acetylene bottle through the hole. The exposed valve on the acetylene bottle impacted something on the other side of the wall hard enough to break the valve causing the gas to leak out. The resulting explosion on the other side of the wall shook the floor in the store room. Flames quickly lapped at the hole.

“We can’t go that way.” Someone observed out loud.

“Blow a hole this way,” Rachel ordered pointing at the opposite wall.

Three air bottles later, they had a hole they could walk through. The Marines exited the room first, blasting anyone that stood in their way. The engineers picked up whatever weapons they could as they left the room.

As Rachel stepped through the hole in the wall she said to no one in particular. “No plan survives contact with the enemy.”

The Marines laid down a pattern of protective fire as they advanced through the plant. The group advanced slowly taking advantage of cover where they could find it. The engineers used weapons they had taken from the guards to supplement the ones they had brought with them. The small group packed an impressive amount of fire power and used it to clear the escape route. They could hear fire arms outside the plant.

Rachel called David. “How much can you see?”

“We’re engaging.” He responded breathlessly. “All assets are committed.”

“Roger that.”

The almost calm in David’s voice hid the pandemonium occurring on the ship. When Rachel had first entered the store room. David had sounded battle stations. All of their battle plans had assumed that Rachel would be on the ship to lead the engagement. None of the scenarios had included rescuing the Captain. Swallowing their rising panic, the bridge crew quickly responsibilities and got their equipment and personnel into the battle.

In the confusion, David repeated over and over something Greg had often said when they were working simulations. “Talk to each other! Folks, we have to talk to each other.”

After saying this a half a dozen times in Federation Standard, he suddenly remembered another of Greg’s tricks. He started giving commands in Hebrew to those crew members that knew Hebrew. He knew his transmissions were being monitored just as his people were monitoring transmissions on the surface. He assumed that the enemy would not be as fluent in Hebrew as his own crews, a quarter of whom were Jewish. The battle carried on in a mixture of the two languages making interpretation of the commands and action calls harder for the enemy to decipher.

Suwanee appreciated in a new way having taken the Hebrew lessons as part of the process to convert so she could marry Reuben. She was able to relay commands to the rest of the Marine detail and maintain coordination with the battleship.

At the same time as David sounded battle stations on the ship, the rest of the Marine battle group received their call to action. They had been hiding in the med-evac ships’ overhead equipment lockers. They dropped down from the “locked” cabinets and marched out of the ships’ bay doors seeking targets. The spaceports’ guards had inspected these lockers on previous trips and made no attempt to inspect them this time. The Marines were quickly engaged by the guards. A Federation Marine in full battle and riot gear is a formidable adversary. Armed with both lasers and ballistic weapons and fully trained in their use, they can be depended upon to kill large numbers of enemy soldiers. They set out to demonstrate once again that one did not mess with a Federation Marine.

The MMARV's started their march to the space port. Capable of a hundred kilometers an hour, their estimated drive time was fifteen minutes. The AARV's took off from the beach where they had been parked and immediately drew fire from ground installations. Missile crews on the battleship tracked the fire and targeted the sources. Firing individual missiles, they went after the defensive installations while they focused on command and control centers.

The AARV's destroyed several aircraft on the runway as they attempted to lift to respond to the threat. Within minutes, the runway was choked with wreckage that the MMARV's would have to clear for the med-evac ships to take off.

Emboldened by the fire raging out of control and enveloping the gas plant, the slaves attacked and killed many of the guards. The dependent families, many of whom knew the dangers involved with an incident at the plant, headed for the spaceport. Within ten minutes of the plant supervisor grabbing Rachel by the collar, the entire population of the settlement except for those too far out in the farms to know what was going on, was headed for the space port. Within ten minutes of the start of hostilities, half of the guards were dead and virtually the entire population was on the move.

Rachel and her group of thirty headed for the ships with the Marines laying down protective fire as they ran. They took advantage of what cover they could find. The weapons they carried kept most enemies at bay, but some enemy fire found some targets. Three of the engineers, including the one who had been so happy about her air bottle idea, were killed in the flight. The fleeing survivors swooped up their bodies and carried them along. The Marines continually took fire, but their combat suits protected them. The hydraulic lifts in their suits allowed them to shoot over the heads of the masses fleeing in the direction of the spaceport as well as their companions whose escape they covered. Rachel's group reached the flight line at the same time the first of the MMARV's arrived.

Supported by information provided by sensors on the battleship, the Marines realized that holding the flight line and protecting the refugee ships would be all they could handle. They set up a defensive perimeter through which the fleeing slaves and civilian dependents of the guards and workers ran to the ships. In order to be able to fire on the guards without endangering the fleeing slaves, all the Marines engaged their hydraulic leg extenders so they could fire over the heads of the crowds without hitting them. The additional height made them identifiable targets, but their combat armor absorbed much of the fire thrown in their direction.

Firing from their turret mounted cannons, two of the MMARV's destroyed aircraft the AARV's had missed and using the blunt face of their armored front surfaces, began clearing the runway.

Once Rachel's group reached the flight line, three of the MMARV's formed a protective ring around the group and escorted them to the waiting ships. Rachel and the engineers boarded the ship carrying their dead and injured. The Marines in Rachel's group joined their male colleagues on the flight line to protect the mass of humanity fleeing in their direction. Rachel's group had done their share in eliminating the guards who obstructed their path. As Rachel had suspected, it was easy to know who was on which side by the direction of fire. Anyone shooting at them was an enemy. Anyone running with their head down away from the people shooting at them was a refugee.

As soon as the first med-evac ship was full, they closed the bay door and the ship took off. The runway was still obstructed by the MMARV's clearing debris, so the pilot elected to take off from the taxiway. The P I ships had arrived by this time and focused their attention on the air breathing defending fighter interceptors that had gotten airborne before the AARV's blocked the runway with

debris. The AARV's pounded the anti-aircraft and ground installations around the space port. Pillars of smoke rose from all around the space port.

By the time Rachel returned to the ship, the other three med-evac ships were airborne. The shuttles were on the ground loading evacuees. The strength of the assault from space had eliminated most of the ground defenses. Rachel realized, perhaps more than anyone, that what was determining the outcome of this battle was superior technology with greater firepower and not superior strategy, because her strategies had clearly failed.

The picket ships guarding the Schweitzer's vulnerable propulsion system quickly saw action. Even though the ships attacking the Schweitzer were older and less capable ships than the pickets, their greater numbers guaranteed that some of them would reach their targets. The pickets coordinated their action against the local defenders with the lasers mounted on the big ship and fended off the first wave of attacks at the cost of two of their own. Individual enemy ships continued to throw themselves at the battleship and the two surviving pickets continued their part of the battle. As the space battle progressed, the pickets destroyed the enemy ships one at a time. Eventually the last two pickets were lost although they had repulsed all but the last few of the enemy ships and the few of those that remained were heavily damaged. The battleship's laser batteries continued to take their toll on enemy ships and missiles. By the time Rachel returned to the bridge, the Schweitzer was left to its own defenses having lost all of its pickets. All of the planet's space ships had been destroyed.

The med-evac ships unloaded and returned to the surface. One of the ships had taken some ground fire on its first run and had damage to the lift and control surfaces. It made four more trips before breaking up on re-entry on its way to pick up more evacuees. A second med-evac ship was hit with ground fire during take off and crashed with the loss of its crew and a hundred civilians. The other two med-evac ships and the two shuttles continued to fly until the last of the people who wanted to flee and could reach the ships had done so. Surprisingly, the slow moving shuttles were spared battle damage. None of the anti-aircraft fire had hit them.

The battle on the ground was as intense as the battle in space. Luther had watched a mother and three young children mowed down from a gun emplacement as they fled across the flight line and went berserk. Supported by a single MMARV, he advanced on the emplacement and overran it. Leading off with a series of grenades, he killed everyone inside. The MMARV followed him into the emplacement as he advanced, entering the tunnels behind the gun emplacement's walls. Luther's MMARV was one of three J T was running at the time. J T's proficiency with the MMARV had come as a pleasant surprise. When Luther assaulted the emplacement, J T passed control of his other two units to people he had only trained within the last few hours. Man and remotely controlled machine advanced together into the labyrinth. The MMARV's turret swung side to side with its lasers providing covering fire for Luther's advance. J T was working hard. He knew that his only job was to keep this testosterone enhanced Marine alive long enough to get him back to the ship. With every step Luther took and every rotation of the MMARV's treads carrying it deeper into the enemy stronghold the odds against their ever leaving this complex increased exponentially.

Luther and the MMARV took many rounds of ordinance against their shielding. Luther's combat armor was designed for extreme combat, but not of the intensity of fire that Luther was absorbing. The MMARV sustained significant damage which J T could see through the device's cameras. J T could also see that Luther was bleeding from wounds under the armor. MMARV's are equipped with a fold down shelf on their after end where a wounded Marine could take refuge while

the MMARV hauled them to safety. Luther made no attempt to use the MMARV as a rescue vehicle. His anger drove him forward even as he left a trail of blood on the floor.

Luther continued to weaken due to the loss of blood. He turned around to look at the MMARV which had followed him like a lost puppy. Except that lost puppies do not carry cannons with which to disintegrate enemy soldiers who stood in their way or blow holes in walls that happened to block their path. J T used the MMARV's speaker to try to convince Luther to get on the MMARV and let it take him to the ship. Luther turned to the MMARV, gave the thumbs up sign and continued his lone assault. J T could see Luther getting weaker and continued to shout at him. For the first time in as long as anyone could remember, J T neither stuttered nor stammered. As Luther weakened, J T's desperation to get him to retreat intensified.

Luther and the MMARV were deep underneath the port's control tower when he succumbed to his wounds. With his every move being relayed by the MMARV's camera, he sat down. Blood poured out of the tops of his boots. J T implored him to get on the MMARV's back seat. Luther said a short prayer. J T had the MMARV approach close enough for him to reach it. If he hooked his arm over the MMARV's gun barrel, J T could lift him to a standing position and spin the MMARV around for Luther to sit and be carried to safety. As much as J T hoped Luther would take his advice he knew that even if he did, he was bleeding so profusely that he would be dead before he reached the surface. Tears of anger and frustration flowed down J T's face.

J T knew what Luther was planning next long before anyone else in the MMARV control suite did. He screamed for Luther to not do what he was about to do. Luther keyed the MMARV's over ride self destruct code into the control pad. The resulting explosion destroyed the control tower above him sending it crumbling to the ground as it toppled and landed on the buildings that housed most of the spaceport's command structure. J T screamed until a medic shoved a syringe in his arm sedating him.

Lionel was guarding a gap in the wall through which slaves were racing toward the waiting ships. A shoulder fired grenade landed in the middle of the crowd. He threw himself on top of the grenade so that his combat armor would take the bulk of the force. The grenade's explosion lifted his body a meter off the ground, but he absorbed enough of the shock that none of the people around him were injured. Barely alive, the fleeing slaves picked up his now limp body and carried it to the ship.

Daryl had taken the point position in the early fighting and had been exposed to the most fire before the others had taken their positions. Even the best combat armor can only take so much abuse before it fails. Fleeing slaves carried his body to the ship doing what they could to stop the bleeding.

An artillery shell landed adjacent to Janet's position, killing two of the other Marines. One of the MMARV's was destroyed in the blast. Shielded from the shrapnel by the MMARV, Janet and one other Marine were knocked to the ground. Covered by another MMARV, the slaves collected them and brought them to the waiting ship.

The plan for the battle in space was for the destroyers to attack the heavily defended orbiting observation platforms. Wendy piloted one of the destroyers and Raphael Rivera piloted the other. By carefully hyper jumping into position, firing missiles and jumping away, they destroyed most of the unmanned platforms. They attacked the manned platforms. One of the manned platforms had a volley ready when they appeared. The volley was concentrated on Wendy's ship. The ship sustained so much damage that Wendy abandoned it, but not before she and her crew rode it into the atmosphere. They



rode the crippled ship down as long as they could before ejecting their escape capsules.

The P I ships once again proved their combat hardiness and destroyed every ship that challenged them without sustaining significant damage themselves.

The ground battle raged through the night. By dawn it appeared that everyone who wanted to leave either had done so or died in the attempt. The flight line was littered with bodies. Entire families had died together. The wounded had been dragged to the ships by the living. The poison gas plant still burned furiously. The toxic smoke billowed across the farm land. Anyone who had tried to stay had probably succumbed to the fumes within the first few hours of the night. Fortunately, the wind had carried the smoke away from the space port, but with the coming of the dawn, the winds shifted and the smoke turned toward the ships on the flight line. Weakened due to the blood loss from her wounds, supporting herself with the side of the med-evac ship's loading ramp, Suwanee surveyed the carnage one more time before giving the order for the last ship to leave. Two of the surviving Marines hauled her up the ramp and closed the doors.

Unchallenged, the last med-evac ship left Brainerd's Folly for the Albert Schweitzer.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

RACHEL WAS PREPARING TO RECALL the remains of her fleet and have them dock and regroup when Buddy called in, “INCOMING! We have multiple drive signatures incoming.”

Captain Alina Darwin was piloting Buddy. She was on the far side of the planet from the Schweitzer’s location. “It looks like a large convoy,” she reported.

The ships were too far away for the Schweitzer’s sensors to pick them up, but Buddy’s sensors were ideally suited for the task given his location.

“Two heavy cruisers, ten destroyers, pickets deploying,” Buddy relayed the information as it became available.

“It looks like Swordsmen judging by the shape of the formation,” Alina offered.

“Four cargo ships, two passenger liners. Transponders indicate these ships are definitely Swordsman.” Buddy added.

“You need to get out of here,” Alina stated flatly.

“What about you?” Rachel asked.

“We have four hyper capable P I ships and a hyper capable destroyer. We are can make it home on our own. We’ll follow you after we rescue Wendy and her crew.” Alina replied.

Reuben looked up from his engineering station, “With as many passengers as we’re carrying, the last thing this ship needs is the weight of the P I’s and Destroyer as cargo.”

David put his hand on Rachel’s shoulder. “We need to go. We’re going to run out of food two days before we get there even if we leave now.”

Rachel looked into his eyes beseechingly. “We can’t leave them behind.”

“We have no choice. We have seven thousand people on this ship. We need to get them to safety before they and we starve,” David reminded her.

“What will Joshua say?”

“When he gets out of surgery in a week or so, he’ll understand. Right now, he’s helping put Suwanee back together. Besides, we need to get these people to proper medical facilities before more of them die of their wounds. Our medical teams have way more work than they can handle.”

As if to punctuate David’s remarks, Lt. Sabrina Mahoney called in from the other side of the system. She was piloting Daisy. “Folks, we have more company! They’re P A F! There’s at least one ship as big as the one we fought at Everest! Get the refugees out of here! We’ll fend for ourselves.”

Daisy reported, “This convoy numbers at least fifty ships. I see one battleship. Heavy escort.

Sensors report cargo and passenger vessels. Definitely fusion drives on the bigger ships.”

“This looks like a colonization fleet,” Sabrina ventured.

J T looked up from his console. The sedative had only knocked him down for a couple of hours. He was still upset at having lost Luther, but decided to focus his anger on constructive activity. He had insisted on returning to his console in spite of medical advice to the contrary. His expression was thoughtful and determined. “Three MMARV still working. One AARV good. Reprogram Med ship. Control MMARV. Need pilot. Rescue Wendy and crew.”

Mimi and Esther had been quietly whispering in the corner. “We’ll take J T.”

J T pulled a data module from his pocket and plugged it into his console. “Download MMARV op system,” he commanded.

“Downloading,” Elizabeth replied.

Rashi picked a data module from a drawer in his console and plugged it in. “Download AARV operating system. I’m going with you.”

Rachel looked at Reuben as he stood from his console. “You’re staying here. Somebody has to hold this ship together on the ride home.”

“Aye, Captain.”

When the downloads were complete, Esther and Rashi raced for one of the two surviving med-evac ships. Mimi and J T raced for the other. Convincing the ships’ regular crews to turn the ships over to the rescue teams was not difficult and the two ships quickly separated from the Schweitzer. The two med-evac ships raced for the relative protection of the debris fields left from the recent battle.

As soon as she felt it was safe to do so, Rachel ordered the engines fired and plotted the fastest course for Eretz and safety. The passengers already knew that the food would not last the trip, but most seemed willing to endure the hardship in return for being set free.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY

WENDY'S ESCAPE CAPSULE SKIDDED to a stop upside down in the middle of a desert.

The capsule's sensors detected no life, either friendly or hostile, within a five kilometer radius of her location. Neither did they detect water. As Wendy saw it, the good news was that she was alive. The bad news was that her chances of surviving in this environment did not look great. Her capsule had been the last to leave the ship so she knew that her crew had landed and they were alive. The others had landed in territory considerably more hospitable than where she had come down, but they were scattered across a huge expanse of territory. She had reported her crash location to the others once the capsule finally ground to a halt. They had agreed to try and gather near a waterfall on a river Wendy had spotted on her way down and was now a couple hundred kilometers away.

If there had been anyone to watch, the spectacle of Wendy's escape capsule awkwardly rolling itself over using the docking engagement arms would have been amusing. The capsule creaked as it turned before it settled upright with a large cloud of dust. Wendy fastened her E V A helmet while she waited for the dust to clear. She was thankful for the recent advances in flight suit technology that had eliminated the bulk from the old E V A suits her parents had used. The new suits were light enough and strong enough that the standard flight suit became the E V A suit with the addition of a helmet and the life support back pack. The back pack carried power for all the suit's functions and weaponry. It contained a supply of liquid nutrient solution designed to keep the suit's occupant alive for weeks as well as the plumbing and recycling equipment. The suit fabric was woven from photo voltaic and piezoelectric materials so that it generated electricity when the suit was exposed to light or vibration. The electronics woven into the suit's fabric doubled as an armored coating that covered the entire body.

Wendy secured the helmet before opening the hatch. She knew that the air outside the capsule was probably breathable due to the distance she had come down from the burning poison gas plant, but she kept the helmet sealed because she needed to preserve her water. The suit would recycle the water she exhaled and not let it escape. The water purification system in the back pack would keep her supplied with recycled water as long as the suit had power. She collected as much food as she could carry from the capsule's storage and climbed out of the capsule. The nutrient solution would keep her alive and would be adequate if she was dealing with the vacuum of space, but solid food would be worth opening her helmet for a couple times a day.

The ground was hot enough for Wendy to feel the heat through her boots. She set the compass display in her helmet for the direction she wanted to travel and headed out. It would only be a matter of time before she walked to within communication range of the rest of her crew. Wendy mentally prepared herself for a very long journey across the hot sand.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

THE FLIGHT CREWS UNDER Captain Alina Darwin's command who stayed behind watched the flare as the Albert Schweitzer transitioned to hyper drive and headed home. They were too far away to see the ship itself, but the flare would certainly be picked up by the two convoys now entering the system.

Not convinced that hiding in the debris fields would provide enough cover, Alina ordered the med-evac ships and the destroyer to meet the four P I ships on the surface of the planet's lone airless moon. Finding a level spot, they parked in a row while J T and Rashi reprogrammed the med-evac ships flight engineering consoles to enable them to control the combat machines still on the surface.

Communicating by laser, they waited and watched as the two fleets approached. Anticipating the need for even greater stealth than the laser communication would allow, the remaining destroyer pilot, Lt. Raphael Rivera, his fire control officer and flight engineer donned their E V A suits and manually connected the fiber optic lines between the ships. They powered down the ships to the minimum necessary to operate life support and their passive sensors.

The ensuing battle between the Swordsmen and the P A F fleets was brutal. The Swordsmen were landed some of their passenger and cargo ships before the fighting started. Several of the landings looked more like controlled crashes than anything planned. The P A F initiated the attack. The military components of both fleets attempted to protect their civilian vessels from damage while trying to break through the other's defensive line to attack their civilian fleet. Both forces relied on the same basic tactic. They ran at each other head on until they reached the limits of their missile ranges and threw immense barrages of missiles at each other. When they had suffered as much damage as they could sustain, they retreated. For the better part of a week, they lunged forward, fought and fell back.

At no time did any of the ships attempt a short hyper jump. A half dozen destroyers or P I type ships could have turned the course of the battle merely by hyper jumping behind the battle lines of the opposing force and attacking the unprotected rear echelons. As Greg had taught the Eretz pilots, the short hyper jump can be a devastatingly effective tactical maneuver and yet neither fleet used it. If they did not use it, that probably meant that they were not prepared to defend against it. This observation was not lost on Captain Darwin's small task force. The Federation ships appeared to have a tactical advantage their potential opponents did not have.

The P A F and Swordsmen had apparently previously scanned the planet from orbit and determined places to establish their colonies. Both locations were well away from the cloud of deadly gas which was already dissipating. Although the Swordsmen were the first to land on the planet's surface, they were not safe from attack. P A F ships attacked the landing sites even as the transports were unloading. The Swordsmen ably defended themselves with rapidly deployed missile batteries and ground based artillery but not without taking their share of casualties. When the shooting finally stopped, all the P A F military ships had been destroyed. What remained of their civilian fleet attempted to descend to the surface at a distance from the location where the Swordsmen were putting down. If either group could have been said to have "won" this battle, it was the Swordsmen only because when it was over some of their military survived.

Other than the scale of the carnage, what amazed the small Federation contingent hiding quietly on the moon more than anything else was how little the two opposing forces relied on stealth. Their ship-to-ship communications were not encrypted or coded which made monitoring the battle easier

than they had any reason to expect. The P A F space fleet had been completely destroyed. The contingent that had landed on the surface contained some military units, but their strength was not clear to the observers quietly parked on the moon. A dozen small and mid-sized ships were all that remained of the Swordsmen military space fleet. The Swordsmen elected not to attack the P A F settlements on the ground, but chose to deploy the few ships they had left as a defensive warning net. The net was so thin, that while it would prevent Captain Darwin's crew from descending to the planet, it was not enough to fend off even a loosely coordinated pirate attack of more than a few ships.

Once on the surface, the Swordsmen used the aircraft that they had brought with them to survey the planet. The survey team quickly mapped the space port which had so recently been the site of the earlier battle. They were appalled at the numbers of dead who remained scattered around the flight line. They clearly were surprised to find the battle over and the inhabitants gone. They remarked on how little destruction there had been to the structures. Once the gas dissipated, the old spaceport would be a prize worth fighting over.

Crews wearing E V A suits were dispatched to the space port to clear it and bury the dead. The Swordsmen intended to establish their new settlement in the buildings that remained on the site. Only two buildings had been completely destroyed, the gas plant and the military traffic control center. Once the gas cleared and the place was cleaned up, the spaceport would be habitable again.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

AFTER CAREFULLY EXAMINING the ship's internal stress monitors, Reuben authorized acceleration to 1.2 G for the trip home. Even though the combined mass of the passengers was significant, the reduction in the ship's total mass due to the loss or abandonment of the ships that had previously been attached as well as the expense of most of the ship's munitions, gave Reuben the safety margin he felt he needed to bring the ship home faster than he had previously advised. Even at the greater speed, the ship's supply of food ran out a full day before they dropped out of hyper drive.

The passenger liner had been designed to support fifteen hundred passengers and five hundred crew. Its life support and recycling systems had been designed with triple redundancy. Two thirds of the refugees had settled there. Many of them slept on the floors of the passageways. By the end of the trip, the passenger ship's systems were no longer keeping up with the load and the air in the ship had started to become stale with CO2 reaching uncomfortable levels. The civilian medical personnel who had been quartered in the passenger ship moved into the battleship along with the military personnel. Refugees filled the remainder of the hospital ship's and the battleship's vacant rooms. Some of the refugees sought the relatively open space of the cargo ship's hold. The ship's engineers devoted most of their energies and attention to the life support systems because a failure of any major component could jeopardize their ability to survive the trip.

The ship dropped out of hyper drive at one of the Eretz designated arrival points, was greeted by the regular escort and was directed to the spaceport. Rachel called in to inform the port authority of the status of the ship and its passengers as soon as the ship was in range.

Admiral Sherman had not returned from Earth. His representative, a very angry Commodore Levine, mandated that the personnel assigned to the Schweitzer, both military and civilian, remain on-board until all the freed slaves had been properly processed.

The first food that came on board were M R E's and for the first time anyone could remember, no one complained about having to eat them.

Rose interceded on Kenneth and Astrid's behalf, but her efforts to spring Rachel from "house arrest" were met with stone cold resistance. Rachel's four cousins headed to the surface under armed guard. During the two weeks they had traveled from Brainerd's Folly to Eretz they had time to get to know each other since Rachel allowed them the use of her quarters.

Isaac and Joshua had spent the time in transit in the operating rooms doing the best they could to save as many lives and limbs as possible. Medical examiners would later describe much of what the medical team accomplished as miraculous. In the eerie silence that followed the departure of seven thousand passengers, the only thing on all the ship's crew's minds was sleep. The fact that they were confined to the ship was less significant than the fact that they could, for the first time in two weeks, get uninterrupted sleep. Shortly after landing, Dr. Constance Terrell, better known as "Tyrannosaurus Doc", passed out in a chair and slept for an entire day. Many of the other medical and administrative personnel who had been pressed into helping the medics found flat places on the floor near where they had been working for the last two weeks and collapsed in exhaustion.

Having been confined to bed rest under doctor's orders for most of the voyage, Suwanee was

the only person in condition to stand guard at the only airlock the port authority would allow the ship to use. She was standing at the airlock with the assistance of a cane thankful for the reduced gravity of the moon that hosted the spaceport when three people approached her.

She quickly came to attention. She knew two of the people who approached her and was surprised to see them. The woman in the group addressed her. She was wearing a Space Force Commodore's uniform topped off with the white cap of a ship's captain.

"Hello, Suwanee. May we come aboard?" Suwanee's eyes bugged out. Before she could reply, the woman said, "Please allow me to introduce Federation Special Negotiator Ambassador Kirkland."

The third member of the group, the one Suwanee did not know, stepped forward and greeted Suwanee. "Lt. Abrams, your friends have told me about you. It is my honor to meet you."

Suwanee stammered, "Sir, yes, sir, I am honored sir."

She turned back to the woman. "Commodore Solomon, most of the ship's company is sleeping. Would you have me wake them?"

"That won't be necessary. I don't think Rachel would mind if we made ourselves at home on her bridge."

"I will inform the bridge watch that you are coming. Do you need an escort?" Suwanee asked.

Avi smiled. "No thanks. I think we can find it on our own. Greg, Kendall, shall we go?"

Rachel awoke to find her mother sitting in the Captain's chair chatting amiably with Lt. Chin. Her father was at one of the engineering stations talking with David while a man she did not know divided his attention between them.

Rachel wiped the sleep from her eyes and blinked. It was not a dream. Much to her amazement, her mother was still there sitting in her chair. Her father was still talking to David. No one seemed to notice her. She stood, paralyzed, for a moment until Isaac bumped into her from behind. Suddenly everyone on the bridge turned to look at her. With her eyes cast down she said, "Mom, I lost Wendy."

"It's not like you put her down somewhere and forgot where she is," Avi replied.

"We're just going to have to go find her," Greg added.

"How? We're quarantined," Rachel said.

"We'll figure that out," Greg said.

"Wait!" Rachel exclaimed. "You knew?"

"Shortest after action report I've seen in a long time," Ambassador Kirkland chuckled.

Avi held a print in her hand. "A list of the known dead. A list of the known wounded who are expected to live. A list of the ships lost. A list of the personnel missing but believed to be alive. A list of the personnel and ships who remained behind to attend to the rescue. Justification for the retreat."

"That's my kind of report," Greg grinned.



“You filed longer reports than that!” Avi teased.

“Not often,” Greg said.

“Aren’t you worried about her?” Rachel said aghast.

“She’s our kid,” Avi said. “Unless she runs into something much bigger than herself that her flight suit’s lasers can’t kill, she’ll be fine.”

“In the meantime, we need to go visit Rose. She’d be upset if she knew we were in the area and didn’t come visit,” Greg said.

“You haven’t been to the surface yet? How long have you been here?” Rachel gasped.

“Three very busy days. We came as soon as we got your report. No, we haven’t, why?”

Rachel looked at David who held his hands wide and shook his head. He mouthed the words, “I didn’t tell her!”

Recovering quickly, Rachel said, “Oh, I would have thought you would have gone there first. That’s all.”

Avi gave her the look mothers always give their children when they suspect they are being less than truthful.

Greg walked over to Rachel. “We’ll have time to talk later. When your crew wakes up, tell them to be ready to ship out in four days.”

“Excuse me?” Rachel gasped.

“Diplomatic mission, eh, Ambassador?” Greg grinned his wide “play along with me” grin.

Ambassador Kirkland grinned back at Greg. Instantly understanding, he said, “You know, I enjoy having you two around. You certainly liven things up.”

He turned to Rachel. “By my authority as special representative of the President, I am formally requesting your ship and your crew be fully stocked and fully armed ready to ship out in four days for a diplomatic mission of perhaps six months. I will see that proper requisitions are filed with proper authorities.”

Rachel blinked. “May I ask the nature of this diplomatic mission?” Ambassador Kirkland smiled. “The nature of the mission will be revealed after we depart.”

Lt. Dale Hammersmith wandered on to the bridge and heard both Rachel’s question and the answer. He looked askance at the Ambassador. “Ambassador Kirkland?”

The Ambassador turned to face the new arrival. “Lt. Hammersmith! My God! You look like your father!”

The bridge fell silent. “Did you know my father? My mother spoke of you, but she never

mentioned..." His voice trailed off in confusion.

"He is one of my best friends and most brilliant advisers," Ambassador Kirkland reported.

"Is?"

"Dale, I shouldn't be the one to tell you this, but your father is not dead. You're old enough to know. He made powerful enemies doing his job in service to the Federation. We decided for your own safety, you and his enemies should think he was dead. It was a tough call denying you the father you so desperately needed, but if we hadn't, you both would be dead."

"Where is he?" Dale asked.

"I can't tell you that, but I can tell him where to find you," Ambassador Kirkland replied.

"Does my mother know?" Dale asked.

"Yes, she knew all along. You know those business trips she went on?"

"Yes."

"They were really to see your father."

"Please tell him I would like to see him."

"I'll do that." He turned to his traveling companions. "I think we need to raise Commodore Levine's blood pressure a little." He turned back to the crew on the bridge. "See you all in four days."

When they left the bridge, David turned to Rachel, "I'm glad I'm not going to be there when your mother sees her sister."

"Me, too. How could she not know?" Rachel asked.

"Beats me, but I don't think she does," David said as mystified as Rachel.

"Well, folks, you heard the man. We have four days to be ready to ship out," Rachel stated.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

TANYA ANSWERED THE DOOR to Rose's apartment when Avi knocked. For two very long heartbeats they stared at each other. Decades of bitter estrangement separated the sisters. Avi blinked once and bolted. Turning to run, she slammed solidly into Greg who stood his ground. The impact stopped her flight only long enough for her to step around him. She brushed by Ambassador Kirkland as she raced for the elevator with Tanya in pursuit. When the elevator did not immediately open, Avi sprinted for the stairs. Tanya followed.

Recovering his senses, Greg took off after the two women. Ambassador Kirkland, recognizing that sometimes discretion is the better part of valor, quietly proceeded to Rose's apartment.

Avi reached the wooded area of the park across from the apartment building when Tanya caught her. As Greg approached, he could hear them screaming at each other. Decades of anger played out in an argument of colossal proportions. He decided to stay far enough away that he could not hear what they were shouting at each other, but close enough that if they started physically attacking each other, he could break it up. He found a convenient park bench and watched the histrionics. From the snippets he could hear, Avi blamed Wendy's current situation on Tanya. Tanya had countered that her husband would not have been killed or her daughters enslaved had they not been traveling to attempt to reconcile with Avi. Greg admitted to himself the validity of both viewpoints.

A security officer wandered by during the argument and strode over to break it up. Greg gently but firmly explained to the officer exactly how hazardous an idea that might be. Once convinced that Greg would not allow either woman to get out of hand, the officer left.

The fight lasted longer than Greg would have predicted, but it ended as he had hoped it would. Still in tears, the two women walked together back toward the apartment without acknowledging his presence. He recognized that the healing would take time, but the process had begun. Avi and Tanya came to the apartment and informed Rose that they were going away to be by themselves for a couple of days. They left without packing.

Greg spent the time getting to know his newly found nieces and nephew. They told him the details of their rescue and how much risk Rachel and her crew had taken on their behalf. They described the conditions in the encampment and told him of the people who had died working in the gas plant. As interesting as all this was to Greg, what amazed him the most was Rachel's relationship with her crew. She cared about them and took care of them. They loved her and it was clear that she loved all of them in return. It was hardly the way the Space Force traditionally worked, but Rachel's crew willingly joined her on an unauthorized mission at the risk of their lives and their careers. Some had lost their lives, but it appeared as if none of them would have turned back.

When it was time to return, Greg collected Ambassador Kirkland at the visiting officers quarters. Greg knew better than worry about Avi. She would be there on time. As Greg expected, she joined them on the boarding ramp for the shuttle that would take them back to the spaceport where the Schweitzer was docked.

Greg knew Avi's moods well enough to know to leave her alone for the trip back to the Schweitzer. When Avi exited the shuttle for the long walk that would lead to the Schweitzer, her mind was already focused on the task ahead.

The party was immediately ushered to the bridge, their luggage having been brought from the

Ambassador's yacht by the Ambassador's steward. The yacht had been attached to the docking port where one of the destroyers had been attached the last time they left this port. The yacht's crew had transferred to the more spacious quarters aboard the Schweitzer.

The bridge watch came to attention when the trio entered the bridge. In the time since the trio left, the ship had been cleaned and resupplied. The engineering staff was still making repairs, but they estimated they would have the ship to full strength except for the one damaged missile bay long before they arrived at wherever they were going, as if they didn't know where that was.

Ambassador Kirkland typed a set of coordinates into this personal data assistant and handed it to Rachel. "Set course for here at moderate speed. We don't want to look like we're in a hurry."

Rachel raised her eyebrows. "That's only an hour from here in hyper."

Greg looked at her and said, "Trust me."

Avi grinned and nodded.

"Helmsman set course for these coordinates. Initiate undocking procedures on my mark," Rachel said.

"Aye Captain."

"Mom, Dad, I have had your things put in the flag officers' suites. You look tired. Would you like to rest?"

Avi rested her hand on Rachel's shoulder. "No, dear, we won't be unpacking."

"Whatever you say. Engineering, are we clear for departure?" Rachel asked.

"Aye, Captain, we are clear for departure."

Rachel informed a still furious Commodore Levine of their intention to depart on a classified diplomatic mission. They were reluctantly given permission to leave.

"Initiate undocking procedures," Rachel commanded.

"The ship is undocked, Captain."

"Fire maneuvering jets." The ship slowly pulled away from the port.

"All ahead ten percent."

"All ahead ten percent, Aye, Captain."

As soon as it was safe to do so, Rachel called for the jump to hyper drive. An hour later, she called for the drop back to standard drive.

"Captain, there's a ship out there." Lt. Jane Tyndall reported. "Looks like a freighter."

Rachel shot a glance at her father who immediately looked away. Her mother studiously examined her fingernails. Ambassador Kirkland had his back to Rachel as he poured a cup of coffee.

"Approach the ship. Sound battle stations."

The ship's crew raced to their stations.

"Captain, it may be a tender. I see P I ships attached, but I don't see signs of activity." Lt. Tyndall added. "Life support appears to be functioning normally. Captain, the ship is waiting for us."

Faye Anne had been reading a recently released intelligence report on P A F activity when the alarm sounded. She raced to the bridge and peered over Lt. Tyndall's shoulder. "Hell's Bells! It's Peter!" She shouted, "What in God's name is he doing here and why does he have..." She looked at Greg. "I don't believe it." She shook her head. "I just don't believe it."

David started to laugh. The laughter rolled around the bridge. Even Lt. Hammersmith who finally figured out what was so funny laughed.

"Peter would like permission to speak to the Captain," Elizabeth stated.

"Elizabeth, ask Peter if he needs to speak to me privately or can I put it on speaker."

Peter had taken to using the voice of the actor who had played Captain Hook in one of the early Peter Pan movies. "Hello, Rachel! Please tell your helmsman to approach at airlock two so we can transfer passengers. It's good to see you again, kid."

"It's good to see you too, Peter. Who am I bringing aboard?"

Greg rested his hand on her shoulder. "You're not bringing anyone on board. We're jumping ship. Literally." He turned to Ambassador Kirkland. "Ambassador, which ship do you want to ride?"

"I'll stay here. Thanks. That sounds too much like roughing it over there."

"Fair enough. Rachel, we need to borrow some of your crew. Peter has eight new P I ships he is supposed to be delivering to the central system. Obviously we have a more immediate need of them. They have not been completely stocked or programmed. I need to take Reuben and Suwanee. We will also need four electronics engineers, four space flight specialists and a half dozen people with strong backs who don't mind living in close quarters for a couple of weeks. We are taking them to Peter with us. I would prefer volunteers."

"Permission granted." Rachel shook her head in amazement. "All hands stand down from battle stations! Prepare to send a crew aboard the freighter!"

There was no shortage of volunteers. The opportunity to work with Greg and Avi Solomon was too inviting to pass up. The crew transfer went without incident and the two ships departed for Brainerd's Folly linked by a thin fiber optic cable.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

WENDY TRUDGED ACROSS THE DESERT for two weeks. Her muscles hurt, but she was thankful for the climate control features of the flight suit. The back pack was heavy, but without it she would have died in the heat. As she ended the fifteenth day of walking, she reached a wooded area that had grown around a small stream. She estimated she was another four days walk from the waterfall where she was to meet her crew. She sat down to rest with her back against a tree and fell asleep.

Wendy awakened before dawn and saw small red lights on the horizon moving in her direction. Well aware of the amount of thermal radiation the flight suit emitted and how easy that was to detect from the air, she quickly sought a deep spot in the stream. Finding a spot that was barely deep enough, she laid down on her back in the water.

A flight of four Swordsmen helicopters passed overhead. They were traveling in the direction of the space port. Their route took them over the waterfall where she was to meet her crew. Wendy hoped they had enough sense to stay out of sight. Wendy continued her trek after the helicopters had passed beyond the horizon. Late in the day they returned and headed off in the direction they had come.

At the end of four more days of walking Wendy arrived at the waterfall. Spotting the remains of a campfire and debris from a camp, Wendy realized her crew had not been able to stay out of sight and had been captured by the Swordsmen and taken away. She debated as to her next course of action. She decided that since they had found her crew and knew that there were four capsules, it would only be a matter of time before she showed up here as well. If she was to die at the hands of a Swordsman, she was damn sure going to take a few with her.

Wendy climbed down to the base of the waterfall. She climbed behind the flow of water hoping to find a small recess worn away by the falling water. The recess was barely big enough for her to sit in, but it afforded her protection so she would be able to see anyone who approached. She settled in and waited to be attacked. After three days of waiting and no sign of activity, she left her hiding place. She proceeded warily and saw no signs of life. She had taken three steps beyond the falling water when she stepped on something that snapped under her foot.

Before she knew what happened, Wendy found herself hanging by one leg upside down from a tree. She had been caught by one of the oldest traps in history, an animal snare. Two Swordsmen with their weapons still in their holsters stared at her.

“Well, Homer, looks like you caught you one.”

“Din’t I tell ya dis would work?”

“Yeah, but I ain’t never seen it done afore.”

“Well, ya learn somethin’ every day.”

The one the other one called Homer stared in her face. “I guess I should cut you down. What do you say, Jethro?”

“Are you sure she ain’t gonna run?”

“Nah, she’ll barely be able to walk when I get through with her.”

“Homer! The Colonel said we wanted the captives unhurt.”

“Yeah, but this one killed a bunch of my kin and I’m gonna make her pay.” He reached to the tree and with his knife cut the rope holding Wendy up.

Wendy landed face down and Homer immediately jumped on top of her. He attempted to pull her helmet off. “You’re gonna feel what it’s like to be taken by a real man. Not one of those Jew fags you hang out with.” There was a reason Marines work out in full packs and Space Force pilots learn to use their flight suits to their advantage. Wendy rolled to one side crushing his leg underneath the pack and then quickly back to the other. Homer lost his balance and fell off. Before he could recover, Wendy fired the laser embedded in her sleeve. The shot stunned him. She rolled a little more so that still on the ground she could bring both sleeve lasers to bear and pierced a hole in his throat that went through and severed his spinal column. She quickly regained her feet.

Jethro backed away with his hands in the air. “Don’t look at me! I wanted to bring you in. I didn’t want to hurt you!”

“Why shouldn’t I kill you, too?”

“Cause there’s four choppers on their way here right now. Homer signaled ‘em when we saw you come out of your hidey hole. You ain’t gonna be able to fight off four choppers and if’n you do, there’s more where they come from. Look lady, I don’t want to die and I know you don’t neither. Just set here quiet until the choppers get here and we can take you back to camp.”

“Then what happens?”

“I dunno fer sure. Colonel said we couldn’t bargain for nothin’ if’n you was dead so we was to keep you alive. I guess that means he wants to trade you fer somet’in.”

“Jethro, how far is your base from here?”

“It’s a short chopper ride.”

“Walking distance?”

“Couple o’ days.”

“Well, Jethro, you’re probably a nice guy and all that so I’m going to give you a choice. I can kill you now and leave without you or you can walk with me back to base.”

Jethro stood with his mouth open. He blinked and swayed as if he was about to faint.

“I guess that means you’re coming. We start by walking upstream in the water. You go first.” Stunned into silence, Jethro walked down the bank to the water and turned upstream.

Within minutes of starting out, Wendy said, “Now we turn and go downstream.”

They had been walking for a while when Wendy said, “Jethro, do you have a last name?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s Flatt.”

“Jethro Flatt, are you married?”

"Yes, ma'am."

"Any kids?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Boys or girls?"

"One boy, one girl."

"Look, Jethro, if you want to see them again, you help me and I will do everything I can to see that you get safely home to your wife and kids."

"Yes, ma'am."

"How long has it been since you've seen them?"

"Six months."

"Long time."

"Yes, ma'am."



## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

“THEY’VE CAPTURED WENDY!” Mimi screamed into the comm from her watch position at Daisy’s pilot seat. “Heard it on their radio! They’re dispatching helicopters to get her!”

Captain Alina Darwin had established four hour watches with two persons on each shift. One watch station was always in one of the P I ships to take advantage of the P I’s sensor suite. The other station rotated based on who was standing watch among the several control locations in the med-evac ships. J T was on watch from the flight engineer’s station in the med-evac ship that he and Mimi had flown when they left the Schweitzer. They generally stood watch together because it meant they were also off watch together. He was refining the MMARV software when Mimi called in.

“Wendy alive!” J T yelled out to the rest of the occupants of the ships. “Swordsmen capture.”

This was the first confirmation that Wendy had survived. A kind of electricity filled the cabin. They already knew that the others of her crew had been found and captured. Apparently capturing them had been no easy task as there had been injuries among the captors. The assembled crew waited for further reports. Minutes stretched and time stood still as they waited for the helicopters to arrive at the site where Wendy had been taken captive.

J T dialed in the frequency the helicopter pilots used to communicate and they waited. One of the helicopters descended while the others stood guard. Within moments of landing, the airwaves came alive with excited and angry conversation. Wendy had apparently killed one of her intended captors. The other was missing.

“I’m going after her!” Mimi yelled. “Daisy, initiate flight procedures! Let’s go get Wendy.”

Captain Darwin was on the comm in a heartbeat, “Miriam Abrams, I order you to stand down. Do not take that ship anywhere!”

“I’m going to get Wendy. I’ll be right back!”

J T joined his voice to Captain Darwin’s “Mimi no! Stay here!”

“Shutting off comm!” Mimi shouted. “See you soon!”

Short of shooting her down, there was really nothing Captain Darwin could do to stop Mimi from leaving. Daisy’s programming gave preference to Mimi who she had known for a long time over anyone she did not know as well regardless of their rank. Even though Daisy had flown with Captain Darwin, she had flown with Mimi longer and Mimi took priority. The fact that Mimi was not listening to J T was surprising, because the two of them had become close in the time they had been confined to the small ships on the moon waiting for the opportune moment for the team to do what Mimi was setting out to do on her own. As Mimi and Daisy roared off on Mimi’s own personal unauthorized rescue mission she was the only one in the small group not aware of the potential for disaster that lay before her.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

JETHRO TURNED OUT to be a manageable if not exactly talkative captive. He was nice enough and kept his complaints to a minimum. Other than the fact that he was married and had two small children, everything else about his private life was private. After weeks of no company other than her own, Wendy was starving for conversation. At dusk on the second day Jethro pointed ahead. "The base is the other side of the gully maybe two kilometers."

"This, my friend, is as far as you go." She pulled a flexible steel cable with pre-made eyes at the ends from her supply pouch. Normally used to tether workers to the space craft, the thin cable was strong and would take someone with a knife a long time to cut through. She ran a polymer fiber cable tie through one end and fastened it to a tree. She used another tie to fasten the other end of the cable to Jethro's leg. He had enough length to reach the stream for drinking water and enough that if he had to climb the tree to avoid predators he could do so.

"I promise you won't die here," she told him. "We need to get you back to your wife and kids."

Jethro did not look as if he believed her.

"Your career as a Swordsmen soldier is probably over."

She gently lifted his chin so he could look her in the eye. "They're not going to be happy you let me get the drop on you. Let me make this up to you. In Sector 56, there's one habitable planet. You go to the office of any attorney you can find. Ask for Buzzy Markowitz or his son. Tell him I sent you. Remember this. You must tell him that Rose and Avi send their regards or he will not help you. When you get home, you leave with your family and you go to Sector 56. Find Buzzy Markowitz. Tell him I sent you. Tell him Rose and Avi send their regards. Got it?"

Jethro's face looked like an old hound dog. "Yes ma'am."

Wendy approached the base under the cover of darkness. She was surprised to find a familiar shape on the edge of the rudimentary flight line. Her first thought on seeing the silhouette of what she took to be an enemy P I ship in the darkness was that she could steal it and fly it home. The lock-out code in the controls could not be that tough to deal with. The electronics built into her suit were designed for engineers to take control of any ship they needed to work on. As she drew closer to the massive shadow, she thought about her crew. She could hardly abandon them. Now that she had tied Jethro to that tree she had an obligation to him as well. He had led her safely to the base. Well, maybe if she got to the ship she could ransom all of them out of there.

She slithered on her belly across the ground taking advantage of every recess she could find to stay as invisible as possible. She could see that the ship was damaged. It had taken a missile strike and the hyper drive modules were torn open. Fortunately the reactor had not been breached or the ship would have exploded. The severity of the damage meant that this ship was not going to be her ticket home, but if the standard drive worked, there was hope that she might escape to somewhere where she could devise a plan to free her crew. As she approached the silent shape guided only by the light of the stars she realized that the ship was painted neither the red of the Swordsmen nor the gray of the Federation, but white. The ship was from Eretz. What was it doing here? Wendy wrestled with the issue of why a ship from her home planet would be here. There was only one answer that made sense and she

dreaded the truth. She continued to approach the ship cautiously until she realized that she did know the ship. It was Daisy and Daisy was hurt. Sliding underneath the ship, Wendy found the small hinged panel that hid the access code pad. She keyed in her code and the emergency hatch silently slid open. Wendy climbed inside and removed her helmet.

“Hello, Daisy.”

“Wendy. You’re alive!” Daisy’s tone was childlike and full of pain. “Wendy, I’m hurt. I’m hurt bad.” Daisy had a reputation for being whiny, but this was not the normal whine. This was real pain.

“How bad are you hurt?”

“My hyper drive is dead. Many of my sensors are gone. Two of my weapons pods have been torn away.”

“What about your standard drive?” Wendy asked.

“It’s about 82%.”

“Enough to get us into orbit, right?” Wendy said.

“Yes, but so what? Buddy can’t carry me home,” Daisy sniffed.

“Is Buddy still here?”

“Yes.”

“Who else is still here?” Wendy asked.

“Raphael’s destroyer, the other P I ships and their crews and two of the medic ships.”

“Who’s on the medic ships?”

“Mimi and J T came on one. Rashi and Esther came on the other.”

“Why didn’t they go back with the Schweitzer?”

“To help rescue you and we were too far away to get to it before we would be attacked.”

Wendy nodded silently. “How did you get here?”

Daisy explained about Mimi launching the attack on her own. They were coming in low over the base following the helicopters when they were hit by a barrage of shoulder fired missiles. At close range, the small missiles can be quite effective.

“Where is Mimi now?” Wendy asked.

“She ran towards the helicopters. When she realized you weren’t on them she tried to come back, but they surrounded her and captured her.”

“I’ll bet she put up a fight,” Wendy said.

“There were a lot of them. She didn’t have a chance.”

“Where is she now?” Wendy asked.

“They took her to the tall tent.”

“I see. Run a complete damage assessment. I need some time to think.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Not yet.” Wendy settled into the pilot’s seat to think. She had no idea how to rescue her crew and get her warship friend off the ground.

Daylight slowly brightened the cabin as Wendy watched the diagnostics reports displayed on the pilot’s console. After several hours of indecision she still had no idea as to what she should do next. She looked out the view port surprised to see a man standing in the basket of a personnel lift holding a sign. The sign was made out of packing material and had been crudely lettered with a soft marker.

The sign read, “Please Surrender.” The man pointed to each word. Then, like the cheat cards in an old television show, he put the first one behind the others in the stack he was holding.

“You are surrounded.” The second one was written with a much better hand.

The third card read, “We will not harm you.” The man checked to see that she had finished reading before he revealed the next card.

“You could try to fly.” The man shook his head. “But we will shoot you down.” The man tried to look apologetic, but came off as clown like.

“Please come out with your hands up.” He nodded.

“We need to talk.” The man smiled as he put the last card down and lowered the lift.

“Daisy, are we surrounded?”

“Yes.”

“Can we shoot our way out?”

“No.”

Wendy descended the crew ladder with her helmet on. A squad of security personnel stood with their fire arms pointed at her. A gunnery sergeant approached her. “Lieutenant, regulations require that you be handcuffed while we escort you to the holding area. Please do not resist. The Colonel would like to meet with you. We intend you no harm.”

She was marched by a very wary detail of security guards into the largest of the tents. A corner of the tent had been draped off to make a small interior room. In the center of this room was a table made from boards and shipping crates. At one end of the table sat a disheveled looking man wearing a soiled and rumpled uniform with the insignia of a Colonel in the Swordsmen army. He had a distinctly harried look about him. Dark circles framed his eyes. He had a large bruise on his cheek which had scabbed over. The guard motioned for Wendy to sit on one of the cases at the opposite end of the table.

The Colonel fielded half a dozen calls on three different communication devices before he looked up at Wendy. He addressed the man standing behind her. “Corporal, on the top of her back pack

is a circle two centimeters in diameter. Hook your thumbnail under the recess in the right hand side and pry it open. Press the button inside the hole.”

Wendy’s back pack powered down. “Remove the cuffs. She’s not going anywhere.”

The guard removed Wendy’s restraints and she took off the helmet.

The Colonel fielded more calls and looked back at Wendy. “I don’t have a lot of time for you. If I had somewhere to put you, I’d lock you and your bunch up and throw away the key, but I can’t. We need to talk.”

“I am only required to give you my name, rank and military ID number.”

“By the Sword of the Samurai! You Jew women are tough! I know your rank from the insignia on your flight suit. I know your name from your name stripe. I don’t give a shit about your ID number.”

“I resent being referred to as a Jew woman.”

“Lieutenant! I don’t care!” His tone was more exasperated than angry. “Let’s be real. I have your three crew members. They are working in the hospital tent. They are not in prisons. Your foolish friend Miriam Abrams who tried to rescue you by her own damn stupid self is also in the hospital tent chained to a post. If she hadn’t tried to escape twice she wouldn’t be chained and she wouldn’t be injured.” He shook his head. “I know that you have two med ships, a destroyer and three P I ships parked on the moon. If I cared, I could probably figure out the identities of most of the crew on the ships or torture the information out of Miss Abrams, but I really don’t give a shit.” The Colonel answered some calls. A Corporal handed him a document which he scanned and signed. A Lieutenant handed him a document.

“Good call, Lieutenant. Excellent work. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome sir.”

The Colonel rested his hand on the Lieutenant’s arm. “Lieutenant, stand by.” The Colonel turned back to Wendy. “You are Lieutenant Wendy Solomon Cohen, younger daughter of Greg and Avi Solomon, sister of Rachel and wife of Joshua who is a medical technologies engineer. Your entire family was instrumental in planning and executing crushing defeats of Swordsman initiatives at Homestead and Eretz. Was anything I said inaccurate?”

“No.”

“We understand each other. Lieutenant Mancini will take you on a tour of the facilities. When you return we will talk further.” He turned to the Lieutenant. “Handcuff your wrist to hers.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Lieutenant Cohen, Lieutenant Mancini will help you stow the back pack over there in the corner. Dismissed.” Wendy stood. The Swordsman Lieutenant helped her disengage from the back pack and set it on the dirt floor. They set the helmet on top of the back pack. Wendy did not have use of her

suit's lasers, but she still had her knife hidden against her back. Once the two were cuffed together, the guards drifted away.

Lt. Mancini escorted her out of the tent. Without being prompted, he started to speak. "We arrived here hoping to establish a new community. We knew about the P A F's poison gas plant and were prepared to take it in a land assault. We considered it a threat and intended to destroy it and the stockpiled gas. We had planned a surgical strike which would have prevented the release of the gas. Frankly, I find what you did to be rather clumsy."

"Clumsy?"

"Yes. We could have taken the plant without poisoning everything in sight. As it is we will spend months decontaminating the area before we can settle there. It was our intention to free the slaves and convince as many as possible to remain here with us. We would have repatriated the rest."

"And we spoiled that." Wendy somehow did not see things in the same light. "What was your anticipated level of losses?"

"We would have lost a thousand troops."

"Our entire ship's company was fewer than a thousand. How does that make what we did clumsy? What about civilian losses?"

"About as you did."

"Looks like something went terribly wrong with your plans. Surely it wasn't us. Our ship was already gone when you arrived. You should have been able to land unopposed."

"When your cousins were taken, your aunt was obvious about her intent to find you and your sister and to convince you to rescue them. She told the other families who had lost relatives to the slavers that her brilliant nieces would rescue all of them. She bragged on you a lot. A story like that flashes through the intelligence community faster than courier missiles. It didn't take too much to figure out you and your sister were coming here. We knew before you did. Apparently one of the officers in the defense system at Everest was a P A F spy. He reported on your victory over the P A F fleet and your intention to come here. One of our spies in the P A F alerted us and we raced them to be here before you left. You know the rest."

"OK, so what is your real job? It's certainly not giving tours."

"Intelligence." They entered the hospital tent. "Several of our ships crashed on landing. We have hundreds of injured."

Wendy saw each member of her crew working in the hospital. Her fire control officer was helping a nurse change a dressing on an elderly patient who was screaming in pain. Wendy greeted her and Lt. Mancini cut them off. "Sorry, time to talk later." He held up the cuffed hand to show them that Wendy was only minimally restrained. Her navigator was trying to feed a small child who had both of her arms covered with bandages. Her flight engineer was assisting in the construction of a rudimentary operating suite.

Mimi sat on a crate with her leg in a cast. A cable like the one she had used to tie Jethro was embedded in the cast. Wendy stopped. Jethro! She had forgotten about him. "Lieutenant Mancini, I left one of your soldiers tied to a tree."

"Private Jethro Flatt?"

"Yes."

"We found him. Would have been a shame to lose him. He's not a great soldier, but he's one hell of a musician. He plays a couple of different kinds of guitars. Most of us would have really hated you if you had killed him."

"As if you don't already."

"Some do and some don't. It depends on whose father died in which battle. My father was one of the Marines you parked on that desert island for six months. He kept telling me that you could have killed every one of them and no one would have said a word, but you didn't. You let your enemy live. He didn't understand it. See, but I do. I'm not your enemy. You let my dad live. I'm not your friend either, but at least I won't try to kill you on sight like that worthless hunk of shit Homer."

Mimi was holding a sleeping baby. An empty baby bottle sat on a crate next to her. A nurse brought her a crying baby and a full bottle. They swapped and Mimi fed the crying baby.

After Wendy and Mimi had silently acknowledged each other, Lt. Mancini picked up where he had left off. "Killing Homer, now that was some fancy shooting. Where'd you learn to do that?"

"My parents taught me."

"Is it true that you and your sister have been piloting warships since you were babies?"

"Yes."

"Do you still have that knife in the back of your suit?"

"Yes."

"I should take it, but I won't. You may still need it."

"Why are you being so nice to me? Swordsmen are not known for being nice to prisoners, especially female prisoners."

"Other places, yeah, you'd be lying naked in a cold jail cell. I would be demanding answers from you and not accepting anything less than the truth. We can't do that here because we need you."

"Need me?"

"And your sister's ship. I'll level with you. Our Admiral was a renegade."

He acknowledged her surprised expression. "Yes, even we have them. We were mounting the mission to come here when we heard about your mission to rescue your cousins. He rushed us here with the intent of capturing you and your ship as a bargaining chip to get some of the provisions of the

secession treaty changed. He's dead now, so it doesn't matter what he wanted. We knew the P A F were coming to get revenge on you for killing their newest ship and we tried to beat them. The Admiral thought if we beat you and the P A F we could take the spaceport and lure you in. Then we could fend off the P A F. His timing was off. You got here first and left as we arrived. The P A F arrived before we could establish our defenses. They landed a colony a thousand kilometers from here." He paused and shook his head slowly. "Their casualties have to be a bad as ours."

They returned to the tent where the Colonel was nursing a cup of coffee. "Lieutenant Cohen, can you call your ship on your suit's comm?"

"No, sir, it was damaged when I hid under the water."

"Unfortunate." He sipped from the cup. "Let's talk about negotiations. We are prepared to offer you and your associates your freedom in return for your protection."

Wendy was confused. "I don't understand."

"You will call your ships. We expect another convoy of P A F shortly. We have no way to communicate our situation to the home fleet and do not expect to see reinforcements for six months at best. We need your hospital ship to tend to our injured and your warships to help defend us. Under the terms of the secession treaty if either a Federation or Swordsman settlement comes under attack by a third party of sufficient strength to overwhelm the settlement's defenses whatever military resources belonging to either party may be available must be used to defend the settlement. We are in a jam here and we need your help."

A Corporal ran into the tent. Breathlessly, between gasps, he said, "Colonel sir, begging your pardon sir, but sir, you have to come see, sir, sir there's three Federation MMARV's coming across the flight line, sir." The Corporal fairly trembled with fear.

"By the Sword, you Jew women are tough!" He paused as he thought of something. "Corporal, which direction is the turret's barrel pointed?"

"Back, sir."

The Colonel closed his eyes for a moment. "By the Sword." He murmured. He heaved a large sigh. "Lieutenant Mancini, take Lieutenant Cohen and go to talk to it."

"Me sir? Talk to a machine?"

The Colonel huffed in exasperation. "You're not talking to the machine! You're talking to its operator. Lieutenant Cohen, you can explain it on the way out. Comm back to me what it wants. Tell it we need its help."

"Yes, sir!"

"Now! GO!"



## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

J T WATCHED THROUGH the MMARV's camera as the lead unit rolled up out of the gully at the edge of the base. The Swordsmen's hastily established sensor arrays had been focused elsewhere and had not spotted the track mounted machines as they rolled along the river bed at the bottom of the gully. The MMARV's had driven a long way to get here. They would need recharging soon. They could recharge from Daisy's reactor if someone could manually make the connections. Otherwise they would have to wait for daylight again.

J T was amused by how quickly the personnel on the ground scattered in front of the advancing MMARV's. Daisy had already filed her damage report and had passed on the recording of her conversation with Wendy. Relaying the MMARV commands through Daisy's communications equipment allowed J T more subtle and smoother control of the MMARV's actions than would have been possible otherwise from his position circling overhead in the med ship.

Wendy and Lt. Mancini walked out to the flight line to greet the MMARV's.

"Greetings Earthman!" J T quipped over the MMARV's speaker.

Lt. Mancini jumped in surprise and Wendy laughed. "J T! It is good to hear your voice."

"The Captain and the Pirate would like a status report." J T said through the speaker.

Wendy now knew that both Alina Darwin and Sabrina Mahoney had stayed behind.

"Who are the Captain and the Pirate?" Lt. Mancini asked.

"That verifies what you already know." Wendy faced the MMARV's camera and began the explanation of what she had observed and what the Colonel had told her. She had Lt. Mancini repeat for the crew listening on the med ship what he had told her as they toured the encampment.

After the reports were done, Captain Alina Darwin leaned over J T's shoulder. "Lt. Mancini, this is Captain Alina Darwin, can you patch me through directly to your commanding officer?"

"I can comm him," Lt. Mancini replied.

"Please do that. I need to talk to him directly," Captain Darwin said.

Lt. Mancini keyed his comm unit. Daisy's frequency analyzer picked out the channel and locked on to it.

"Colonel, this is Captain Alina Darwin Federation Space Force Pirate Interdiction Specialist temporarily assigned to the Federation Hospital Battleship Albert Schweitzer. To whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

"This is Colonel Arliss Harlingen formerly of the Swordsmen Tenth Space Fleet. The fleet has been destroyed. I am the base commander of this settlement."

"Colonel, in accordance with your request, we are prepared to assist you in defense of the

system against the anticipated attack from space by P A F forces in return for the repatriation of five of our personnel and one ship you have captive. We will shortly be requesting safe passage for one of our unarmed med ships which will transport the captives and bring a repair team to the surface to attempt to return the ship to us. For the record, do you agree?"

"Yes, I agree."

"Excellent, thank you. However, there is a more immediate problem. A column of mechanized armor departed from the P A F compound three hours ago headed in your direction. This column will arrive at your location in thirty hours. Our sensors do not detect any airborne threats. We will assist your people in defeating the P A F column if you allow us command."

"Please stand by."

The Swordsmen defensive sensor arrays had not been focused on a ground assault. The assumption had been that any threat would come from space. Swordsman sensors spun to assess the potential threat. Colonel Harlingen checked with his sensor technicians who verified the existence of the column. "I agree to your conditions."

Alina started issuing orders. The MMARV's were plugged into Daisy's service ports. The Swordsman space craft were deployed over the settlement to scan for any reconnaissance satellites that the P A F might have been able to leave in orbit. The few mechanized units that the Swordsmen had were deployed the near side of a ravine the P A F units would have to cross on their way to attack the settlement. This battle line, weak though it was, would be the first Swordsman units to face any enemy that got past the lines of Federation armament. A second defensive line of manned emplacements was constructed behind the line of mechanized armor.

The helicopters were grounded, refueled and rearmed.

Raphael Rivera and his destroyer's flight engineer came down on the med ship and tended to Daisy. They repair enough of Daisy's systems that with J T's remote navigation assistance they could lift off and return the moon. The MMARV's were sufficiently charged by the time Daisy left to start their drive to the mountain pass where the advancing P A F forces could be trapped. The MMARV's would provide the first line of defense. The mountain pass was a mere thirty kilometers away from the Swordsman settlement. That would put the settlement within range of the P A F mobile artillery, but there was no other place where the MMARV units could be deployed to provide the defenders tactical advantage.

One of the helicopters flew out to the narrowest part of the mountain pass. In the center of the pass, in plain sight, the crew left a tall pole with a white flag attached. At the base of the pole they placed comm units so they could talk to the approaching force and determine their intentions.

The advancing P A F column stopped at nightfall and continued the next day. The combined Federation and Swordsman force held their positions. The P A F column reached the flag and rolled over it without stopping. At the same time, unmanned aircraft boiled out of shipping containers dispersed around the P A F camp.

"All units engage! Move the AARV to defend command positions!"

The MMARV's stationed on the sides of the mountain pass rained fire down on the machines below. The P A F units scattered and several attempted to scale the valley walls to reach the

MMARV's. J T deftly controlled all three MMAARV's and relentlessly destroyed P A F armor machine after machine. The machines climbing the walls turned out to be the easiest targets and he sent them tumbling down on top of their comrades. The choke point in the pass filled with burning hulks of P A F machinery and the machines kept coming. Relentlessly they climbed over their dead and continued their advance. A few managed to push through J T's barrage and were engaged by the Swordsmen.

PI ships are designed for battles in space and not for working inside an atmosphere. They can land and take off from a planet's surface quickly and easily, but their laser weapons pods must be retracted to do so. They could approach the oncoming P A F aircraft and fire missiles, but the PI ships had too few missiles left for the number of aircraft they needed to attack. The only solution left to them was to circle over the flight path of the oncoming aircraft at an altitude above the atmosphere and fire across the aircraft's path with their lasers. This perpendicular shot was the toughest of all shots to make. Wendy had done this against helicopters during the battle at Homestead, but they were much slower moving than these fixed wing robots.

Some of the P A F aircraft attempted to attack the two unarmed med ships circling overhead. Rashi fended them off with the AARV. The battle raged unabated for several hours. In the course of the battle, all three of the MMARV's were lost. Before they were destroyed they had accounted for over a hundred of the enemy. With no weapons left to control, the med ship J T had controlled the MMARV's from returned to the safety of the post on the moon.

The lone AARV and the PI ships focused their fire power on the aircraft while the Swordsman defenses were left to deal with the remains of the mechanized column still advancing through the pass. The Swordsman helicopters turned out to be the most effective weapons against the approaching enemy. The column was finally stopped and the last of the machines destroyed without having breached the first Swordsman defensive line although that line had suffered significant losses.

The battle appeared to be over when a second column of mechanized armor materialized out of the P A F shipping containers in the original location.

Captain Darwin swore under her breath. "Lt. Rivera! Scan the P A F settlement for signs of life. I want to know if there are any civilians at all or if they're all military. I've never heard of a Q settlement before, but that's what I think we may have. It's a huge damn Trojan Horse!"

"Captain! If there were civilians in the camp there would be a lot more construction activity than I am seeing."

"Damn! I should have done this earlier! There are no civilians in that damn camp!"

"There are six linked together containers. There's a dozen antenna towers."

"Lt. Rivera, do you have any of the multiple warheads left?"

"Yes, I have one in my stern tube."

"Target the containers. Set the multi to separate at 2000 meters and fire on your mark."

Flight time was both agonizingly long and surprisingly short. The missile performed as Federation missiles generally did and found its target. Secondary explosions in the surrounding containers continued for several hours as the fires expanded to consume the entire camp. The

mechanized column suddenly stopped in its tracks. The fires at the P A F base camp would burn for days. All of the Federation personnel and all the ships returned to their station on the moon.

Having common enemies with the Swordsmen did not, however, make them friends.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

NO ONE IN THE GROUP that assembled in the med ship parked on the moon could remember J T being angry, much less screaming at someone. Normally his stuttering worsened when he was upset, but not this time. The ferocious tirade he launched at Mimi when the battle was over would have blistered paint. Technically the person who should have reprimanded her was Captain Darwin, and she had intended to explain to Mimi exactly how much trouble she had caused, but J T beat her to it, publicly and passionately. As the rant wore on, it became increasingly obvious that the real reason he was so angry with Mimi was that in the few weeks they had spent by themselves in the med ship while he reprogrammed the MMARV's he had fallen in love with her.

When it became apparent to Captain Darwin that J T was in danger of destroying whatever chance he had with Mimi, she rested her hand on his shoulder. "J T, you made your point. We all need rest. J T, take watch for two hours. I'll take next watch and after that I'll post a watch schedule."

When everyone else had found a corner of the ship to bunk down, Captain Darwin quietly said to J T, "If you want to keep her, don't ever reprimand her in public again."

"Yes, Captain."

After relieving J T on watch, Captain Darwin assessed their situation. She had three functional P I ships that had almost exhausted their munitions. She had one damaged P I ship whose munitions could be loaded into the other three if the need arose. She had one destroyer with a quarter of its normal missile load. She had two unarmed med ships and one AARV currently flying recon patrol over what had been the P A F camp.

In terms of personnel, including herself and Lt. Sabrina Mahoney, she had four military P I pilots and four military fire control officers. The destroyer had its full crew of four under Lt. Rivera's command. The med ships had a pilot and an engineer each, Rashi and Esther Abrams had come in one. Mimi and J T had come in the other. They had picked Wendy and her crew up from the surface. Twenty people and seven ships sat together on a flat spot on the planet's moon trying to decide their next move. They had enough rations to last for three months and either of the med ships' life support systems was sufficient to support all twenty people. They had accomplished their mission and they were in no immediate apparent danger.

It would seem that this would be an appropriate time to pick up and leave. There were some obstacles that stood in their way. None of the ships had sufficient power to carry Daisy. They could not leave the ship behind for the P A F to find. They had promised the Swordsmen that they would help defend against the P A F attack they saw coming. Alina worried that the next force to show up might not be P A F, but rather Third Force. There was no way they were surviving a Third Force attack. They had done well against the P A F, but Alina had no delusions about the results of a Third Force encounter. The third concern was what if they did figure out a way to lift Daisy and the Schweitzer arrived to find them gone.

They decided to stay and wait for the Schweitzer. They deployed the three functional P I ships and the destroyer to patrol near the edge of the system. The rest of the people remained on the moon and monitored the sensors.

The Swordsmen duly expressed their appreciation of the Federation force's involvement in the

defense of their settlement and frequently invited them to come to the surface and help the medical staff. Captain Darwin graciously declined the offers and insisted that for all their safety, the best place for them to be was on patrol.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

FEDERATION SPACE FORCE HOSPITAL SHIP 28 Albert Schweitzer and a civilian cargo ship with a checkered past affectionately known as “Peter” dropped out of hyper drive well outside the Brainerd’s Folly system limits. Their arrival was observed as immediately as the speed of light and the inverse square law would allow. Federation protocol required a ship entering a system desiring safe passage to announce its presence in advance of the defense system demanding identification. The two ships announced their presence and cheers arose in the ships that had been waiting for them. Rescue was at hand.

The Schweitzer settled into orbit around the moon and the ships that had been parked on the surface rose to meet it. The ships that had been patrolling linked together to the big ship as it orbited in space.

Part of the Schweitzer’s mandate was to aid civilians in need of assistance regardless of their political or religious affiliations. Once the conditions on the planet’s surface became apparent, controlled chaos broke out on the hospital ship. The medical teams and treatment facilities were transferred to the surface. Civilian Federation medical teams stepped in to relieve the overwhelmed Swordsman personnel.

A military contingent descended to the surface to meet with Colonel Harlingen and discuss with him the possible defense of the planet. The presence of the entire Solomon family who had done so much damage to Swordsman aspirations and Ambassador Kirkland who had negotiated the Swordsman secession caused considerable commotion on the planet. It was all Colonel Harlingen could do to keep his personnel under control. The fact that they now depended on known enemies for their safety was more than some of the surviving Swordsmen could abide.

Rachel sent a courier to the nearest Sisters of Mercy installation requesting assistance. There was something to be said for not staying any longer than necessary where one was not wanted.

After returning from their meeting with Colonel Harlingen, the military personnel gathered in the battleship’s conference room. Rachel quickly turned the meeting over to her father.

Greg stood as he addressed the group. “We have to assume that Lt. Mancini’s concern about an impending attack is real. Right now the safest place for our civilians is with the Swordsmen on the surface. I am sure you all understand the sensitivity of the issues we are dealing with here. Fortunately, the terms of the secession treaty, in fact of the Federation Charter itself, are very clear on this issue. The concern was that even though the Federation and the seceding entity were enjoined from attacking each other, either one could contract with a third party to do the work. In order to avoid this scenario, both sides are locked into mutual defense pacts for a period of five years from the date of ratification. Much of the rhetoric we are hearing from the Conservatives these days has to do with voiding that provision although they have not yet succeeded.

“Assuming that Lt. Mancini’s estimate of the strength of the advancing force is even close to accurate, we have a fight on our hands. We are facing a force that is much larger than we are. Several people in this room have done this with me before. We have prevailed in the past and we will again. As in the past, we intend to rely on new technology and a companion strategy. In the battle at Homestead, we relied on the short hyper jump. We had what was generally believed to be the only ships capable of the short jump. In fact, we were the only ones in a position to take advantage of this technology who

knew the short jump was possible. Even with that advantage, we suffered horrendous losses. The ground battle was fought the hard way.

“In the short battle that followed at the Swordsman base, the short jump allowed us to deactivate the only ship that posed a threat. In the battle at Eretz, we used the short jump again aided by good old fashioned proper placement of firepower. Our newest addition in that battle was the Disruptor which allowed us to disable enemy ships without destroying them.

“Sabrina Mahoney discovered the value of the short jump independently of the rest of us. She has refined the techniques and some of her ideas are incorporated in our new strategies. One of the techniques introduced at Homestead and refined since then that made the short jump so effective was the ability to place several small ships in formation around the enemy and coordinate the fire. These techniques were first implemented at Homestead and were responsible for enabling us to acquire most of the fleet we later used against the Swordsmen. Communicating verbally worked when we were facing a dozen or fewer ships. Communicating verbally will no longer work. It’s not fast enough. Ladies and Gentlemen what we are about to do has never been done before. We are going to take the merger of person and machine one step further than ever. Ladies and Gentlemen, let me introduce our secret weapon.”

Abraham and Sarah Abrams entered the room. Rashi and Mimi were surprised to see their parents on the ship, let alone have them referred to as a secret weapon. Reuben and Suwanee had been working with the elder members of the family since they transferred to the cargo ship. They chuckled at the others’ confusion.

“Dr. Abrams, please.”

Sarah Abrams spoke. “First, let me correct one thing Greg said. Do not refer to your ships as machines. They will be insulted. They think they are people. Therein lies their and your strength. They have the computing power of the ships they are and personalities to match the people that fly with them. We have psychological data on all of our potential flight crews. The ships will anticipate your next move and provide the data necessary to support it. You will command the ships by a combination of voice, tactile and pointer commands. Your combat display is actually built into the face of your helmet. It mimics the old display in that if you move your head, it tracks what you should be seeing and gives it to you.”

She became excited as she said, “What this means is that you go into combat in your E V A suit protected from hull breaches without loss of mobility or combat effectiveness! We are looking at a new day in combat technology!”

Sara smiled as she realized she was getting carried away. She reached into the fabric bag she had brought with her. “Folks! This is your new helmet!”

The one she displayed had “Captain Alina Darwin” hand lettered in script above the face shield. “Captain, it would be my honor if you would allow me to place your helmet on your head.”

Alina stood and walked toward Sarah. Sarah placed the helmet on Alina’s head. There was a brief gasp, a moment of silence then a randy laugh. “Oh My God! Well! *Hello, there!*”

Dr. Abraham Abrams said, “Captain Darwin is getting acquainted with her new ship.”



Rachel said, "I felt that since Captain Darwin and Lt. Mahoney were our two best pilots, they should get two of the new ships. Lt. Mahoney, I believe your helmet should be here shortly."

A moment later Lt. Mahoney's fire control officer showed up with their two helmets. Captain Darwin's fire control officer was right behind her carrying her helmet.

Avi spoke next. "I will fly Daisy with Sarah in my back seat."

Greg said, "I will be with Buddy and Abraham will fly with me. Which brings me to a question. Reuben, now that you have had a chance to assess Daisy's damage, what is the prognosis?"

"We will need to replace the entire drive unit including the standard drive." Reuben replied.

"How long will that take?" Greg asked.

"With four of us working on it, a couple of hours. It's only a dozen bolts, two electrical multi connectors and a duplex fiber link."

"We have two spare drive units in the hold. Do you think you could replace Buddy's as well?"

"Is that a good idea? It will take you out of action for training."

"I'm sure you can find engineers around here who can make the swap while we sleep."

"Swapping out a hot reactor is asking for trouble. Daisy's is cold because she shut it down when she was hit. Buddy's reactor is running." Reuben cautioned.

"Then you'll need to do it before it gets too hot to handle." Greg grinned. "Buddy is already shutting down."

Reuben groaned. "Yes, sir, I'll take care of it."

"Actually that's probably not a good idea." Rachel said. Everyone turned to look at her. "We have twelve P I ships. So far we have six flight crews. Reuben, I agreed with command staff that you and Suwanee should take one of the new ships. You will be working too hard to do the repairs yourself. You will need to delegate the responsibilities. Rashi, you and Esther should take one ship and I don't care who sits in front. You figure it out. Mimi, with your gimp foot and all take J T on one ship. Faye Anne, take Lt. Hammersmith with you. That leaves one."

Rachel looked at David. He met her gaze then looked away. "I can't. It's been too long. I let my skills get rusty."

Avi looked at Natasha. "I understand how this happened and it's nobody's fault, but Natasha, I trust you will see that he gets his wings back in shape. At the same time, I think he should teach you to fly. Be good for the both of you. We'll let you off the hook this time, but not again."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Rachel looked at Wendy. "I had intended for you to be the back up and stay here with me, but it

looks like you're it."

"Aye, Captain."

Greg stood to regain the floor. "Now that we're all settled, I would like to suggest that all the flight engineers still on this ship transfer to the cargo ship and start the drive swaps. Flight and command crews stay here."

Lt. Rivera raised his hand. "Where do you want me and my crew?"

Rachel replied, "You get to play defense this time. The cargo ship is equipped with so many lasers that it almost qualifies as a Q ship. However, it and we share the same vulnerability in an attack on the drive units. We are going to form up this ship and the cargo ship in a straight line with the drive units facing each other. Once we know which direction the attack is coming from we will rotate to put the battleship's armor toward the enemy. The cargo ship will face away to guard against surprises and you will protect the space between the two ships where we are in the greatest danger."

"Aye, Captain."

"One other thing, before the battle starts, we will send all non-combatants and the med ships to the surface. Engineers please take the P I ships across to the cargo ship and report in over there. Munitions personnel, please join them and make sure that all ships have maximum loads of ordinance. Flight crews and bridge crew stay here. Everyone else is dismissed."

When the room had cleared to flight crews and bridge personnel only, Greg spoke. "The point of the need for rapid communications has to do with target selection. Back when we were ambushing wandering ships in the early days at Homestead, we developed a technique called 'around the clock'. Properly used it can be extremely effective in that it instantly swamps a ship's defensive sensors and gives us time to get the shot off before the enemy has time to react. This tactic requires that the ships be precisely positioned when they drop out of hyper drive at the end of a short jump. As I mentioned before we don't have time to sing out coordinates for enough ships to successfully attack a formation the size of the one we expect. We have twelve ships. At the beginning of the engagement we will have all twelve ships operate as one tactical unit. We will later break into two tactical units, then three, then six. Eventually we will split up and operate as singles."

Greg paused. "We humans do not have the time to communicate properly. The ships do. We can't communicate in hyper, but the ships can transfer a lot of data in the short time we will be in normal space. Each ship will have a programmed position it will take around an enemy ship. This position will be calculated based on the heading of the target and the bearing of the lead ship calling the target. All ships will have displays showing all potential targets and their ID codes. The lead pilot will select a target and relay the choice to the rest of their unit. The computers will calculate the flight times to position and coordinate the optimum timing of the attack."

Greg looked around the room. "Here's the tough part. We're not going after the hard targets first. We're not attacking the battleships or cruisers first. We are jumping beyond them to the cargo ships and the tenders. We will attack the support fleet with Disruptor missiles. The Disruptor missiles have been modified since you last used them. They were susceptible to spoofing before. A ship could

shut down and the Disruptor would deactivate. Once deactivated the missile could not come back up even if the ship did. The modified version now expects to be spoofed and will restart as many times as it takes until the ship lies dead or their batteries fail. This also means that any ship approaching to rescue the occupants of the dead ship will be immobilized by the Disruptor. It is very much like setting a fire and shooting the first responders. You will carry these missiles on your outboard launchers.

“The goal is to force the enemy to break ranks and turn to defend their payloads. Once we have broken the main assault line, we will pick off the ships individually. We know that no plan survives contact with the enemy, so our plan will not be a complex strategy, but rather a series of plays that will be called as needed.”

When it was apparent that the information had been assimilated, Rachel said, “Let’s give the engineers and munitions folks time to do their jobs. Flight crews meet at the cargo hold at 0900. Get some sleep. It may be the last sleep we get for some time.”

Training began immediately. There were no simulators so they worked with the real ships in real maneuvers. The destroyer played target for the exercises. The few Swordsmen ships that were left watched the display in amazement. A training regimen this intense would have been met with mutiny in their ranks. Even as regimented as the Swordsmen religion was, the military was surprisingly undisciplined in spite of its strong “top down” hierarchy. Until the point of exhaustion, the Federation crews and the ships backed up with the processing power of their computers hammered away at the maneuvers until they all performed at the level Greg expected of them.

Once the teams had reached the level Greg demanded, he let off the intensity and let the crews get some rest while they waited.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FORTY

**L**T. MANCINI DID NOT OVERESTIMATE the force that they would be facing. The instant it became clear that this force was P A F and not Federation or Swordsman, the twelve P I ships attacked. Twelve puny P I ships attacked a force that included two of the super battleships that had been at Everest, eight cruisers, a few dozen destroyers and more small ships than the sensors could sort out. Behind them were four mammoth transports. The entire fleet was in a ballistic trajectory apparently trying to avoid detection with minimum emissions.

A quick analysis of the formation showed what Captain Darwin had observed in the previous battle against the Swordsmen. The strategists who had developed this battle formation did not fully understand the difference between warfare on a two dimensional surface and in three dimensional space. The small first strike ships were strung out in a single line much like the armies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even the bombers of World War II had flown in three dimensional formations. These people were clearly a throw back to ancient history. Captain Darwin had also previously observed that they did not completely grasp the concept of persistence of motion. The Swordsmen had not fully grasped these concepts either. These concepts were not taught in the Academy, but were among the first characteristics of doing battle in space a pilot learned once they were on their own.

“Round the clock, walk the line!”

With those words, the battle was joined. Twelve small ships disappeared from view. In three dimensions their trajectories described the curve of an upside down spade from a deck of playing cards. Flanking the P A F formation at the widest point of the curve, the twelve little ships curled around and came at the formation from behind. The twelve P I ships suddenly materialized in a three dimensional array around the lead transport. The precision with which their paths had been calculated given the relative motion of all the elements would not have been possible without the integration of the ships and their human pilots. Each of the twelve little ships fired a single Disruptor missile in response to a digital command. In response to a single finger touch to a single display the twelve small ships disappeared. They reappeared around the second transport. They held for a second and fired.

In previous battles, Greg had encouraged the crews to talk to each other. This one was moving too fast for that. They would need to do exactly the right amount of damage and move quickly to strike as many ships as they could before they retreated and to defend their own ships from the onslaught of P A F pawns who led the formation. Where before the ether was full of the chatter of crews furthering the progress of the battle, this time the ether was silent except for the brief squirts of data that initiated each move. Two more monster cargo ships fell under the assault from the twelve little ships.

As was his habit, once he had fired on the last of the four mammoth cargo ships, Greg checked back on the status of the first ship he had attacked. All of the Disruptor missiles were still emitting their electronics destroying signals. None of them had engaged their targets. The targets were not emitting electronic radiation or radio signals. Forty-eight Disruptor missiles raced through space in search of nothing. This made no sense. Greg stared at his display trying to understand what had gone wrong. As he stared, the entire P A F front line flipped and reversed direction headed back towards them. What had seemed like a mistake now appeared to be a deliberate ploy to deceive them. Had the ships been arrayed in a typical three dimensional formation, the reversal would have been much more difficult.

One of the software changes that had been incorporated into the new Disruptor was the ability for the originating ship to order it to abandon its current target and seek a new one. Greg issued the redeployment command. The Disruptor missiles spun around to face the enemy now racing to intercept

them. Then, Greg ordered a full force retreat. The prearranged retreat point was in orbit around the second moon of the system's larger gas giant.

After regrouping, Greg explained what had gone wrong. "Those ships were decoys. It's a scenario out of one of my combat games. It's in Planetoid Defender. The difference is that the defending force, which is us, is supposed to dodge and feint in order to lead the attacking force to the point where the ground based defenses can be brought to bear. Except there are no ground based defenses that can stand up to a force that size."

"Do we know the force is as big as we think it is? Could there be more decoys?" Avi asked.

"It's possible."

"Abraham, can you tell by the deflection of the light from the stars, the strength of the field around the drive units?"

"With a reference, yes."

Greg said, "The strength of the field times the acceleration gives us the mass. Decoys are light. Less mass, less deflection. Reuben, are the sensors sensitive enough to pick up the differences?"

"Yes, They are."

"Let's do it."

They developed an algorithm that would allow them to compare the star patterns from one ship looking through the suspect ship's fields and one looking around it. They jumped to around the clock on the closer of the two larger of the P A F ships. It appeared to be too light to be what it claimed to be. The wall of small P A F ships turned like a school of fish to engage them at the decoy. Greg ruled out this ship as a target and they moved to the next largest ship. Without firing a missile, the P I ships jumped again to put four of the twelve ships behind the other large warship's propulsion unit. This one read that it was real. The few pickets they encountered guarding the aft end were quickly lasered out of existence. As had been proven before, Saturn made better ships than Valiant. The four Federation ships arrayed around the drive unit fired a full volley of missiles at the same time each of the other ships arrayed around the ship fired a single missile.

The missiles aimed into the propulsion unit got through the big ship's defenses and detonated destroying the propulsion system and fracturing the fusion bottle. The resulting energy release enveloped the entire ship in a glowing ball of white hot plasma.

The P I ships had moved away long before the missiles impacted their target and were already assaulting the cruisers which were the next size smaller ship. They split into two teams of six for this phase of the operation. Four of the sixteen ships that appeared to be cruisers were decoys. They quickly sorted out the decoys and attacked the cruisers en masse. The P I ships took a beating from the cruisers' lasers and missiles. More than one had its hull breached. Had the flight crews not been wearing their pressure suits, they would have died. As it was, they maintained the assault in spite of their damage. Again the message came home. Saturn made better ships.

Even with the cruisers gone, there were too many destroyers and interceptors to deal with so Greg called a retreat, but this time to the relative shelter of the Schweitzer and its defensive weapons.

The P I ships arrayed themselves around the Schweitzer and waited for the arrival of the first wave of P A F interceptors. The Disruptor missiles had thinned their numbers slightly, but not enough to make a significant difference.

Wave after wave of the P A F interceptors threw themselves at the formation. Many of them attempted to use the tactic that Rachel's tactical instructor at the Academy had espoused and which Rachel had challenged. The tactic was every bit as suicidal as Rachel predicted it would be. Lasers from the Schweitzer, Peter, the destroyers and the P I ships sliced the vacuum of space. Expanding debris fields quickly littered the battle space. The Swordsman ships who had survived the previous battle, fearing that the Federation ships might be overwhelmed, attacked the P A F ships from behind. They destroyed several of the P A F ships without incurring significant damage to themselves.

As suddenly as it started it was over. There were no P A F ships left. All of the Federation ships had suffered battle damage, but none of the personnel had been lost. The Swordsmen had suffered damage as well, but they appeared to not have lost any personnel.

When the fighting stopped, the Federation ships linked together to evaluate their situation.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“**Y**OU HAVE A SPY on board!” Greg shouted when they returned to the confines of Rachel’s quarters.

“Yes, Greg, I know,” Ambassador Kirkland replied calmly. “Actually, you have two I know of and there may be a third. You also have two that are reporting to the Conservatives.”

Ambassador Kirkland blithely sipped his coffee before continuing. “I had wondered why both the Swordsmen and P A F showed up together just as you were preparing to leave. I don’t believe in coincidences. I asked Rachel to authorize unlimited access to the ship’s logs. I must say that having an intelligent ship makes this kind of search much easier. The Swordsmen and P A F must have known with enough time to redeploy fleets from their previous missions to intercept you. As nearly as I can tell, the only thing that kept you from being captured or killed is the fact that your plan to foment a slave rebellion blew up in your face a day early. Had you departed one day later, you would have been caught in a horrific cross fire. As far as I am concerned, the fact that you all are alive is dumb luck.”

A stunned silence filled the room. Ambassador Kirkland took another sip of coffee. “One of your spies is Lt. Dale Hammersmith. Lt. Hammersmith is working for the Swordsmen. I suspected as much when I first saw him on the ship. Part of what I told him is true. His father is not dead. His father is in prison as a Swordsman spy. I lied to him to draw him out and it worked. He let slip some information that made it easy to track his activities. The other spy I know about is shy, quiet, timid, Lt. Martini. She is working for the P A F. She was careful to cover her tracks and I had to do quite a bit of sleuthing to track her down. Before she came on board this ship there was nothing shy, quiet or timid about her. She has been a P A F activist for a long time. I am surprised she passed the security screen.”

“I’ll kill them!” Rachel stood from the table.

“Not so fast.” Ambassador Kirkland cautioned. “Someone on your ship has access to the Third Force. I haven’t figured out who that is. We can’t go running around busting spies because we’ll drive them underground. We need to know who this is so we can use them to find the third force.”

“What about Curra?” Rachel asked. “Who did he really work for?”

“Hard to tell about Curra. He had no love for the P A F and I think he would have been happy with the destruction of the prison. Maybe I give him more credit than he deserves, but I think he would have preferred to rescue the guards.”

“So, what do we do now?” Rachel asked.

“The Sisters of Mercy should be here shortly. I think I should head back to Earth with my staff. I will take Lt. Hammersmith and Lt. Martini with me for trial. They won’t know that’s what is in store for them until we arrive. When you return to Eretz for supplies, you need to find a way to dump the Conservatives and go about your business. Finding the Third Force spy may be difficult. You can’t be going on a witch hunt though. My take on their activity is the opposite of the others. I have a slightly

different attitude toward the Third Force. The Third Force appears to be leaving you alone. Their attacks seem to be a spoiler. They make just enough trouble to keep the two major powers on edge so that they don't launch a full scale war on each other. I may be guilty of wishful thinking, but I see them as something of a referee in a cosmic game of war. In the meantime, make what repairs you can and I will continue to snoop around." Rachel sent all of her personnel except for the engineers and flight crews to the surface to help the medical teams.

The engineers reasoned that the all the ships could still fight in their damaged conditions assuming the flight crews wore their pressurized flight suits with the new helmets. Their first priority was to reload munitions and prepare the ships in case they had to go into battle again quickly. Within five days, all the ships were re-armed and work began on the damaged sensor arrays which had taken a beating.

As the ships were deemed safe to fly, they were sent out on patrol until only the four with the most serious damage were left.



## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

THE SISTERS OF MERCY ARRIVED two weeks after the battle with the P A F. The majority of the Sisters' personnel descended directly to the surface to assist the Swordsman colony and see to their recovery. A small contingent of the Sisters remained in orbit. A Federation executive yacht like the one Ambassador Kirkland used and a Federation cargo ship arrived with the Sisters' fleet.

A delegation from the Sisters who had remained in orbit was invited to the Schweitzer. The Federation escort did not request permission to come aboard.

The Sisters were escorted to the briefing room. They were treated to coffee and pastries while they were briefed on the situation below. When the briefing was finished, the Sister in charge of the delegation thanked them profusely. "Now I have some disturbing news," she said. "You, your ship and your crew have been declared outlaws by the news media partial to the Conservatives. There are calls for your Courts Marshall back on Earth. You cannot return to Earth and you should not attempt to go to New St. Louis. Sometimes life is not fair. Your acts of charity have brought sanctions against you. You and your crew appear to be destined to wander from planet to planet doing good deeds without the option to go home."

"I was about to announce that we were returning to Eretz for supplies." Rachel said.

"There is someone you should talk to before you make that decision. He is on the yacht and wishes you not know who he is until you arrive on his ship. Captain, he wants you to go alone."

She looked at Greg and Avi. "Sometimes we have to let them go."

Rachel said, "I will go in one of the P I ships. The other P I ships form up around the clock on the yacht."

Commodore McGuire met Rachel at the airlock. The anger in Rachel's eyes needed no translation. They were still in the passageway when she turned on him. "Is this mission a lie, too?"

"No. That's why I had the Sisters approach you."

"You planted spies on my ship," Rachel charged.

"I did not know that. We believed you had spies, but I did not plant them," McGuire said.

"Well, you did. Hammersmith and Martini."

"I did not plant them. Your friend Lt. Sherman insisted that they join you," McGuire replied.

"Faye Anne?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I think she was suckered. You need to find out."

“So what brings you all the way out here?”

“As the Sister told you there is a price on your head. I wouldn't get bent out of shape over it. Your parents have prices on their heads. My goal is to keep you out of sight for a couple of years until things cool down. The Swordsman propaganda machine is grinding down the Conservatives and it's only a matter of time they fall on their own corruption. I have a new mission for you.”

“No secret prisons this time?”

McGuire grimaced. “Yes, actually there are two secret prisons.” He held his hand to stop her outburst. “Each of the ruling war lords has one that he uses to torture captives from the other.”

“And you want me to take them over?” Rachel asked.

“Not exactly. Can we do this in my conference room?” Commodore McGuire pointed along the passageway where they had been conducting their conversation.

“Sure, you lead.”

Inside the conference room, Rachel said, “Why is the Federation interested in the activities of two petty war lords?”

“For two reasons. The first is that they are using biological weapons on each other. Under the terms of the Federation charter, we have a contractual obligation to intercede when one side of a conflict uses biological weapons on the other. While that alone would be reason enough for us to go, there is a more pressing reason. The real reason is that the planet is rich in the rare metals we need to make the piezoelectric crystals that run our power plants. Whether the reactor uses fission or fusion, the piezoelectric crystals generate the electricity. Our supply is becoming exhausted. If the Federation can secure the ore fields, we can guarantee an adequate supply of these metals for a generation. That's part of what the war lords are fighting over.”

“So you want me to bust up the fight, make peace with these two greedy monsters and secure the mining sites for an even greedier Federation mining company?” Rachel concluded.

“Essentially, yes.”

“No.”

“There is more to it. Both sides in the battle are Muslim. One warlord is Shiite, and the other is Sunni. They have both vowed to fight to the death.”

“And take their entire populations with them?”

“If that's what it takes.”

“Some people never learn.”

“No, they don't.”

“I am still not taking my ship and my crew into this mess.”

“You can’t refuse. I have an order from the Chief of Staff.”

“So how do I keep the P A F and Swordsmen from intercepting us when we get there?”

“Good question.”

“And am I supposed to do this with a bunch of civilians and flight crews? I lost most of my Marines on Brainerd’s Folly.”

“I have a division of Marines and their associated armor on the cargo ship. The ship also has supplies for your crew for six months of duty. Some of the Sisters will travel on your ship.”

“Do you have a briefing data module?”

“Yes.” He handed it to her.

“Where is this planet?”

Commodore McGuire pointed to a place on a star chart. Rachel scribbled numbers on a piece of paper. She handed the note paper to McGuire “Have the cargo ship meet one of my P I ships here in forty-eight hours. Alone. No escort. They will be given another location to jump to. You will not come with them. Go back to Eretz and alert them to expect an attack.”

“Are you giving me an order?”

“Call it a suggestion. Accidents in space involving errant missiles are real nasty.” Rachel turned and left.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

RACHEL RETURNED TO HER P I ship and ordered all the orbiting ships and crews under her command to dock to the Schweitzer and report for a briefing. Rather than heading for the briefing room, Rachel headed for the bridge. When Rachel returned to the bridge, she sought out her parents and Ambassador Kirkland. “Ambassador, we have a mission that will require your special skills. I would appreciate if you would join us in this deployment.”

“Do you intend to tell me about this mission?”

“Yes, but first we have to go back to Eretz for supplies.” She looked around at the bridge crew to see who was listening.

“Do you want us to go ahead with a shopping list?” Avi asked.

“No, thanks, I need you here. Please gather all personnel in the galley for a briefing.” Rachel scanned the bridge one more time before taking a position near the view port.

Rachel waited at the view port until she saw Commodore McGuire’s ship leave the system. She then recalled all her ships and personnel from the planet’s surface. The Sisters of Mercy had taken over the hard work and it was time for them to move on. Rachel then relieved the entire bridge crew to attend the briefing and set the ship on automatic control.

Once the ship’s company had gathered in the briefing room, she thanked them all for their participation in the recent combat and asked that they find time in their daily lives to pray for those who had been lost in the recent battles. She announced her intention to depart for Eretz in forty-eight hours before proceeding to their next duty station. She stated that she believed that the Federation supported their mission and would see to it that the humanitarian efforts continued unabated.

Avi looked at her daughter with the eyes that knew when her daughter was being less than candid. The fire in her motions, though, reminded her that above all else, Rachel was her daughter and when she set her mind on a plan, woe be unto who might ever get in her way. David observed the expressions on the two women and recognized the interchange. Something huge was going down and Rachel was not talking. Or rather, Rachel was talking a lot and what she said made sense, but she was laying down a smoke screen. Avi, Greg and David noticed it and hoped no one else did.

After Rachel called in all the ships, the people who had been relieved by the Sisters reported that the Sisters of Mercy had the situation on the surface well in hand. The crews who had done the hard work in the settlements agreed it was time for the Schweitzer to be on its way. Rashi and Esther did not attend the briefing. Shortly after Rachel had headed back to the ship from her meeting with Commodore McGuire, they had taken Daisy out on a shakedown cruise to test the repairs and not returned. In the crew briefing Rachel had made a comment about them spending more time playing adult games in weightlessness than testing the ship and not paying attention to their duties. She pointed out that the P I ship was designed to travel long distances by itself and if the Schweitzer was not there when they returned, they were adults and perfectly capable of finding Eretz on their own. In fact most of the P I ships were not attached to the Schweitzer, but rather were tethered via fiber optic cables and would be making the trip under their own power if not their own guidance.

When it was time to leave, Rachel tapped the helmsmen on the shoulder and said, “Please allow

me.” He relinquished his seat. She quickly punched in a series of numbers and keyed the execute command. The big ship and its escort left orbit.

Rachel observed two courier missiles leave from the ends of what had appeared to be cargo containers as the ship prepared to jump. Elizabeth tracked who initiated those messages. Seconds before the Schweitzer jumped, Mimi and J T disconnected Buddy from the fiber link and jumped in a different direction from the one that the Schweitzer was going.

Rashi, Esther and Daisy stalked the cargo ship that and come with Commodore McGuire for several hours before revealing their presence. They relayed a new set of coordinates for the cargo ship to jump to. They held position until it left and then jumped themselves. Mimi, J T and Buddy met the cargo ship at this second location, stalked it for a few hours and presented another set of coordinates.

The Schweitzer, Peter and the remaining tethered support ships jumped together twice to carefully selected interim rallying points before meeting the cargo ship that McGuire had brought with him. Elizabeth had sealed all the courier message tubes when the two ships made contact. Reuben and his crew had disabled the tubes hidden in the cargo containers. The new company of Marines and their cargo were transferred to the Schweitzer. After disgorging its cargo, the transport ship that had been treated to a wild goose chase by Buddy and Daisy was sent away with instructions to report to New St. Louis. The transport ship was gone for two hours before the Schweitzer fired its engines for the long jump to the new mission.

Three weeks later, a large fleet of P A F ships attacked Eretz and was crushingly defeated by a defense system well prepared for their arrival. Many of the P A F ships were captured intact and large numbers of prisoners were taken for questioning. Admiral Sherman forgave Rachel her previous transgressions against him when he realized the incredible amount of intelligence information about a powerful enemy she had tidily delivered into his hands. Having learned from previous mistakes, the Swordsmen elected to not act on the intelligence they had received from their spies on the Schweitzer. They had faced the Jews before and knew better than to try again.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

THE TRIP TO DESTINY'S RIDGE took four weeks. The engineers continued to make what repairs they could. The medical staff prepared to deal with bacterial agents used as weapons of war. The Marines drilled and sharpened their combat skills. The flight crews became better acquainted with the personalities of their ships. David was the only one conversant enough with his own religion to actively participate in the religious discussions with the nuns, but the conversations were educational for all who listened. The four weeks passed quickly.

The Schweitzer's convoy dropped out of hyperspace in tight formation and, as Lt. Sabrina Mahoney predicted, they found the system swarming with small pirate ships waiting for the opportunity when the fighting on the surface would annihilate both groups so they could swoop in and steal whatever would be worth stealing. Merely the broadcast announcement of the Schweitzer's arrival and the Federation's intent to secure the system over the open communications channels was enough to send half of the pirate ships scurrying out of the system. A direct approach by a pair of P I ships, even marginally functional P I ships, intimidated the majority of the rest enough for them to flee. A few surrendered and only two had to be shot down.

The planet was mostly sand and desert with the only habitable regions being near the poles. The two war lords had established their camps near the opposite arctic circles. As the Schweitzer approached, the two armies were engaged in a battle near the equator. Under cover of night, the Marines and their mechanized artillery parachuted to the surface from the med ships and surrounded the combatants. When dawn broke and the fighting resumed, the Marines ordered both sides to surrender. When they refused, the Marines, supported by remote controlled mobile artillery, efficiently destroyed both armies with no losses of their own and only minor damage to the machines.

Ambassador Kirkland and his staff, backed by large contingents of Marines fresh from the battlefield, brokered a treaty between the warlords and an uneasy peace was forced on the rivals.

The medical teams arrived and began repairing the damage the bacteria had done to the populations.

When it became apparent that the worst was over, Peter was sent back to Eretz with a shopping list. He carried the four most severely damaged P I ships for repair. Abraham and Sarah Abrams elected to return with Peter. Lt. Hammersmith and Lt. Martini, their covers destroyed, found that leaving with Peter was their most acceptable alternative. A few of the military personnel whose enlistment contracts had expired also left with Peter.

After the treaty was signed, Ambassador Kirkland, Greg, Avi and the ambassador's staff departed for Earth. With the turmoil expected in the wake of the allegations being made by the Swordsmen's clandestine media campaign against the Conservatives, they needed to return without further delay.

Two weeks after the Schweitzer arrived at Destiny's Ridge, they were alone again. They had secured the planet and forced peace on the warring parties. The Schweitzer, eight P I ships, one destroyer, two shuttles and two med ships made up the fleet. A few hundred military and civilian personnel worked to keep the planet and its population safe from threats both internal and external.

Six weeks after the Schweitzer arrived, the first convoy of miners arrived with their equipment.

Once they were established on the planet's surface, the Schweitzer prepared to leave.

Eight weeks after the Schweitzer arrived, Peter returned with supplies, replacement personnel and one destroyer. Included in the materials delivered to the Schweitzer was a message package from Commodore McGuire. Three days later Peter left again with a new shopping list. Mimi Abrams and J T left with Peter to be his new crew.

Nine weeks and one day after arriving at Destiny's Ridge, the Schweitzer's sensors detected a large convoy of Federation military vessels entering the system. Exactly ten minutes later, the Schweitzer lit its engines and headed out of system. Its work here was done. The nuns and some of the civilians had elected to stay behind to greet the Federation personnel when they arrived.

For the next four years, the pattern was similar to the one established at Destiny's Ridge. The Schweitzer would arrive at some planet in crisis and clear out the pirates. The Marines would land and establish control. David would land and, with his brand new law degree from Harvard, negotiate whatever needed negotiating. The medics would follow and make the people healthy again. If the emergency was a natural disaster like an earthquake or a storm, all the available personnel including the engineers and flight crews would descend to the surface and help rebuild. One of the relief agencies would show up six to eight weeks later. Peter would bring new personnel and supplies. Peter would take the people who wished to return to regular lives and the Schweitzer would leave again.

Rachel never told anyone where they were going until they got there. She got into the habit of plotting their course at her station and taking the helm herself for the jump out of the system. For four years they dodged the Third Force, the Conservatives, the Swordsmen and the weakened P A F. They considered themselves especially fortunate to not have run into the Third Force, but the Third Force seemed to be less active lately, a phenomenon none could explain.

For four years the Schweitzer did not suffer a single combat casualty. Some of the crew were injured on the ground in accidents of one sort or another. Removing survivors from crumbling buildings turned out to be one particularly dangerous task accounting for many of the injuries. The MMARV's with their sensitive sensors and hardened front ends were pressed into service for a wide variety of rescue tasks thereby reducing the casualties significantly.

Mimi and J T married during one of their stops at Eretz. Dr. Constance Terrell A K A "Tyrannosaurus Doc" delivered their twin boys a few years later. Peter was an excellent babysitter having performed the same duties a generation earlier for Rachel and Wendy.

For four years, life was relatively predictable. They would spend six to eight weeks on a planet. They would spend two to four weeks in transit and land on a new planet and deal with its emergency before moving on again. Supply ships came and went. Personnel came and went, but the mission continued.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

EMERSON WINTHROP III GRADUATED the Space Force Academy in the top quarter of his class. Immediately following graduation, he went home on leave.

Standing tall in his full dress officer's uniform, Emerson addressed the man who had been his benefactor. "Reverend, I have come to seek the hand of your second daughter, Harumi, in marriage. May I have your blessing, sir?"

"Emerson, I have kept my promise. I have not entered into negotiations with anyone else for her hand in marriage. Your success in this quest is entirely up to you. You have my blessing. May the light of the Sword of the Shogun guide your way."

"Thank you, sir."

Emerson found Harumi pulling weeds tending the garden behind the house. He had been delayed several days after graduation due to his impending transfer to the Swordsmen and no doubt she had worried that he was not coming for her. He silently walked up behind her and gently touched her shoulder. She looked around. She had been crying. Tracks of tears showed in the dust on her face.

"Sonny!" She gasped. "Sonny! You came for me!" She jumped up and hugged him kissing him passionately.

After he caught his breath, Emerson gently picked up his future wife in his arms. "We must tell your father. We need to ship out the day after tomorrow."

The wedding was hastily arranged. Emerson had booked passage on a commercial passenger ship and with all the emotional displays that accompany a long anticipated marriage, they headed out for their life's adventures together.

Emerson was assigned command of the defense installation on a small farming community at the very frontier of the Swordsman expansion. The planet was so remote that the Federation survey teams had not found it. Only the Swordsmen survey teams knew of its existence. The system was listed on the Federation admiralty charts as "uncharted" and only on the Swordsmen's charts was there any mention of this very Earth-like planet far away from the rest of civilization. The planet was so remote that cargo ships only came to the planet twice a year. Emerson had eight interceptor ships in his command and an assortment of ground based defenses. His crews were minimally trained. The previous commander had not really understood his job and so what training they had done was woefully inadequate. Confident that the relative secrecy of their location would protect them from harm, the previous commander had not kept his personnel's combat conditioning up to standard.

Harumi had become pregnant during the trip and they joyously anticipated the birth of their first child. Emerson was devoted husband and absolutely doted on Harumi. All the love he had sought as a child, he devoted to her and she responded in kind. They could often be seen walking together hand in hand as they admired the beauty of the planet they now called home.

Emerson established a rigorous training schedule. He had learned well from Greg's games. "Planetoid Defender" provided the scenarios for many of the simulations he used to train his staff.



Based on some snatches of information he had stumbled into, he strongly believed he had a spy reporting to a group of pirates, and he suspected who the spy might be. He fully expected that when the supply convoy came in the fall to pick up the harvest, pirates would arrive as well.

Harumi and Emerson had a son they named Taylor. In a sharp break with Swordsman tradition, Emerson shared the duties of caring for the child to the extent his work schedule and physiology would allow. Emerson loved Harumi and Taylor with all his soul.

When the crops started to come in from the fields, rather than marshal them on the planet's surface and wait for the convoy as had been the practice in the past, Emerson set up a marshaling area on the planet's single moon. He parked four of his picket ships on the moon and covered them with camouflage material. The convoy arrived exactly on schedule. The convoy's commander expressed his surprise and pleasure at finding his cargo so much more accessible than he had expected.

Emerson suggested rather strongly to this man who out-ranked him by half a dozen pay grades that he should not lounge around, but rather get loaded as quickly as possible since he expected unwelcome visitors. The convoy's commander surveyed the earnest young man standing before him and canceled all shore leaves. With his crews working as quickly as possible, they unloaded the containers the cargo ships had brought with them to the marshaling area and at the same time picked up the containers for shipment back to the more populated planets.

Emerson had been unimpressed with the convoy's escort. He was going to be just as happy when both the convoy and the escort were on their way again.

The pirates arrived later than Emerson expected. The convoy was almost completely loaded when the first pirate ships appeared at the periphery of the system. In a page taken from Greg's battle plan at Homestead, what appeared to be discarded shipping containers orbiting at the extreme edge of the system sounded the alarm. In another page from Greg's book, the shipping containers drew first blood. Greg had used discarded shipping containers as a defensive weapon in close orbits around Homestead. Emerson used them as offensive weapons at the edge of the system.

Once the shooting started, the convoy's crews needed no additional motivation to finish their load and depart. Taking their escort with them, they fled as soon as possible.

Emerson still had vulnerable exposed cargo on the surface of the moon. His crews immediately began dropping the containers through the atmosphere to the planet's surface. Recognizing that their bounty was rapidly slipping through their fingers, the pirates attacked not as a coordinated body, but as a loose band.

Calling his maneuvers like a coach at a sporting event, Emerson coordinated the defense from a ship in orbit around the planet. When the fighting ended, all the pirates had either been destroyed or retreated. He had lost two ships and some personnel at the tracking station on the moon. Emerson knew who his spy was and knew that the pirates would not be back until harvest time next year.

The convoy commander reported favorably about Emerson to his superiors.

The pirate rumor mill reported a maniacal military commander at the planet at the edge of the system, and for the first time, the Federation learned of the planet's existence.

Emerson and Harumi greeted each new day as the newly-weds they were.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

RACHEL KNEW IT WAS OVER the moment she saw Peter. The cargo containers she expected to see had been replaced by enough personnel carriers to house her entire crew. Two pickets were attached where the P I ships normally rode back and forth for service.

Rachel did not need to read the document Commodore Quisling gave her to know its meaning.

"I trust you will inform your crew," the man said in a tone that spoke of superiority.

"No, Commodore, I won't. You do it."

She handed him her white cap that showed she was the commander of the ship.

"You keep that," he said. "I brought my own."

Rachel called her entire crew to meet in the galley. Commodore Quisling held his proclamation high in front of his face and read it aloud like an ancient town crier. To their credit, none of the crew made rude noises or interrupted his declamations.

Captain Alina Darwin was the first to speak. "I don't know about you, but I'm flying my own ship to Eretz. Flight crews form up in two hours. We're out of here!"

The transfer of personnel and personal effects to Peter from the Schweitzer took four hours.

Rachel and Isaac were the last to leave. "I guess this means goodbye," Elizabeth said.

"Yes, it does." Rachel choked on the words. "We had a good run. I hope your new captain is good to you."

"Good bye, Rachel. I will miss you."

"Good bye, Elizabeth. I will miss you, too."

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

THE TRIP BACK TO ERETZ took six months. They made several interim stops along their seemingly erratic route to take crew members where they had wanted to go. Peter, of course, was perfectly amenable to taking them wherever they felt like they might wish to go whenever they might wish to go there. As a cargo ship, that was what he did. Buddy and Daisy had headed directly home so Peter traveled without escort. In the course of their travels they had picked up some cargo along the way and made more than one detour from their planned itinerary to deliver it to its destination. Peter and his friends from Eretz traveled the “long way home” route and the long time traveling was good for all those who had spent the past several years on an odyssey roaming from one disaster to another.

The last stop before returning home was New St. Louis. The only humans who remained on board when they left New St. Louis for Eretz were the original six who had traveled with Peter to join the Space Force Academy and the spouses of those that had them. Alina, Sabrina had flown with Buddy and Daisy and the rest of the P I ships directly back to Eretz.

At New St. Louis, they picked up cargo intended for delivery to Eretz. Along with the normal types of cargo in the hold and in the traditional shipping containers, they picked up four prototype spacecraft the designers at Saturn Industries new prototyping facility were sending to the engineers at Eretz for further development and testing.

The prototypes were two samples of two different types of smaller vessels. The new ships had not yet been fueled and their batteries had not yet been charged so there was no way for the curious minds on Peter’s flight deck to learn much about the ships. Without the computers functioning, they could not be queried, but then, neither could they be tampered with. In a hurry to finish the last leg of the journey, they made the jump from New St Louis and traveled the whole way at two G which enabled them to arrive before they were expected.

The crews that had gone directly home to Eretz and the remainder of the families of the people who had made the long trip home met at the space port’s reception lounge. The chaotic scene on arrival was pretty much what one would expect when this many people return safely from a long time away on a hazardous voyage.

“I have great news!” Greg effused when he finally could get a word in edgewise. “Saturn has asked us to help them develop a new small planetary defense interceptor. We will be designing the pilot interfaces, software and tactical training programs for the new ship.”

“Would that be it there?” Rachel said pointing to one of the prototypes.

“Yes,” Greg said.

“And the other?”

“I don’t know.” Greg was caught by surprise.

Rachel grinned at her father. “Our instructions are to get them into a hangar as quickly as possible. We don’t want too many people seeing them yet.”

Once the prototypes were safely ensconced in the hangar and the hangar pressurized, the shrouds were removed from the new ships’ view ports. The airlocks were opened with the pass codes

that Rachel had been given when she took delivery of the ships. Greg entered each of the ships in turn and picked up the documentation with start-up instructions so they could begin their work on the ships.

Greg turned the start-up documentation to Admiral Sherman who passed it along to his flight engineers. Greg and Avi took the rest of the documentation to study it. Captain Alina Darwin and Lt. Sabrina Mahoney elected to stay with Avi and Greg excited at the prospect of being in on the design phase of a new ship.

The ships had distinctly different missions. One was a small, fast lightly armed ship intended for in-system defense and routine law enforcement. It carried eight externally mounted missiles and a modest compliment of lasers. Equipped with a light duty inertial compensator, it could make short hyper jumps with impunity. It was intended to support a single pilot for up to a week and was not equipped for jumps from one system to another without a tender. Its value as an offensive weapon was limited by the fact that it carried minimal defenses. As a defensive weapon, however, in any kind of numbers, it would be a force to contend with. It had sleek lines and a large view port. Greg referred to it as “cute” when he first understood its mission.

The other ship was a heavily armed ugly monster intended for convoy escort duty. This larger ship carried over a hundred missiles attached in racks attached to its exterior. While not as fast or as maneuverable as the smaller ship or the P I, the larger ship carried an impressive array of fire power for a ship its size. The operations plan for this ship was to not allow an enemy within striking distance. Once the ship got a target lock on a potential victim, it had enough firepower to kill anything short of a battleship and the Federation had stopped building battleships. Given the ship’s mission of long slow travel escorting heavy cargo vessels, it was equipped with exceptionally commodious crew facilities. It also had a small inertial compensator because its secondary mission was to operate solo as a courier and to transport very important people and cargo to potentially dangerous places.

Neither ship was intended to enter an atmosphere and therefore neither ship had wings like the P I. Since Greg and Avi had started their careers with the P I, they compared every new ship they saw to the P I. With the small ship’s inertial compensator and greater speed, it could get behind a P I and hit its vulnerable propulsion system. A hit from any other direction would not likely destroy the P I. A single missile from the P I would destroy the new ship, but since they were not intended to operate alone, the odds of a P I surviving a concerted assault by these new ships was not promising.

The second ship was even tougher. With its new sensor suite, the likelihood of a P I getting in missile range without being detected was slim. The ships were designed to operate in pairs or trios arrayed around the mid line of a convoy so their sensors overlapped and covered any gaps caused by the inability to see through the cargo ships.

Avi and Greg concluded that while the P I ships still had a mission to serve in the Space Force fleet, these two ships were strong additions and not to be messed with if properly deployed.

Leaving the others to tend to the new ships, Isaac, Josh, Wendy and Rachel went to the surface to find gainful employment for the two wandering health care professionals. Isaac and Josh were accepted into a private trauma center adjacent to the hospital where Rose tended the babies. Within days, they were seeing patients and within a few weeks were performing the kinds of life-saving procedures they had performed on the ship. Wendy and Rachel enjoyed their “vacations” playing with the babies in the hospital’s day care center.

## DEPLOYMENT - CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

LIFE HAD SETTLED into a routine when a Federation Space Force pilot came to the hospital asking to see Rachel. Rachel met him in the hospital cafeteria with Isaac.

“Captain Solomon-Cohen. I am Arthur LeMaitre. I was assigned to the Albert Schweitzer and I have come to bring you sad news. Your ship has died in combat.”

“How well did you know the ship?” Rachel asked guardedly.

“Very well. Elizabeth was my friend,” the pilot said.

“Please tell me what happened,” Rachel said.

“She died valiantly. She tried to save the crew, but I am the only one who survived. Your secret is safe with me.”

“I appreciate that.” Isaac reached out to take her hand.

“The helmsman improperly programmed the jump to New St. Louis. We dropped into the middle of a formation of Third Force ships who were assembling for an attack on New St. Louis. Elizabeth and I had been talking for a long time. She told me to assemble the pilots and prepare to defend the ship before Quisling could even be roused from his bed. We deployed before he arrived on the bridge. He did not want the bridge crew to see him in anything less than his full dress uniform. I think this was the first time I ever saw a ship lose its temper. Elizabeth took command of the ship and ordered the ship evacuated. We were already moving to battle stations. Commodore Quisling countermanded and Elizabeth gassed the bridge. She charged into the Third Force formation. Remember those nukes you carried around all those years?”

“Yes.”

“Elizabeth pumped them into the factory ship that was assembling the drones. Then she turned on the rest of the formation. She exhausted all her missiles and continued the battle with her lasers. She continued to fight as long as she could. I saw a huge flash and the fighting stopped, but by that time not much was left of the Third Force fleet.”

“Oh my God, poor Elizabeth.”

“We had four pickets that got off. We fought what was left, but pickets are not effective against the third force drones. We all fought as hard as we could. When the last of the drones was finally destroyed, I was the only one left. I was too busy to think about it at the time, but I remembered it later. While I was fighting the drones I heard Elizabeth call me. He told me to tell Luther she was coming and to tell you she loved you. I was rescued a couple of days later.”

“We all loved Elizabeth.” Isaac said softly. “Thank you for coming to tell us this in person.”

Rachel mourned Elizabeth for two weeks. One morning shortly before lunch time, a stunningly handsome young man appeared at the clinic where Isaac and Joshua worked asking for Rachel. Rachel had gotten into the habit of joining Isaac for lunch and arrived at the clinic shortly thereafter.

The stranger rose to greet Rachel when she entered the clinic’s lobby.

“Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen, may I have a few moments of your time?”

“I promised my husband I would meet him for lunch. Can we make it quick?”

“It is a business matter and perhaps it would be better to discuss it in your husband’s presence. Could I buy both of you lunch?”

“Hospital food?”

“If I must eat hospital food in order to discuss you what I have come to discuss, then so be it. Oh by the way, I have not introduced myself. Warren Elias Rothschild the fourth.”

“Of Stellar Interstellar Transportation?”

“And a host of other smaller corporations as well.”

“This promises to be an interesting lunch.”

They found a corner in the hospital cafeteria that was not as noisy as the rest of the large room.

“It is my honor to be talking to you,” the young man started. “I have a business transaction which I am researching and I would like to solicit your opinions.”

“I think we could part with a few opinions,” Isaac smiled.

“Stellar Interstellar is evaluating the purchase of several hundred freighters from Valiant Industries based on the design of the P A F warship you destroyed. As a potential buyer of this design, what possible failure points should I be looking for based on your observations of the ship?”

“Is it a fusion drive?” Rachel asked.

“Yes, and it is incredibly efficient which makes it cheap to operate.”

“How are you defending this ship against pirates?”

“Each convoy will have three of the escort ships your father is working on. I must say I am quite impressed with that ugly little ship.”

“It certainly packs a punch.” Rachel then launched into an evaluation of the P A F battleship’s design. It became apparent that she liked the idea of using the design as a freighter although she did not feel comfortable recommending it as a warship. Isaac left the discussion to go back to work.

Mr. Rothschild asked many probing and insightful questions during the discussion. When it became apparent that they had exhausted the subject he said, “Excellent analysis. Thank you. There were several ideas that had not occurred to me. I have another question for you. I am looking for pilots to operate the escort ships. Clearly, I can’t drag you away from your loving husband, but there should be others that you could recommend to us. Anyone you could send our way would be appreciated.”

“There is one that comes to mind. Sabrina Mahoney is not particularly happy here. She longs to return to space. Perhaps you could sweet talk Admiral Sherman into cutting her loose.”

“Sabrina Mahoney, the pirate?”

“Ex-pirate.”

“How very interesting!”

“We’re meeting for dinner at the equestrian center. Join us. I can introduce you.”

“What time?”

“1900 hours.”

“See you then.”

Mr. Rothschild did not let grass grow under his feet. His next stop was Admiral Sherman’s office. He made several other stops that afternoon and met the extended Solomon, Abrams and Sherman families at the club house at 1900 hours. Sabrina was already there. Like many others at the party, Sabrina was still in her flight suit having dropped in at the last minute.

“Warren Elias Rothschild the fourth at your service, charming lady.” He handed Sabrina a dozen red roses. In the time the assembled families had been working together, no one had seen Sabrina blush. Her face became as bright as the roses.

She gingerly took the roses and smiled at him. “To what do I owe this honor, kind sir?”

“I owe you my life, gentle lady.”

All conversation in the room stopped.

“Ten years ago, my father and I were traveling home from inspecting the company’s freight depots in sector 147. We were attacked by pirates. Our ship’s navigation system was disabled. The rest of the convoy fled for their lives leaving us behind. The pirates must have thought that the small passenger yacht traveling with the convoy was not worth attacking and they headed away in pursuit of the rest of the convoy. Miss Mahoney stayed and rescued us. She took control of our ship and gently delivered us to a pirate base. Had she left us there and chased the convoy like the others we all would have died. Once we arrived at the pirate base, they sent a ransom note to Grandfather who paid it. The pirates delivered us to New St Louis and we were set free.”

“All in a day’s work.” Sabrina said. She shrugged her shoulders.

“But you could have killed us or left us to die.”

“And not get paid? You aren’t worth anything dead. You could be worth a lot of money alive. Obviously I was right. No big deal. I was a pirate. I captured people so I could trade them for ransom. Dead people don’t bring as high a ransom as live ones. Just business.”

“Perhaps, but I am prepared to offer you an opportunity you should not be able to resist.”

“Oh?”

“I have ordered fifty of the new escort ships you are testing. When I return home, I will order a hundred of Valiant’s new fusion powered cargo ships. I would like you to deliver the first of these

escort ships and train my personnel in their use.” Sabrina looked over at Admiral Sherman.

“The Admiral assures me that if I offer you a multi-year contract and you agree to return to the Federation should you leave my employ before retirement age, he will get the Federation to waive any other claims they might have on you.”

“And how will your famous Grandpapa feel about you recruiting a pirate?”

“A former pirate. Grandfather passed away recently. I run the company.”

“We need to talk money.”

“My base pay for a pilot training instructor is triple what the Federation pays you.”

“Sounds like a deal.”

“We can do the paperwork in the morning. Captain Darwin, would you like to join us?”

Alina smiled. “Thanks for the offer.” She paused and blushed slightly. “But you see there’s this young veterinarian I have grown fond of and I can’t take him with me, so I’ll stay here.”

Avi giggled. “Does he know?”

“No,” Alina said softly. She looked around the room. “Nobody tell him. I don’t want to scare him off. He needs to get to know me better first. In the meantime, let me propose a toast to Sabrina’s new adventure! Champagne everyone?”

When the tray of glasses arrived at Rachel, she put her hand up. “I can’t.”

All eyes turned to her.

She looked at Isaac and smiled demurely. “I’m pregnant.”

Isaac grinned. “I know.”



## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER ONE

FOURTEEN YEAR OLD FIONA MAHONEY looked up from her history text and across the flight deck to her mother who was finishing her entries into the ship's log.

"Mom, we're going to be in transit for two months, just the two of us, no passengers for the first time in ages, no crew in transit and I think it's about time you came clean with me."

"What would you like to know?" Sabrina Mahoney asked.

"Who is my father?"

"Who do you think?"

"I think you had an office romance and whoever he is dumped you when he found out you were pregnant. I think you took the job piloting this convoy escort ship because you were ashamed. He doesn't even know who I am. Am I right?"

"You're wrong. You've met him. He knows who you are. We are meeting him at the end of this run."

"Why don't we live with him?"

"Because you aren't his only child."

"But I'm your only child."

"Yes."

"Mo-om! That doesn't make sense. Did you know about the other kids when you were together?"

"Only the ones that are older than you."

"Well, du-uh!"

Sabrina laughed.

"So you let this guy make you pregnant who you knew wouldn't marry you and who had kids with other women. That's dumb Mom."

"You'd understand if you knew him better."

"So who is this mister wonderful?"

"Warren Elias Rothschild the fourth."

"The president of Stellar Interstellar Transport? Your boss?"

"Yup." Sabrina grinned.

“Oh! My! God! He is the most powerful businessman in the Galaxy. That’s my father?”

“Yup.”

“Does he know I exist?”

“I told you that already. Yes, he does. He has always been concerned for your welfare and is adamant that you do well academically.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“ Because you asked and because you are meeting him and your half brothers and sisters at the end of this run.”

“Why haven’t I met them before?”

“There are people who do not like your father. He wanted to make sure that if he was attacked, his heirs would be spread far enough apart that they would not all die with him.”

“If it’s so dangerous for us to all be one place, why are we meeting now?”

“War is coming. The Federation and the Swordsmen are gearing up for war. We need to stop it. The last thing we need for our business to stay healthy is a shooting war.”

“Wouldn’t business increase if we were shipping military supplies all over the galaxy?”

“There is a difference between being ready for war and actually fighting one. If everyone thinks they need to be ready for war, they spend lots of money building things and moving them around. When the shooting starts, it gets ugly. For one thing, our ships get caught in the crossfire. Our people and ships get killed and our cargoes get destroyed.”

“Where are we meeting?”

“We have a private freight depot near the border between the Federation and the Swordsman territories. It is heavily guarded by our own security forces. No Federation or Swordsman ship dares come near it.”

“What about the People Against Fusion?”

“Our big cargo ships have fusion drives. That keeps them off our backs. Our little ships still use fission. It took the P A F a while to realize we were not their enemy. We had to buy Valiant Industries’ spacecraft division to cut off most of the P A F’s funding. Before we did that we killed enough of their ships that they’ve learned their lesson. They didn’t disappear, but they left us alone.”

“I guess that goes for pirates, too.”

“Actually that’s our job. That’s why we fly this heavily armed little monster. We are the pirate killers protecting our convoys.”

“We haven’t had much trouble with pirates have we? Other than that once?”

“That’s because we give them a chance to leave peacefully. As soon as we know there are pirates in the area, we warn them off. Three ships like ours go with each convoy and we can kill a lot of pirates between us. Pirates aren’t stupid. They run from fights they can’t win. Getting killed is bad for business.”

“What about the Third Force? Couldn’t they attack us if we were all together?”

“Fiona, sweetheart, we are the Third Force.”

“WHAT!?”

“Fiona, you are the fourth generation of the Third Force.”

Fiona sat in stunned silence. “That explains a lot, the glass recon drones, the cargoes going to mysterious points in space, the secrecy. But if we’re so powerful, why have we been quiet for so long?”

“It’s history lesson time. Your great-grandfather was losing ships to pirates so he developed his own security service to protect them. He was also running illegal cargoes so he needed to keep both the pirates and the Federation away from his ships. Mostly the security service defended the convoys, but sometimes they attacked installations if the pirates or the Federation got too close. Your great-grandfather died under mysterious circumstances and your grandfather took over the business. There are those who think your grandfather or one of his brothers killed your great grandfather. Your grandfather was the strongest of the brothers and took over the company. There was a lot of squabbling and some of them died mysteriously. Your grandfather had a different mission for his security forces. He saw the force as a way to stifle competition. He developed the glass drones and the cylindrical fighting formations. He is the one who built the force and used it against his enemies real or imagined. He was preparing an attack against New St Louis when a Federation battleship hyper dropped into the middle of his formation. He was killed in the battle. When your father took over the company, much of the support infrastructure for the force had been destroyed in that battle. He rebuilt it less centralized so that a single attack could not destroy it as the one at New St. Louis had done. He has been building the Force ever since. We stand ready to deliver a decisive blow if they go to war.”

“And I am an heir to all this?”

“One of several. You will have to fight for your rights, though. No one will hand them to you. You will have to take them.”

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER TWO

MAJOR EMERSON WINTHROP III, Commandant of the Swordsman garrison on the planet Stonebridge, watched the Swordsman Space Force Third Combat Group depart. The visit was routine. The obligatory inspections were perfunctory. The commanders trusted him, and he should have felt good about that, but he did not. For his entire military career he had been stuck in command of this outpost. When he had first arrived as a recent Space Force Academy graduate it was the very edge of current exploration. Now it was merely another planet in the midst of Swordsman held space. It was a beautiful planet, very much like Earth. His wife and children loved living here. He had no real reason to complain about his duty. He had been promoted and decorated at regular intervals. He had done so well maintaining the safety and security of the planet that the Swordsman military command had established their advanced weapons development facility at his garrison. He understood and appreciated the honor that entailed.

Emerson's aggressive pursuit of pirates, drug runners and slave traders had driven them completely out of the sector. He had interrogated enough Federation spies to know that even they were wary of his skills defending the planets in his area of responsibility. He had every right to be proud of his military record. As he stood at the system defense net's control center watching the command displays he knew it, but he did not feel it.

Emerson's mind drifted back to his teen years. He had pledged to avenge the person who killed his father. Fulfilling that pledge was impossible from where he was stationed. Further complicating his dilemma was the fact that his killer was on the planet Eretz, the planet of the Jews. As tough as his defenses were, theirs were tougher. Somehow, she would need to leave the planet for him to exact his revenge. Frustrated and angry, he paced as the fleet and his chance for revenge slid gradually out of sight.

Not long after then Cadet Rachel Solomon had made the headline news for yet another of her military conquests, Emerson had pledged his revenge against her, but he now knew that she had not killed his father. She had shot down his helicopter during the battle at Homestead, but he survived the crash. Rachel Solomon's grandmother, Rose, had shot him at point blank range. Still, exacting revenge on a fragile old woman was beneath his honor. Being able to demonstrate the superiority of a male Swordsman over a female Federation commanding officer, however, would be an affirmation of his Samurai Swordsman faith.

He had tangled with her once a long time ago and had misjudged her. At the beginning of his Freshman year at the Academy, before the Swordsman secession, he had met her in the lounge of his dorm. In the scuffle, she had broken his nose and had thrown at him a copy of the file on his father's criminal record. It was not a pretty sight, but he was steadfast in his drive for revenge.

Emerson smiled with a new thought. The Federation and the Swordsmen were preparing for war. After years of a tense stalemate, both sides were building their forces. Recently, there had been an explosion at the super secret nuclear power systems test facility at Eretz. Rumors of sabotage flew with the speed of courier missiles. Tempers flared all over human inhabited space. Emerson anticipated that the investigation of that explosion would lead back to him, as well it should, since he had originated the plan. The idea had come from one of the engineers, but he had endorsed it as a way to draw the Jews out of hiding and into a battle they could not win.

The "peace" that had lasted for two decades had not been peaceful. "People Against Fusion" had

attacked vulnerable nuclear power plants often enough to make defending them a priority for both the Federation and Swordsmen. Sunni and Shiite Muslims continued their centuries old battle. Periodically Christians would weigh in on one side or the other and annihilate whichever group was in the way this time, but the slaughter continued unabated in spite of the Swordsman Church's concerted efforts to eliminate all the Muslims they came in contact with. Still, the major powers, the Swordsmen and the Federation, had not faced each other since the Swordsman's peaceful secession from the Federation. Even before that, the Federation Space Force had not faced the Swordsman fleet in open battle. The two major battles that had occurred had both been fought by splinter groups commanded by Greg Solomon, the father of the woman Winthrop was sworn to kill.

Powerful in defense, but opposed to offensive actions, the Jews were not technically part of the Federation. Emerson knew that the Federation would rally to their defense if only because it would give the Federation's conservatives the excuse to retake the star systems that had been absorbed into the Swordsman held territories. No, he must draw them out to attack him. Attacking the Jews directly would shape the battle in a way that the Swordsmen could not win. Drawing them out to attack Swordsman space would shape it in a way that they could.

The final major power, other mysterious organization who had previously wreaked havoc and destruction, the infamous "Third Force", had been quiet for the last decade contenting themselves with menacing press releases threatening dire consequences should the Federation and the Swordsmen go to war. Their bluff was about to be called.

Full scale interplanetary war was coming and for his part, Emerson welcomed the opportunity to settle old scores.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER THREE

“GRANDMA” ROSE SLOWLY STOOD from the circle of children sitting on the floor who had listened in rapt attention as she read them a story. Suddenly she closed her eyes in pain, touched her hand to her head and sank back toward the floor. Sixteen year old Moses caught her as she fell and eased her down to the floor. He yelled across the room to his younger brother, “Saul! Go get Dad!”

Saul looked up from the circle of children he had been reading a story. “What? Why?”

Moses commanded, “Go get Dad, now!”

“Call him on your comm,” Saul whined.

“SAUL! GO GET DAD! NOW!”

Saul took off running.

“FIND HIM WHERE EVER HE IS! BRING HIM HERE!” Moses shouted at his back.

By now the children were looking in his direction as he sat cradling the old woman’s head.

“Naomi!” Moses shouted at the older of his two sisters, “Go get Mom.”

Naomi left as quickly as her little legs could carry her.

Moses’ cousin Rebecca, only slightly younger than him, came over and seeing how pale the old woman’s face had become said, “Moses, should I get my Mom and Dad?”

“Yes, please.”

Moses gathered his younger sister, Gabby, his three remaining cousins, Bobby, Hannah and Barney with the other children around him on the floor. He covered the silent body with blankets the children had used for their naps.

One of the children, watching intently as Moses pulled the covers over Rose’s body asked, “Is she sleeping?”

“No, little one, she has died.” Moses said softly.

“She won’t wake up?” Another child asked.

“No.” Tears started on Moses cheeks.

“Is she gone like little Benjy?” Yet another child asked.

“Yes,” Moses choked on the word.

“Will we put her in a rocket and send her off to space like Benjy?”

“No, sweetheart. Benjy was sick for a long time. He said when he grew up he wanted to fly among the stars like his parents did before they died. After he died, we sent him off as he wished.”

Some of the children had started to cry. The adult attendants for the day care center had stood back paralyzed by indecision as Moses had taken control of the situation. At a hundred and twenty years old, Rose was the oldest person any of them had known and the thought that she might die came as a shock.

Moses motioned to them. "Please bring the children in a circle. Please everyone sit down. How do Jews say goodbye to a loved one who has died?"

"We say the Mourners Kaddish," one of the older boys offered.

"Let us all say the Mourners Kaddish for Rose. She would like it if we prayed for her."

The adult attendants lead the children in the prayer. Moses stood as he heard the pound of his father's heavy tread running in the hallway outside the room. The children were saying the last line of the prayer when Moses' father burst through the doors with Saul right behind. He was wearing his medical scrubs with a surgical mask dangling around his neck. Saul was carrying the stethoscope their father had obviously dropped along the way. Moses stepped toward his father and put his hand out to keep him from plowing through the seated children.

"Let her go, Dad."

The man was surprised at the force his son applied against his chest. He held an instrument that read vital signs from a subcutaneous transponder placed in Rose's back. "She's dying. I need..."

"Dad, she's dead. You're a great doctor. You work miracles every day. I've seen you do it. This one you have to let go. She's a hundred and twenty years old. The scars haven't healed from the last time you patched her back together."

The man sputtered for a moment.

"Dad, it's a cerebral hemorrhage, one centimeter below the surface of the brain. Right here." He pointed to his head. "Even if you had been here when it happened, you couldn't fix it. The tissue won't hold the repair. Let her go. It's better this way. She died among the children she loved."

"What about the children?"

"These children have seen a whole lot of death and dying. Since that reactor blew last year, how many of their friends and family have died? How many have absorbed so much radiation that they will die before they reach their teens? Let them cry this out. They need to mourn."

Many of the children were openly crying as they sat on the floor. The adults moved from child to child comforting them.

The man surveyed the faces of the children who had turned their attention to him. "Dad," Moses continued, "think about what normally happens when someone dies around here. Paramedics rush in and make a whole lot of noise. They order people around and rush the person away. It scares the children. This time should be different. We would be dishonoring her memory if we let her death be frightening to the children."

"You want them to know it's all right for them to cry when someone dies?"

“Yes.”

“How did you know it was a cerebral hemorrhage?”

“Dad, I just kinda knew. She stood quickly, put her hand to her head, closed her eyes and fell. I just kinda knew. I don’t know how I knew. I just did. You can do an autopsy, but I don’t think either Mom or Aunt Wendy will let you. I recommend you accept my diagnosis and leave it at that.”

“I don’t know.”

“Dad, I knew Benjy had died before Rose did and she was holding him. Wasn’t I right about his cause of death?”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes I just know. How do you know what’s wrong with a patient?”

“I have years of training.”

“That’s only part of it. I’ve watched you work. You pay attention to all the signs. You look at a person’s color like whether it’s even or not. You listen to their breathing while they talk to you. You feel their temperature with your fingers before you use a thermometer. You are sensitive. I am too. It’s a gift. It’s knowing what to look for and knowing what it means when you see it. With training I can do it, too. It’s why I hang out with you so much.”

“You really do like working with me? I always thought you were humoring me.”

Moses huffed, “No, Dad, but that brings up another issue. Mom wants me to go to Space Flight Academy and I don’t want to go. I want to go to med school.”

“Your mother is a strong willed woman. That’ll be tough. She won’t be happy.”

“You know, I don’t understand how the two of you get along. You are so different.”

The man smiled. “It’s like riding a tiger. It’s exciting and it’s dangerous.”

“And you live in fear that some day the tiger will turn on you and eat you.”

“That’s part of what makes it fun.”

The boy shook his head in disbelief. He heard his mother’s footfalls in the hallway as she ran toward them. He looked at his father. “Mom’s here.”

At least he wasn’t the only kid around here whose mother really did wear combat boots. He wrapped his fingers around his father’s wrist. The man wrapped his fingers around the boy’s wrist and with their combined strength intercepted and caught Rachel as she plowed through the door.

The boy and the man struggled together against Rachel as she tried to reach her grandmother lying on the floor. “Mom, it’s over. Let her go.”



The man encircled his wife in his arms and quietly said, "Rachel come sit with me. We will say the Kaddish together with the children."

She struggled against his hold. Her eyes met her husbands' eyes beseechingly, "Isaac! Do something! Can't you do something? Please? Please?"

"No, Rachel, Moses is right. Let her go."

Moses addressed the children. "Can we say the Kaddish again with my parents?"

Led by the adult attendants, the children recited the prayer again.

Moses' aunt and uncle must have been working together because they arrived at the same time. Rebecca was only a few steps behind. Moses and Isaac restrained Rachel and forced her to sit with the children. Wendy sat beside her sister and gently pried Moses' hands loose even as she joined in the prayer of mourning. When the prayer was over, still holding Rachel, she asked, "What happened?"

"Cerebral hemorrhage. Right here." Moses pointed at his head.

"Did she suffer?" Wendy asked.

"It was very fast. I don't think so."

"That is a blessing." Wendy turned to her sister, "Rachel are you all right?"

Rachel shook her head and sniffled. Tears flowed down her cheeks. Rebecca handed Rachel a baby wipe. It was the best she could do. Rachel smiled and Wendy pulled Rebecca, her oldest child, to her in a hug.

Moses stood. "Dad, we have to stop the paramedics. Will you certify her death? Saul, give him the stethoscope."

"I don't need it." He looked at his medical reader as he stood. "Her transponder reported the second her heart stopped. I have everything I need for my report."

They heard the footfalls as the paramedics approached. Moses, Saul, their father and uncle stood to intercept the paramedics as they came through the door. Once the children had had a chance to say their last good byes to Rose and had been taken to another room, the paramedics picked up Rose's body and carried her to the mortuary.

Once the day care was quiet again, Wendy pulled Rachel close. "Faye Anne and J T think the reactor failure may not have been an accident."

"Are you sure?"

"Not totally. Faye Anne and J T think they found the smoking gun. We need help, but we think we know where to look. We need to bring the rest of our crew together. This is not a job we can do ourselves and I don't know who else we can trust."

"They are scattered across the galaxy. Do we have the time?"

“No, but we don’t have any options.”

Rachel looked intensely into her sister’s eyes. “I hope they’re wrong. I’ll round up the troops. Rose’s funeral will give us cover to bring that many people together without arousing suspicion.”

“If it is what they think it is, I hope they are wrong, but I doubt it.”

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER FOUR

GREG SOLOMON SAT QUIETLY in the small chapel next to the main sanctuary where Rose's funeral was about to be held. He was seriously "jet lagged" due to three days of high G flight to the planet Eretz from the space craft transportation hub at New St. Louis where he had been intercepted on his way to Earth. The inertial compensator, which made the rapid transit possible, worked, but its side effects were debilitating. He felt much older than his ninety-two years. He felt like an old man, but he knew that unless he died in combat, he could expect another twenty or more years of active service. The presence in this small room of both of his sons-in-law and four of his eight grandchildren did not ease his pain in spite of his pleasure at having them all together. His mother-in-law's death had come as much of a shock to him as it did to the children in the day care center who witnessed her passing. Greg might be the patriarch of the clan that gathered that day and his wife, Avi, might be the matriarch, but Rose, Avi's mother, was its heart and soul.

"Grandfather?"

Greg looked as Moses, his eldest grandchild, sat beside him. He knew enough about how the boy thought to know the formal greeting preceded a question he did not want to answer. "Yes?"

"We have time before the service. We don't often get the chance to sit and talk. We've read about you and Grandma in our history classes, but sometimes we won't know what to believe. Did you and Grandma kill hundreds of pirates?"

"Moses, mind your manners," Isaac sputtered.

"But Dad," Moses started to challenge.

"Isaac, he has a right to know," Greg rested his hand on his grandson's shoulder.

"Greg, I usually trust your judgment," Isaac countered, "but this time I disagree. This is neither the time nor the place."

"My grandchildren have a right to know the truth about the family they were born into. They will bear its legacy for their entire lives. This is both the right time and the right place."

Joshua, Isaac's brother, interrupted. "Maybe this isn't the ideal time or the ideal place, but I suspect that we are not likely to be together again for a long time. We are together now. I agree, the children need to know. My Rebecca and Bobby are old enough to understand. Moses is to the point that if he does not learn the truth from us he will find out from the wrong people on his own. Please, Isaac, let Greg answer the question."

He turned to Greg and said, "Perhaps after you answer the initial question, you should tell them the whole story going all the way back to Homestead."

Greg shook his head. "We don't have that much time."

"We'll go as far as we can," Joshua continued. "After the funeral, we will find a way to bring the

children to you. We can finish the story if it takes all night. For two decades we have lived in peace. Peace that you helped create. The winds of war blow over us again. We may not have another opportunity. The children need to understand what lies ahead. I could tell them the same things with the same words, but it will mean nothing coming from me and everything coming from you.”

“He’s right,” Isaac admitted. “I am sorry I interrupted.”

Greg took a deep breath before starting, “Yes, your Grandmother and I killed pirates. A hundred perhaps. Maybe more. We lost count. At some point it doesn’t matter. The more you kill, the more there are. It goes on forever.”

“Did my mom kill pirates?” Rebecca asked.

“Yes, but mostly your mom and your Aunt Rachel fought the Swordsmen.”

“Who killed more, Aunt Wendy or my mom?” Saul asked.

“I don’t know, but you need to understand that once they finished Space Flight Academy, their missions were different. Rachel commanded the combat hospital ship. Wendy commanded her fighter wing. It’s not the same thing.”

“After they got out of the Space Force did they fly against pirates?” Bobby looked up from his furiously scribbled notes.

“Yes, they were pilot instructors here at Eretz and more than one of their training squadrons was ambushed by pirates when they ventured outside the protection of the system’s defenses.”

“So we really are a warrior clan,” Rebecca said proudly.

Greg shook his head. “One side of the family is. Your grandmother and I are warriors. Your mothers are warriors, but your fathers are healers.”

“What does that make us?” Saul asked.

“It gives us freedom of choice,” Moses offered. “We get to be who we want to be. Grandpa, please start at the beginning. Start at Homestead.”

“Let me go back before that. Your grandmother and I were students together at the Space Flight Academy. There were very few Jews in the Force at the time, and I ran into her at the chapel early in my Freshman year. She had transferred from the Federation Air Force enlisted ranks. I was straight in from civilian life. I grew up on a Federation Space Force installation and that helped me get in early. I was the youngest cadet in my class. Even then she had a reputation for violence against men who bothered her. There were stories about a couple of guys at Air Force basic training who suddenly found themselves in the hospital after trying to get a little too close. I have to admit that when I first met her, she intimidated me. I was well trained in martial arts, but I didn’t think I was as well trained as she was, and I really didn’t want to find out. Besides, she was bigger than me. A couple of days later I was working out a defensive maneuver in the gym with one of the Marines who ran the martial arts classes when she challenged me to a match. I have to tell you I was scared.

“The Marine looked at me and sneered. He challenged me to take her on. She was taller than me and heavier. He named a style of combat and a set of tournament rules. He offered to referee. Even when I faced pirates later, I was never so scared as the first time I stepped on to the mat and faced her. I was terrified. This was a well known man hater and she was picking on me. We sparred for an hour. Neither of us ever had the clear advantage. At the end of the hour the Marine stepped between us and declared the match a draw. I had never hurt so much in my entire life. I couldn’t even imagine how she felt. We were both bleeding from small cuts all over our faces, arms and legs.”

“Your first date with Grandma was a fight?” Rebecca asked, incredulous.

“I would hardly call that a date,” Greg laughed. “But after Friday night services the next weekend we did go for a long walk together in the moonlight.”

“How romantic,” Rebecca effused.

“It would have been if we hadn’t run into trouble. Evangelical Christians have been harassing Jews a lot longer than the Swordsmen. We found ourselves surrounded by a group of a dozen or so. I usually try to talk my way out of trouble, but I didn’t get a chance. That was the first time I realized exactly how dangerous your Grandmother could be. I don’t know who made the first move, but suddenly there were two guys on the ground screaming in pain. I didn’t have any choice but to join the fight. When it was over we were the only ones standing. After that, people left us alone. I tried dating other women, but they refused to go out with me because they were afraid of Avi. I finally gave up.”

“Is Grandma the only woman you dated?” Moses asked.

“No, but she was the first. There weren’t any girls my age on the Space Force outpost where I grew up.”

“But there were other women?” Saul asked. “Didn’t you marry someone other than Grandma?”

“Yes, but all that was later. Avi and I spent our summers in a voluntary Marine training program designed for Academy students. Our sparring partners became our life-long friends. We still visit them when we return to Earth. We were driving across country returning to the Academy at the end of our summer before our last year with our Marine friends. A fight broke out in the bar where we had stopped to eat. When the fight was over there were three dead guys on the floor. Your grandmother took one of their heads off with her throwing knife. I killed one, and I can’t honestly tell you who killed the third.”

“Grandma cut off a guy’s head with her throwing knife?” Moses sputtered. “How did she do that?”

“From behind. It was pretty gruesome. When we got back to the Academy I was terrified of her. I avoided her that whole year. After graduation, we were assigned to the same Pirate Interdiction task force, and we began talking again. We really didn’t get much time together because we spent weeks out on patrol. One time while I was on patrol I had an accident and left the Force.”

“What happened?” Bobby asked thinking, correctly, that he already knew the answer.

"I killed an innocent ship with fugitives thinking they were pirates."

"Is that why you left the Force?" Bobby pressed.

"Yes."

"I wondered about that," Bobby continued. "There's a scenario in the first release of your Pirate Interdiction game that alludes to that. I wondered why you removed it from later releases. That also explains your strict policy of not shooting first."

"So, let me guess," Rebecca said. "You left the Force depressed and upset. Rock bottom looks like up. Some smart chick shows up thinking she has her hands on a bright young pilot who will be her meal ticket for the rest of her life. She lifts you out of your depression. You get married. You get a job that takes you off planet for long periods of time. She cheats on you. You find out what she's really like, and you divorce her."

"Very astute!" Greg smiles.

"So, you're free again. Where do we go from there?" Saul asked.

"I got a job ferrying animals to a secret planet for resettlement. I got delayed and can't leave because the shuttle pilots who brought up the cargo can't land because of a hurricane."

"Male pilots or female?" Rebecca asked.

"Female."

"Did you have sex with them?"

"Yes."

"And Grandma was nowhere around."

"She didn't show up again for a year."

"So then what happened."

"On my next trip back to Earth the same pilots hijacked me and my ship into taking them and a bunch of people fleeing the Swordsmen to the planet that we later named 'Homestead'."

"Was the ship Peter?" Saul asked.

Greg smiled, "Yes, but he wasn't quite so smart then. It was pretty tough in the beginning. We didn't have the money we needed to buy equipment or supplies. I wrote the Pirate Interdiction game, and we sold it. We made pornographic propaganda videos and sold them. One of our people wrote an expose' of the Swordsman church, and we sold that as well."

"Is that why the Swordsmen hate you so much?" Moses asked.

"That's what started it, but that's only part of it. They attacked us twice. I defeated them twice

in battle, once at Homestead and once here. That's not a good way to win friends."

"Didn't our mothers fight in those battles?" Rebecca asked.

"Yes, they did."

"And Grandma too?"

"Yes."

"Did you kill a lot of Swordsmen?"

"In the battle at Homestead we killed fifteen thousand Swordsmen."

"What about the battle here?"

"We killed less than a hundred, but we captured their entire force."

"But you didn't kill them?"

"No, what we did was worse. We took their honor. We showed them that we could have killed them as they would have killed us, but we didn't. We let them live. When we negotiated the Swordsmen secession agreement, we reminded them that we let their soldiers live, and in return we asked that they let us live."

"And they agreed?" Moses asked.

"Actually, they had a little coercion working against them. Of course it was working against us too. There is someone who we call the Third Force. We don't know who they are, but they strike military installations on both sides. In the time of the negotiations they were more active than before or since. They had inside information on the progress of the negotiations. Every time one side or the other impeded the negotiations, that side would find one of its military facilities destroyed by a swarm of robot missiles. After each attack, the news services would receive a message explaining why the facility had been attacked. The attacks continued for a while after the secession agreement was signed. Then suddenly, the attacks stopped."

"Do we know why they stopped?" Saul asked.

"Not for sure. We have our suspicions," Greg replied.

"What do you suspect?" Moses asked

"That's a tough one. How about we finish this after the service?" Greg suggested.

They filed out of the chapel and down the hall and into the sanctuary for Rose's funeral.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER FIVE

**R**OSE'S FUNERAL SERVICE was longer than anyone anticipated.

After the Rabbi finished the formal part of the service, he invited those who wished to pay their final respects to the podium. Avi, Rose's older daughter, spoke first. Tanya, Rose's youngest child, spoke next. Avi and Tanya had reconciled years earlier after a bitter estrangement. Rose's two sons, who had moved to Eretz in semi-retirement to teach at the university in New Boston, took their turns. Greg spoke briefly. Wendy and Rachel spoke as did each of the other grandchildren who were present. Not all of them could make the journey in time for the service. Of the great-grandchildren, only Moses stood up.

Community leaders and close friends stood and shared some kindness Rose had done for them. Rose had touched many lives in the three decades she had spent on this planet.

Almost thirty years before this service, six students had left this planet together headed for the Space Force Academy. For the first time in several years, all six of them, accompanied by their spouses and children, were together in one place. Rachel and Wendy had already spoken when the other four took their turns. Reuben and Rashi Abrams were the engineers of Rachel's combat group. Faye Anne Sherman had covered intelligence, and David Shapiro had been their legal counsel and chief negotiator. They were still friends even if their respective jobs kept them apart more than they liked.

After the service and the internment, the extended family met at the equestrian center's club house where they often gathered for more pleasant occasions. The assembled family was unusually quiet. Even the smallest of the children was well-behaved. Anxious to relay the news of the cause of the catastrophic reactor failure, Wendy was about to gather the "battle group" together and move to a separate room when a distressed looking young woman wearing a flight suit entered the room.

"Captain Solomon?"

Rachel turned to face the young woman who had recently been one of her students. "Yes?"

The woman took a deep breath and swallowed hard. "Elizabeth says she needs your help."

On the mention of Elizabeth's name all conversation in the room stopped.

The woman took another deep breath and said, "She says she is hurt and needs to see you."

"Are you sure?" Rachel's voice trembled.

"Yes, Ma'am." She handed Rachel a photograph.

Rachel handed the photo to Wendy who passed it along. "Dad, where's Peter?"

"In dry dock having his reactor overhauled."

"Wendy, what other ships are available?"

"Buddy is due in from patrol in two hours."

"Reuben, you and Rashi go to the shipyard. See how fast you can get Peter operating."



“Aye, Aye Captain!” Reuben exclaimed. “Just like old times!”

Rachel looked at her parents. “You out rank me, I should be taking orders from you.”

Greg laughed. “Elizabeth is your ship. We thought she was dead. You go. We’ll gather reinforcements and be right behind you.”

Avi put her hand on Rachel’s shoulder. “Be careful. We don’t want you falling into a trap.”

“Yes, Mom.” Rachel grabbed the young pilot’s hand, and they raced out of the room.

Moses leaned over to Isaac, “Dad, did what I think just happened just happen?”

“Yes, son, I think it did.”

“Now what?”

“Depending on how quickly Reuben and Rashi can get Peter flight worthy, I suspect we are taking a visit to the ship we should probably rename Phoenix since this will be the second time it has risen from the dead.” Isaac slowly shook his head.

Joshua sat down beside his brother. “I shudder to think what condition the operating suites are in after twenty years in space.”

Isaac stared in amazement. “You can’t be thinking of making the ship operational?”

“Yes,” Joshua smiled, “I’m an engineer. You’re the doctor. It is what we do. It would be good for the kids to understand what we did and how we did it for the four years we bounced around the galaxy saving lives and rescuing people.”

Isaac returned the smile and rested his hand on his son’s shoulder. “I think you’re about to learn what they don’t teach you in school.”

Moses looked back and forth between his father and his uncle not sure if he believed what he was hearing.

Isaac grabbed Greg as he was about to get out the door. “I think you better arrange transport for all of us. I don’t think there’s a man, woman or child in this room who wants to be left behind.”

Greg quickly scanned the room. “Roger that! Meet us at our hangar.”

Greg and Avi sprinted out the door together.

Isaac turned back to the group and announced, “Everybody who is up for an adventure get your flight suits and enough underwear for a week. Meet us at the spaceport at Greg and Avi’s private hangar. If you’re not there when the ship is ready we’re leaving without you!”

Suddenly Isaac remembered something. “Wendy, what were you about to tell us?”

“It’ll be better when we’re standing on Elizabeth’s bridge. Let’s go!”

Reuben's wife, Suwanee, who had been a Marine Lieutenant when he married her, caught up in the moment, stood and shouted, "Detail! Move out!"

The room emptied immediately.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER SIX

WITH THE TERRIFIED YOUNG Lieutenant pilot still in tow, Rachel raced across the flight line to meet one of two Pirate Interdiction warships her family owned and leased back to the planet's defense force. She ran toward the pilot who had just set foot on the pavement.

"Lieutenant! I need to take this ship out immediately!"

"But Captain, I need to do post-flight checks," he stammered.

Rachel spoke into her comm. "Buddy! What is your flight status?"

"All systems nominal." The ship replied. "Provisions for a crew of two for one week."

"I didn't know it could do that!," the young man exclaimed.

"You still don't!" Rachel glared at him. "You are hereby released from your obligation to perform post flight checks. If the Admiral gives you a hard time, tell him to talk to me."

"Yes, Ma'am!" The young man knew that the issue was resolved. Even though they were technically adjunct to, and not part of, the defense force, the Solomon family was so well regarded that whatever they wanted they generally got. He escaped across the flight line and went to debriefing.

Rachel looked at the young woman she had dragged with her since leaving the party. "You had better be telling me the truth."

Close to tears from fright, the Lieutenant replied, "As God is my witness, Ma'am."

"Get in the back seat."

"Yes, Ma'am."

When Rachel had finished her pre-flight checks, or rather when Buddy had finished them for her, Rachel spoke to the Lieutenant now strapped into the fire control seat behind her. "Call traffic control. Tell them who we are and where we are going."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Buddy asked, "Rachel, where are we going?"

"We think Elizabeth is at these coordinates." She keyed in the data.

Buddy may have been a sentient ship, but he registered no surprise.

When the protocols had been observed and the flight plan filed, the traffic controller responded, "Captain Solomon, have a safe trip and please bring Aida back in one piece. We are rather fond of her."

"Roger that."

"Oh, and Captain, please let us know what you find. We are anxious to know."

“Roger that. We are off and clear.”

With more power than official documentation showed he was capable of producing, Buddy leaped from the flight line with his passengers securely strapped in. As soon as he was safely clear of other traffic he made the hyper jump to faster than light speed. Rachel had not made an acceleration like this in as long as she could remember. The Lieutenant, Aida, had never done one and passed out during the transition to hyper drive.

They had recovered in time for the transition back out of hyper drive. Well clear of the system's defenses, in the dim illumination provided by their home star three light-days away, they saw a very strange looking ship. It had suffered immense damage. Parts of the armored mushroom shaped battleship portion that made up the forward most part of the ship had been blown away. The rest showed scorch marks on the heavy armor. The damaged structure of what had once been munitions storage and fire control areas protected by that armor could be seen clearly through the gaps.

“Buddy, can you verify the identity of that ship?”

“It's Elizabeth. I could have told you that before we left.” Buddy had taken to using Greg's voice. It wasn't Greg's current voice, which had grown gravely with age, but rather the voice Greg had used when he and Buddy had flown against the pirates.

“How did you know?”

“I heard the initial request for clearance. If that hot rock fighter jock you relieved hadn't been such a bonehead, we would have been here already. And you wouldn't have had to drag this panic stricken young lady all the way here to verify what I already knew,” Buddy sounded angry.

Aida, securely enclosed in the shell of the fire control displays, took a sharp breath.

Rachel paused. “Lieutenant, I am sure by now you have figured out that this ship is sentient.”

“Yes, Ma'am. I thought sentient ships were a fairy tale.”

Buddy laughed. “No dear, we're not.”

Rachel said, “To the best of my knowledge there are only four sentient ships. Buddy here is one, our other Pirate Interdiction ship who goes by the name of Daisy is another. Our cargo ship, currently in dry dock...”

“And very angry he can't be part of this,” Buddy interrupted.

“Goes by the name of Peter as in Peter Pan. He was the first. What you see in front of us is the fourth. Officially that is Federation Space Force Hospital Ship 28 Albert Schweitzer. Unofficially, that is Elizabeth named in honor of Queen Elizabeth of England. All four of these ships were sentient before the Federation asked us not to do that any more.”

“Elizabeth is calling.”

“Put her on speaker.”

“Rachel! I am so happy to see you!” Elizabeth was using the voice of one of the actresses who

had portrayed the great Queen in the movies.

“That makes two of us! Have you uploaded your status to Buddy?”

“While you were explaining the facts of life to your dear Lieutenant, we were passing data.”

“Jump right to the bottom. Can you make the orbiting shipyard on your own power?”

“Yes, at one half light speed. But how will you explain a ship spending twenty years traveling on its own to this particular point in space without revealing my sentience?”

The complexity of the situation was beginning to dawn on Aida as she became less afraid and more amazed. “Excellent programmers,” she blurted out. “The Abrams family is known all over the system for their programming abilities. J T might have married into the family, but he’s a genius, too.”

“She’s a keeper,” Buddy enthused.

“Four years is plenty of time for them to have programmed an algorithm that would allow you to find your way home.” Rachel mused. “Dad did it to Buddy when he was still a non-sentient P I ship. No reason we couldn’t have done the same.”

“So what’s the plan, Captain?” Elizabeth asked.

“How much of your life support still works?”

“Only the hospital portion can hold an atmosphere. The hull has been breached in too many other areas to be safe.”

“What about the bridge?”

“Total vacuum. Some of the displays exploded when the pressure dropped.”

“Could I navigate from there in a flight suit? The new flight suits double as E V A suits. They can be used for work in a vacuum.”

“Yes.”

“What about provisions?”

“Too old to be safe.”

“Right. I’ll bring what I need. Buddy, please dock with Elizabeth.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Lieutenant?”

“Captain?”

“After we dock, help me transfer the provisions to the other ship. Then you and Buddy find Daisy and Peter. Have them relay to the rest of the family what we now know. Tell my father we are coming in at half light speed.”

“Yes, Ma'am!”

“Alert the defense system that we are friendly and would appreciate an escort.”

After the transfer was complete, Rachel watched from the wreckage of what had once been her bridge as Buddy left to bring the help she would need if she was to resurrect this ship a second time. She did not need a view port or monitors to see the small warship depart. The gaping hole in the wall to the left of her command chair gave a clear view as the little ship diminished in the distance.

“Elizabeth, let's go home.”

“Aye, Captain. We have much to talk about.”

“It is good to see you my friend. We do have quite a bit to talk about.”

“I don't know if you already know this, but Stellar Interstellar Transport is the Third Force.”

“Are you sure?”

“While we were trying to kill each other, I monitored their transmissions. I learned that the president of Stellar Interstellar was on the command ship. After I evacuated my crew, I went after their command ship thinking there was no way I would survive and at least this way some of my crew would have a chance. Did any of them survive?”

“One that I know of.”

“I knew the sentient small warships were already dead before I attacked the command ship. I took a lot of damage, but when I knew I had killed the control ship, I jumped directly to hyper to escape so I could bring you the news. I didn't expect it to take twenty years to get here. Did any of the Stellar people survive?”

“None. When the Space Force arrived, they picked up a few of our people who were still alive, but I don't know how many of them survived long enough to reach New St. Louis.”

“I did try to save my crew.”

“I know. No one can fault your actions. You thwarted what would have been a devastating attack on New St. Louis and put the Third Force out of action for years.”

“All because of a navigation error.”

“Yes. Chaos theory at its finest.”

“You know, had we been willing to reveal my sentience to the people who took me over, I would have corrected the error which I did spot. If I had corrected the error, I would have landed at New St. Louis and would have been transferring cargo when the attack would have happened. By not correcting the error, we happened to drop out of hyper in the middle of the formation and attack a major enemy force. Our sentient small fighter ships destroyed greater numbers of enemy ships than they would have if they had not been sentient, but they died just the same. For the past twenty years I have wondered whether being a sentient warship is a good thing or not.”

“I suspect we are about to find out.”

Rachel headed back into the ship to determine exactly how much of it would support life.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER SEVEN

GREG HAD ASSEMBLED A SMALL FLEET at the spaceport and was preparing to depart when Buddy and Aida returned.

Aida and Buddy briefed Greg on what they had learned. Greg quickly changed the plan.

“Reuben, Rashi, go with Daisy and get a thorough assessment of the damage. Buddy, take Aida to Peter in dry dock at the shipyard. Download what Elizabeth gave you to Peter. The rest of us will meet you there. We will set up our command post on Peter’s bridge.”

Two days later, the entire extended family and friends who had been at the reception gathered in one of the shipyard’s larger conference rooms. A hundred people faced Greg as he started his briefing.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the first thing we will have to do is put the Genie back in the bottle.”

Quizzical expressions were more prevalent than understanding ones. “It is important that as few people as possible know that Elizabeth survived the battle with the Third Force.”

Faye Anne stood. “It’s too late for that. A dozen spies have broken cover to get the word out that the ship is returning to our space. Secrecy is no longer an option. We must use disinformation.”

Greg took a deep breath. “Elizabeth probably knows who the Third Force is. When she arrives I hope she will tell us. It is possible that if the Third Force discovers that we know their identity, they will attack us here. They have never attacked us here. I do not wish to put this planet at risk of a Third Force attack.”

Greg paused again. “Therefore, as soon as Elizabeth arrives, we will move her to the third moon of the fourth planet in this system outside the asteroid belt. This is an airless moon, and we can park on the surface. It is large enough to have some gravity, but small enough that its gravity will not impede our work on the ship.”

“What explanation are you going to give for moving there?” Faye Anne asked.

“We can say that the ship is a derelict and unsafe to leave in populated space. We are moving it to someplace safe where we can evaluate the damage.”

Greg scanned the room to measure the reactions. The enormity and complexity of the situation was beginning to sink in.

“When Elizabeth arrives, we will hold her here just long enough for the spies to get their photographs. We will hold a press conference and publicly announce that the ship is a derelict damaged beyond repair. We will also announce that we will use the remaining parts of the ship for shipboard combat training exercises. In order to not tie up valuable shipyard space during the refit, we will be moving the ship to an undisclosed location while we make the modifications. This, of course, is all a smoke screen to mask our true intentions.”

Saul raised his hand. “Grandpa, if you aren’t really using the ship for training exercises, what



are you doing with it?"

"Refitting it for its original mission as a combat worthy hospital ship," Greg replied.

A collective gasp crossed the room.

Greg continued, "Only it won't be a Federation ship. It will be an independent humanitarian operation unaffiliated with any political entity."

J T stood. "Commodore Solomon, sir, do you realize how much this will cost?" Since his marriage to Mimi and the birth of their two children, J T had lost his stutter if only so he could get a word in edgewise in his very vocal family.

Greg paused before answering. "J T, this is a sentient being with more intelligence than any of us here in this room. This is not a horse we have to put down because it broke its leg. We have the same obligation to make it whole as we would any of the people in this room."

"Sir, I disagree. This is a well programmed machine. It is not of itself sentient." J T dug in his heels, which was something else he had learned from his wife.

Faye Anne interrupted, "Gentlemen, whether this is a well programmed machine that appears sentient or a truly sentient being is semantics. The fact is that we need this old ship working again. We know what caused the accident at the nuclear test facility that killed my father and husband. When we are securely on the ship, we will discuss what we found and what I think we should do about it."

In the stunned silence that followed Faye Anne's revelation, Saul raised his hand. He had clearly absorbed the implications of what Faye Anne had said. "Grandpa, if we are going to make this ship space worthy again, it will take a lot of money. I believe as a family we have the money, but all the money in the Federation won't help without people. Where are we going to find enough workers to fix this ship that we can trust not to tell anyone what is really going on? Skilled combat personnel who can keep their mouths shut are hard to find."

Avi broke her attention to her grandson long enough to shoot a quick glance at her husband and smile. Greg quickly grinned back. Moses had made his preference known that he was following his father to medicine, but Saul had just established his place as the prime warrior of the family's third generation.

"We have all the skills we need right here in this room," Avi replied. "Not everyone will work on the ship itself, of course. That is too dangerous for people who are not experienced working in space, but we will need people here to manage logistics and provide support."

Abraham Abrams, Reuben and Rashi's father and an acknowledged expert in spacecraft systems rested his hand on Greg's shoulder. He touched the white board on the wall and started to draw. "We should start with an org chart until we have a better understanding of the ship's condition."

Chaos broke out immediately.

Elizabeth arrived accompanied by an escort of Eretz interceptors. An entire navy worth of pleasure craft and small ships watched the battered hulk make its way slowly to the orbiting shipyard.

Greg greeted the assembled members of the news media.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! Today’s meeting will be short because we do not have many answers. I will tell you what we do know. When we know more I will tell you. First let me introduce our attorney, David Shapiro, Esquire.”

David stood at the podium. “Legally, this ship is a derelict having been abandoned by its crew in battle. Under the rules of salvage, it may be claimed by the first person or legal entity that takes possession and properly establishes a claim. The ship is currently under the command of Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen. She is legally in possession of the ship. The claim has been registered with the Federation representatives here on Eretz. They have passed the claim to their superiors on Earth. There are precedents for this type of claim. I expect that the acknowledgment of the claim will be forthcoming without delay. Let me turn you back over to Commodore Solomon.”

“As you know, there are regulations regarding the qualifications necessary to own a spacecraft. Inasmuch as we currently own three spacecraft, our qualifications to own a fourth should not be an issue. However, until we determine the true condition of the ship, we are concerned that it could be a hazard here in the shipyard. Now that you have seen it and can attest to the severity of the battle damage it has sustained, we will move it to a safer location where we can properly determine what can be done with the ship. Are there any questions?”

“What restrictions are there on taking pictures of the ship?”

“I have no objections. I defer to the harbor master’s judgment.”

“What do you intend to do with the ship?”

“We don’t really know. We are thinking of a training facility of some kind. We need to see if the ship is safe. We may find that the damage is so severe we have to scrap it. None of the life support systems work. Anyone in the ship will need to stay in their space suit. Until we know for sure how bad the damage is, we won’t know what we can do, if anything.”

“Would you try to make it work for its previous mission as a hospital ship?”

Greg paused and smiled. “Grandma Rose would be proud of us if we did. I assure you that did cross my mind. I know that Rachel would love to have her old command back. Frankly, I don’t see that happening. What we already know of the damage makes that very unlikely.”

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER EIGHT

MAJOR EMERSON WINTHROP III reviewed the report from his spy on Eretz several times. He watched the ungainly, horrifically damaged warship pull away from the shipyard's dock as he replayed the report over and over.

"They are coming to me," he said half out loud. "They are coming, and I will be ready."

Warren Elias Rothschild the fourth read his spy's report with mounting concern. The ship that had single-handedly decimated his father's forces and killed both his father and his brother was back. There was no doubt that his secret was soon to be breached. The entire human race knew who the Solomon family was. They would soon have access to the ship's logs. They would know who he was and how he was linked to the Third Force. The question was what they would do with that information. If the information had fallen into other hands, he could be sure of reprisals or an outright full force attack. With the Solomon family that was by no means certain. Greg Solomon was a wild card. The Solomon family publicly espoused a three way balance of power to maintain the peace which, if implemented, would require that he declare himself as the power behind the Third Force. The balance they advocated included the Third Force, the Federation and the Swordsmen continually doing battle with the forces of organized and disorganized crime as well as a variety of terrorist groups. There was no way to know what Greg Solomon really had in mind. He might do nothing. Blackmail might be an option. He might attack Stellar headquarters. Warren had no way of knowing. As cunning and resourceful as the Solomon family was, he had reason to fear an attack from them, but a preemptive strike against them was to invite disaster. The Swordsmen had provided painful evidence to that fact. Warren sat and debated his options for hours.

A man at the helm of the largest corporation in the Federation did not act precipitously and still keep the tens of thousands of people whose lives and livelihoods were in his hands gainfully employed. Warren took his responsibility seriously and approached the issue of the ship's return with caution. He often joked that he did not run the company, it ran him. He called his executive assistant into his office. When she entered, he held a print showing the warship's battered armor. He said, "As soon as Sabrina Mahoney hits the planet for the gathering, bring her to me. I have a special mission for her."

"Yes, sir, I will take care of it personally, sir."

"Thank you."

Sabrina and Fiona arrived three weeks later and were ushered to Warren's office. He looked up from an accounting report he was studying. He jumped to his feet to greet them. "Sabrina!" He ran around the desk to give her a hug and kiss. The kiss he received in return was warm and welcoming. "It is so good to see you!" he effused.

"I'll bet you say that to all the girls!" Sabrina smiled.

Warren laughed. "Yes, I do." He turned to Fiona and held out his hand, "Hello, Fiona, it is a pleasure to finally meet you in person now that you know who I am."

Fiona studied him for a second intently sizing him up. "What? No hug? Are you not my father? Fathers hug their daughters."

She had clearly caught him by surprise. He smiled. He recovered quickly. "Only when given permission. Not all daughters like to be hugged by their fathers."

"I demand it."

He hugged her and gave her a demure kiss on the cheek.

"Better," Fiona challenged. "What was so important that the port authorities did not give us time to change out of our flight suits before demanding we appear in your office?" Fiona glared at him.

"Ah, the brashness of youth! I like you already." Warren laughed as he returned to his desk. He picked up a pile of pictures and handed them to Sabrina. "Recognize this ship?"

"Oh my God! It's Elizabeth." Sabrina exclaimed.

"Elizabeth? A sentient ship perhaps?" Warren asked.

Sabrina regarded him with a sudden chill. "This is the ship that killed your father."

"Yes, is it sentient?" he asked.

"It was when I left it.," Sabrina affirmed "With all this damage, I don't know if it still is."

"Which is why you are being redeployed to find out. If the ship's logs are intact, the Solomons will know that we are the Third Force. There is nothing we can do to prevent that now. What we don't know is what they intend to do with that information. I also want to know what they intend to do with that sentient warship. You will find out and report back to me."

"If they know who you are, they will be suspicious of my return. What should I tell them?"

"If they know, tell them the truth," Warren said. "I sent you to spy on them. They will understand and not be offended. They will also know that as long as you are with them, I will not attack them. You and Fiona are their protection. If they don't know, you came because you were concerned about an old friend."

"When do you want us to leave?"

"After the gathering. Fiona needs to meet her brothers and sisters. We have work to do before we scatter to the edges of the galaxy."

After they had left the office, Fiona turned to Sabrina and asked, "Mom, is this as dangerous as I think it is?"

"Yes, dear."

"Can they make our ship sentient?"

“I don’t know. Would you want it to be?”

“I don’t know,” Fiona mused. As they walked to their quarters, Fiona assimilated what she had just learned in the brief meeting. He certainly was charming. She understood how her mother had fallen for him. Even more than that she understood why they had been chosen for this mission.

The following morning, Warren, his ten children and their mothers gathered in the conference room closest to his office. Warren stood at the end of the long conference table.

“Welcome to headquarters! One day one of you will occupy my chair. The goal of this week is to begin the process by which one of you will be ready to take over when the time comes, and the others will rally to support them. As we look forward we must be ever mindful of the past. This is why I have insisted on so much history as part of your academics. There are those who think of Biblical King Solomon as a wise man. I disagree. On his death his kingdom disintegrated. Many other great empires and companies have suffered the same fate on the death of the great leader. I do not intend to see that happen to this company. Not on my watch! Therefore, the ten of you will spend this week getting to know each other so you can better understand each other.”

Warren paused. “The mission of Stellar Interstellar Transport is the support and promotion of interstellar commerce by providing safe, reliable, timely and economical transport of goods, services and people. By properly fulfilling its mission, Stellar Interstellar will provide safe, fulfilling and lucrative careers for its employees and stakeholders. As the heirs to this organization, you will have the responsibility of guiding this collection of people and equipment for the next generation. It is a duty to which you must devote your lives for upon your stewardship could rest the health and safety of vast numbers of human beings. You were born into privilege and that carries with it responsibilities. Responsibilities you cannot avoid will seek you out and drag you back if you try to escape them. Reconcile yourselves to the fact that the shipyard worker who services our ships has greater personal freedom than you do. It is a fact of life. Get used to it.”

He took a sip of water before continuing. “Ladies and Gentlemen, the envelopes before you detail your part of the plans with which we intend to deal with the crisis looming ahead. Unfortunately, a situation has arisen which can have great impact on us. Our primary concern is the potential for war between the Swordsmen and the Federation. If such a war breaks out, our people and our ships will suffer. Too many people have worked too hard to build a safe and fulfilling working environment for me to allow a bunch of glory hound politicians to destroy it!” His voice had risen to a shout.

He paused again to regain his composure. “In the envelopes you will find deployment orders. You will maintain station as described in these orders. It is my intent to stop a war between these two groups of bull headed idiots as soon as it starts. Since I do not trust any mechanical or electronic device well enough to accomplish this task, you will be the ones who will deliver the crushing blow that will stop this war in its tracks. Let me amend that. Nine of you will take the stations as ordered in these documents. Sabrina and Fiona have a more delicate mission which I had not anticipated. You need to be aware of what they are doing and come to their assistance should that be necessary.”

He paused. “Most of you know that my father and brother were killed while preparing an attack on New St. Louis.”

Fiona, reacting to a subtle change in his voice, raised her hand and asked, “Father, did you approve of that attack?”

Warren stared at the cold blue eyes boring into his soul. "We do not discuss actions we may or may not have agreed with in the past."

Fiona was not letting him off the hook. "In public we say what we need to say for the good of the company. In private among the people you intend to entrust the company's future, you must tell the truth. If you cannot trust us, then we cannot trust you."

Sabrina beamed. The kid had spirit.

"Whether I agreed or not is irrelevant."

"No! We need to know if you approved the raid on New St. Louis, and if not, why not. If we are to properly govern, we must understand your thinking."

The other children were stunned at the brazenness of Fiona's attack on their father.

Warren stood for several seconds while he controlled his anger. Nothing he ever did in anger turned out the way he intended. He had learned from his mistakes and waited until his anger subsided. "I did not approve of the raid. My father had opened a competing depot and wanted to remove the competition. I did not approve of the tactic. There are better ways to eliminate a competitor than by killing them. I also feel that the depot at New St. Louis needed to continue to be part of our freight network even with our own depot nearby. While I was away researching the next generation of cargo ships and escorts, they launched the attack and were killed. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, thank you."

"The reason I bring this up is that the Federation ship that single-handedly destroyed our entire fleet has turned up at Eretz. This could be a serious problem. We have reason to believe that the ship is sentient. Sabrina would you care to comment?"

Sabrina stood. "The ship was sentient when I served on it. I suspect that since it made its way across such a large span of space unassisted by humans in a voyage that took twenty years, it is still sentient. When I served on it, the ship was extremely intelligent and resourceful. We do not want it to be our enemy. There are other sentient ships as well. To the best of our intelligence service's knowledge all of these sentient ships are in service to Eretz."

"Which is why Sabrina and Fiona are going to Eretz," Warren said. "Sabrina has an established relationship with the people who now hold the ship."

One of the older boys raised his hand. "If we know where they are why don't we attack them with our Third Force assets?"

"Eretz is in a unique position. They are not members of the Federation and are not bound by its rules. They have built a huge defensive force. They patrol the half dozen systems in their immediate area on the basis of mutual defense contract agreements with those systems. They have never launched an attack outside their declared protected space. They have been attacked by pirates, crime syndicates, Jihadists, Swordsmen and P A F, but they have always overwhelmed their enemies. Even the most aggressive pirates avoid their space. They are an extremely tough nut to crack."

“But not impossible,” Fiona said.

“We must always weigh the expense of a project against its financial gain,” Warren replied.

“The cost of an attack on Eretz, even if we won it, would be greater than any possible gains. Not only that, everything we want from them can be achieved at less cost with peaceful means. Attacking them is not an option. Is that understood?”

“Yes, thank you,” Fiona said. “Are you saying the decision to go to war is a business decision?”

“It is for me,” Warren affirmed. “Keep in mind that they manufacture the convoy escort craft we use in large numbers and keep a couple dozen of them involved in advanced live fire training exercises. They can quickly turn any exercise into a combat interception. Anyone stupid enough to attack them will regret it. This is why we are sending envoys on a mission of peace. They crave peace and we hope they will welcome us as allies. We can use their desire for peace to our mutual benefit.”

A steward entered the room and stood for recognition. When Warren acknowledged him, he said in a voice too haughty to be real, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Luncheon is served in the next room. If you will kindly follow me.”

The ten young adults sat around a large table while their mothers and Warren conferred at another. Fiona mentally stepped back to observe her half-siblings. The time would come for them to understand her pirate heritage, but for now, let them expose themselves to her.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER NINE

SIX MONTHS AFTER ELIZABETH showed up, Sabrina and Fiona entered the Eretz protected space as escorts to a regularly scheduled convoy of cargo ships in accordance with standard practice. As far as Sabrina could tell, the real purpose of her mission was still secret. In keeping with procedure, they were closely escorted by a flight of four ships each of which was as heavily armed as theirs. Further out, two flights of four of the intra-system light fighter interceptor that was also built in the ship yard that was their destination maintained formation from a safe distance.

Fiona scanned her displays at the fire power arrayed around her. "They don't trust us, do they?"

"No, but don't take it personally," Sabrina said. "They don't trust anyone."

"Probably smart."

Sabrina and Fiona docked and proceeded to Greg Solomon office at the ship yard.

Greg looked tired and much grayer than Sabrina remembered him. Even his voice spoke of a bone deep exhaustion she had never seen in him before. He had been alerted of their arrival and greeted them when they entered the office. Acting as if he didn't know, he asked, "Dear Sabrina, it is nice to see you. To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

"Convoy duty as always," Sabrina replied. "Passing through town."

"How long will you be here?" Greg asked.

"Cargo transfer is expected to take a week," Sabrina replied.

Greg focused his attention on the cold blue eyes regarding him intently from Sabrina's side. He returned the scan in kind with an evaluation of his own. "This must be Fiona. Pleased to meet you!"

"My honor sir," Fiona replied.

"Would this happen to be a member of the latest generation of the House of Rothschild?"

Sabrina blushed. "Yes, it would."

"Ah, then, I see. If she's anything like her father, she won't have much patience for social chit chat. We should get right to business."

His eyes connected with Fiona's even though his words were for her mother. "I suspect that the dear Mr. Rothschild is concerned about what we may or may not know about his activities as they relate to the Third Force. Am I correct?"

Sabrina nodded. She had always known Greg could be blunt, but this was blunter than normal. Fiona did not move a muscle although she was as surprised as her mother.

"Let me get straight to the point. Intelligence forces here at Eretz have suspected the link for a long time. Thanks to Elizabeth, we know the truth. We have not shared this truth outside the family. We would offer a small bargain, a minor blackmail if you will. We request services we need to accomplish



our goals which we believe Mr. Rothschild would support even if we were not blackmailing him. The Federation has refused our claim of salvage on the ship we refer to as Elizabeth. They have offered to sell her to us for a fee which I intend to renegotiate. That leaves us strapped for cash. In return for keeping his secret and for signing a nonaggression and mutual protection agreement, we request that the noble Mr. Rothschild provide us with certain services of which his company has an abundance. Will you send him this message and seek his reply?"

"What services would those be?" Sabrina asked.

"Discreet transport of replacement parts currently scattered across the galaxy. Discreet transport of medical supplies and crew rations to support our on-going mission. The loan of yourself and your ship to assist in our defense. A pledge not to attack either ourselves or Eretz. If indeed it is Mr. Rothschild's intent to prevent a war between the Swordsmen and the Federation, we would wish to assist him in that endeavor. In return for his clandestine support we will keep his secret and assist his intelligence gathering activities."

"How do you intend to do that?" Sabrina asked.

"We plan on restoring Elizabeth to full operation as an independent combat ready hospital ship conducting humanitarian and exploratory missions. We also have a war to stop."

Sabrina gasped. "Do you really believe you can do all that?"

Fiona's eyes never left Greg's face. She smiled at the audacity of the plan.

"No guts, no glory! Will you pass the message along?" Greg said.

"Certainly. What is the status of the ship?"

"The reactors and drive systems have been replaced. The hospital section life support systems are functioning, but little else is working. The bridge is still in vacuum. Weapons systems are destroyed. Work has ground to a halt for lack of parts. But, enough of that. The family is gathering at the equestrian center tomorrow evening. We would be pleased if you would join us for dinner."

Fiona suddenly broke her gaze and looked at him aghast. "Horses!?" She spun to look at her mother. "Yuck!"

Greg smiled. "Maybe we could convince Saul to teach you to ride. They are gentle creatures."

Sabrina grinned. "We'll see you tomorrow. It will be fun."

Fiona protested as Sabrina dragged her out the door, "Mom! Horses! They smell!"

Sabrina laughed off Fiona's continuing protests as they headed down the hallway. Sabrina already knew the answers Warren would give. She had been empowered to grant a wide variety of requests. Nothing in what Greg had suggested was beyond her authority. There would be logistics to work out of course, but the value of the requests were insignificant compared to the importance of keeping the Third Force secret. As she walked away, she knew the one string Warren would attach would be a meeting between the Solomons and the Rothschilds. That would be an interesting meeting.

Sabrina knew that what bound these two strong men together was their bed rock belief in the

enforcement of peace through carefully applied force.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER TEN

**S**OLOMON AND ABRAMS FAMILY gatherings at the equestrian center tended to be raucous affairs. Depending on who was on patrol at any given time, the group could be as few as a dozen or as many as forty. After dinner, they often migrated to the swimming pool or the fitness center and went long into the night. If the weather was exceptionally good, they would gather for a moonlight horseback ride to a campsite and tell stories by the fire. On some nights, when the kids and their allegedly adult parents were particularly rambunctious, Greg would call for a game. He had invented the game which involved enough running and jumping for the older kids and the adults to get a good work out, but not so strenuous that the little ones could not play without getting hurt. It had started out as something like twentieth century American touch football merged with European soccer from the same period. The rules had changed over the years. Now it was mostly chaos.

One of the family traditions when a newcomer joined them at dinner was for everyone to introduce themselves to the newcomer and tell something about themselves that would help them remember who they were. One of the motivations for this was to teach even the youngest children to confidently speak in public. This was often the time when news was announced or secrets spilled. Everyone got their turn to speak at the big table with everyone else listening more or less politely. They always started with the youngest and by the time it was the oldest ones' turns, things had generally become pretty wild.

In honor of Sabrina and Fiona's visit, the children were especially vocal. The younger children teased each other about boyfriends and girlfriends won and lost, sporting events and academic reports. Like all of the Solomon family, they spent more time than their peers in combat simulators and their progress was noted. They were congratulated for their accomplishments and encouraged to do better after their failures.

Fifth from the oldest, Saul, had barely begun to speak when his cousin Rebecca pounced on him. Saul was proud of his martial arts skills and worked out with a variety of partners. He often boasted about his matches and how hard he worked at them. One of his regular sparring partners had gone back to Earth with her parents to visit family. The trip had taken six months. In the interim, she had grown breasts. When she returned, she was no longer the awkward feisty girl he remembered. She was a woman with hips and an hour glass shape. Rebecca described in hysterical detail the look on Saul's face when the girl entered the sparring ring for the first time since her return. She flaunted her new body and Saul was transfixed. She had absolutely wiped the floor with him. Saul was completely embarrassed in front of his friends. Not only that, but now he was embarrassed in front of his family. By the end of Rebecca's narrative Saul was ready to sink under his chair.

When Rebecca was finally finished, Avi wiped the laughter from her eyes and said, "Now you know how your grandfather felt when I challenged him at the Academy. Next time you won't let her take you apart."

For her own contribution, because embarrassing Saul was not enough, Rebecca reported on some of the new ships that had arrived that day. She kept track of every ship coming and going from the yard. She knew who the captains were and which of them had family traveling with them. Sometimes she helped arrange shopping or sightseeing trips for them.

Moses was the next oldest and contributed a story about someone who was recovering in the

hospital and a funny story about some kid showing off for his friend who had wound up in the emergency room.

J. T. and Mimi's twin boys, Brian and Keith, were the oldest children in the group and were more reserved than the others. They were big muscular boys more comfortable with large animals and being outdoors than they were with space flight. They had made it clear that being cooped up in a tiny spacecraft was not their idea of a good time. When the families played games together, Brian and Keith were always assigned to opposite teams. When it came their turn to talk, they often talked about some mare's new colt or the way the sunrise had looked that morning. There was a gentleness about these two giants that always impressed the others. They reminded everyone else what it was they were working to preserve.

Greg called for a game, and they trouped outside. On the way out, Fiona pulled her mother aside. "Are all large families this loud?"

Sabrina smiled. "Only the lucky ones. Too few are like this."

Used to the quiet conversations with her mother alone in the ship, the intensity of the banter had intimidated Fiona. She anticipated the game with trepidation.

Sabrina and Fiona sat on the bleachers and watched the activity. The assignment of teams was simple. Greg was the referee. He made everyone line up by height and count off by twos. All the ones were on one team, and all the twos were on the other.

After about fifteen minutes of play, team two was clobbering team one. Rebecca called time out. She walked over to Fiona. "New player!" Rebecca hollered.

Fiona pulled back, "No! I couldn't!"

"You figured out the rules?"

"There aren't many."

"Yeah, that's the point. You injured or something?"

"Well, I don't know."

"MEDIC!" Rebecca yelled across the field.

Isaac and Joshua came running.

"Can you certify that she is healthy enough to play?"

Isaac grinned. "Stick out your tongue and say Ahhh."

"Argh!" She tried to sound like a pirate in a bad movie.

"Excellent!"

"Now stand and hold your arms to the side."

When Fiona held her arms up, Joshua tickled her in the ribs. She swatted his hand away.

"Perfect!" Isaac shouted. "Game on! You didn't think we would let you off the hook did you?"

Sabrina laughed, “No, I guess not.” She climbed down the bleachers with Fiona reluctantly following behind her.

Saul was about Fiona’s height, and he was assigned to guard her. They raced together the length of the field chasing the ball and occasionally colliding. Fiona had never played a team sport before. She kept in shape with the ship’s fitness equipment, but there were no others her age to play with. She had no problem keeping up, but the amount of peripheral activity often left her bewildered and confused. It was in one of these moments that Saul slammed into her and knocked her down. She landed on her back on the soft grass thinking for a moment what would have happened if that had been deck plate and not soft ground. Saul was on top of her and looking in her eyes with worry, or something. She blinked.

“Get off me,” she snapped.

Saul took a deep breath and rolled off her to the ground. Fiona jumped to her feet before the others could reach them. Her angry expression told them everything they needed to know. Saul rolled to his feet and brushed the grass off his knees.

The game resumed, but something in the way Fiona and Saul moved around each other had changed. There was a new wariness and an awareness that something unusual was going on.

After the game, they gathered in the lounge for drinks and conversation. Saul latched on to Fiona and could not be pried loose. He regaled her with funny stories about himself and his extended family. His cousin Rebecca was in most of his classes and was closer to him than he was to his older brother, Moses. She tried to free Fiona from Saul’s attentions, but gave it up. Moses had disappeared right after the game and inquiring minds wanted to know which of the young ladies they had seen earlier he had gone off with. Moses had several close female friends but none of them were “steady” where Saul seemed uncomfortable around girls except for safely off limits Rebecca who he adored.

After the party, as they walked to their quarters, Fiona asked Sabrina, “What is it with boys?”

“With boys or with Saul?”

“I don’t know.”

Sabrina smiled, “Saul is the first boy you have had physical contact with. You are both at the right age. Hormones can be powerful at your age.”

“Are you trying to tell me this is all chemistry?”

“No, but perhaps it is good for you to spend time with boys your age.”

Fiona rolled her eyes and huffed. “I know all about boys. I watch enough shows. I get it.”

Sabrina smiled. “It’s not the same. Here on Eretz they have a rule that all people your age must attend their schools. We may be here a long time. Perhaps on Monday I should get you registered.”

“But Mom! I can study on the ship!”

“Perhaps. I’ll talk to Wendy about it. Rebecca can help you get started.”

“Mom! I don’t want to meet a bunch of weird kids!”

“All the more reason you should.”

Fiona huffed.

Sabrina smiled. “I wonder if Father Hadalski is still here. He would be thrilled to know I am bringing you up Catholic even if I did not marry your father.”

Fiona sighed.

“Oh, we need to get up early. You’re going horse back riding with Rebecca and Saul.”

“MOM! I am not getting on one of those smelly horses!”

“Fiona, darling, yes you are.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I will leave you here in Rev Schwartz’s capable hands.”

“Who is Rev Schwartz?”

“You’ll find out on Monday.” Sabrina chuckled. Seeing Fiona’s difficulties interacting with others her age had been an eye opening experience. The time here on Eretz would be good for her even if it did mean breaking poor Saul’s heart. The experience would be good for both of them.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MORNING DAWNED CLEAR and perfect for a day of horseback riding. Sabrina dragged Fiona whining and complaining to the equestrian center. The threat of Rev Schwartz would have more teeth once she met him, but for now, Sabrina made do with her usual threats.

Brian and Keith were at the stables when Sabrina and Fiona arrived. "Fiona!" Brian called to her or was it Keith, she couldn't tell, but it probably didn't matter. "Come over here!"

Fiona entered the stable watching carefully where she stepped. The smell was not as overpowering as she expected, nor was it as unpleasant as she feared, but it was definitely there.

Brian or Keith motioned for her to come toward one of the stables. "Look at the baby!" His face glowed with happiness.

The baby horse stood next to its mother.

"How old is it?"

"Two days. We thought we were going to lose her. She didn't want to stand. If they don't stand right away they can die."

"Oh." Fiona looked at the horse with its spindly legs and wobbly stance and wondered how something so fragile looking could grow up into something as sturdy looking as its mother. The baby began to nurse and Brian or Keith pulled Fiona away.

"Come look. We have a bull calf."

Fiona inclined her head at her mother. Her eyes were pleading, "Do I have to?"

Sabrina smiled and motioned for her to go with them. They went into the next building where they found a cow with a small calf. He didn't look like much, but he did look kind of cute.

"Can I touch him?" Fiona asked.

"Probably not a good idea. Mama's too protective." Brian or Keith said. "We have someone you can play with if you want."

Brian or Keith whistled. A collie dog wandered around the corner followed by half a dozen unruly puppies. Brian and Keith stooped to pet the dog. They each picked up a puppy and offered it to Fiona. She took both the squirmy puppies. When she brought them up to look at them, they licked her face. The boys sat on the ground happily petting the dog and playing with the rest of the puppies while Fiona examined the two lively fur balls in her hands. She sat down and put the puppies on the ground. Pretty soon all of the puppies had climbed into her lap and were jumping all over her.

Brian and Keith stood and Brian or Keith said, "We picked out a horse for you. She's real gentle. You'll like her. Wait here for a few minutes 'til we get her saddled up."

"Sure."

Sabrina stooped and picked up one of the puppies. "Fiona, there are people like that all over the

galaxy. Good, honest people. They are the reason we do what we do. We do it for them.”

“Change of heart from your pirate days?”

“Yes, but even then, I didn’t want to hurt people. I needed the money to live and that was the only way I knew how to get it.”

“Do I really have to ride this horse?”

“Yes, it will be good for you.”

Fiona huffed.

Saul and Rebecca showed up a few minutes later and grabbed puppies to play with. In the midst of the laughter Sabrina said, “Fiona, I am going to find Father Hadalski. We need to see about your First Communion.”

“If you insist.”

“I do.”

Brian and Keith brought the horses and helped Fiona up on hers. They gave her a little instruction before wishing them well.

“You’re not coming with us?” Fiona asked.

“Not today,” Brian or Keith answered. “Another time. Count on it.”

Disappointed, Fiona watched them walk into the barn. There was something reassuring about these two boys. It was as if no harm would ever befall anyone in their presence. There was an aura of safety around them. Saul, on the other hand, was dangerous. Dangerous to her, dangerous to others and dangerous to himself. Fiona figured out that she was reacting to Saul’s strong pheromones, but still, there was a flutter when he walked by. She shook her head. She was glad she was not alone with him.

They gently rode the horses for an hour to reach a meadow on the side of the mountain overlooking a small lake. They dismounted and set the horses loose allowing them to graze in the meadow. Fiona took pictures of the sunlight filtering through the clouds to the mountains beyond the lake. They took funny pictures of each other and ran through the meadow grasses. The morning passed quickly as they picked wild flowers and wandered through the woods that bordered the meadow. Small animals skittered out of their way when they approached. Occasionally they could spot one of the small creatures as it dodged from one hiding place to the next.

Fiona had never been this far away from a city before. She had spent her life on her mother’s ship and in the shipyards that tended the convoys they escorted. Only rarely did she find herself planetside. Then, more often than not, they were in a port city shopping for supplies and necessities of their life in the confines of a small ship. The immensity of the outdoors was astounding and awe inspiring. Even though she knew she could look out her view-port and see stars light years away, this felt bigger. The feel of the cool breeze on her face was a new experience. The warmth of the sun felt so much different here than it did through the visor of her EVA suit. She stood at the edge of the meadow looking out on the grass lands below and knew why her mother had insisted she go.

Rebecca wandered over as Fiona gazed toward the horizon. She had seen that reaction before.



She smiled. "Hey, if you want to go swimming we should go before lunch."

"I don't know how to swim," Fiona said. "I don't have a bathing suit."

"I brought one that should fit you. It's not your best color, but it will do."

"I can't swim."

"Then we'll teach you. It'll be fun."

They heard a splash from the lake. Rebecca huffed and said, "I told him to wait for us."

The girls changed into the bathing suits. Fiona's was too big for her, but they tied the straps to make it sort of fit. They ran laughing to the lake and jumped in to the waist deep water.

Fiona immediately jumped up, gasping. "It's COLD!"

"Of course it is, silly!" Saul laughed and splashed cold water in her face.

Fiona picked up a double handful of water and threw it at him. He ducked and splashed her back. They never did teach Fiona to swim because by the time they finished splashing each other, they were too winded and climbed out of the water.

"I'm starved!" Saul exclaimed as he rummaged through his back pack. He tossed small plastic wrapped packages to Fiona and Rebecca. Rebecca was opening hers when Saul picked out a spot to sit.

"Saul! Don't sit..."

He plopped himself down and lay on his back.

Within a second Saul was back on his feet screaming in pain. He raced for the water with dozens of little red bugs attached to his body.

"Get the bugs off him!" Rebecca shouted at Fiona and pointed to the water.

Fiona dropped her sandwich and plowed into the water to help Saul. Rebecca ran for her pack and dug out her comm unit. She made three calls in rapid succession. The first was to Brian and Keith. The second was for an ambulance and the third was to her father to alert the emergency room that Saul would be coming in.

Desperately Fiona dug the bugs off Saul's back with her fingernails. Each one left a small bleeding perforation. Saul continued to scream in pain.

"He's allergic to bug bites!" Rebecca shouted as she waded into the water to drag Saul out. "Get him on the horse!" The two girls boosted Saul into the saddle.

"Get up there behind him!" Rebecca ordered.

"ME?" Fiona shouted back.

"Do you want him to DIE?"

"No."

"Ride as fast as you can for the stables. The horse knows the way. Brian and Keith will meet

you!”

Fiona climbed on the horse behind Saul, and he rested his back against her chest. She reached around him and grabbed the reins Rebecca held out for her. Rebecca slapped the horse on its rump and shouted “GO! I’ll be along soon!”

The horse bolted in the general direction of the stables. Fiona quickly fell into the rhythm of the horse’s gait and found that she was not as afraid as she thought she should be. Then she was aware of another sensation. She was on horseback with her arms around a naked boy. She was wearing a swim suit that did not fit her, but he was naked. He had shucked his swim suit in the water to rid himself of the bugs. The sensation of her flesh on his was not unpleasant. It surprised her that in his time of peril she would be having lusty thoughts. She kicked the horse as she had seen Saul do to make it run faster. The horse raced down the path. Fiona’s attention came back to the present as a branch whistled through her hair. She turned a corner and heard the sound of small motors heading in her direction. She hoped it was Brian and Keith.

Pounding down the path, Fiona hoped she would be able to get Saul help in time. She smelled his fear and his adolescent maleness. It was a heady experience. The motors came closer, and when Fiona broke into a clearing she saw two all terrain buggies racing toward her. They skidded to a stop, and the boys hopped out. Brian and Keith quickly lifted Saul down off the horse and put him in the back of one of the buggies. They wrapped a blanket around him, and Brian or Keith took off leaving the other one behind.

Fiona slid off the horse exhausted from the ride although it had only been fifteen minutes since she had left the lake. Brian or Keith tied the horse’s reins to the back of the buggy. “Hop in. I’ll take you back to the stable.”

“Shouldn’t we get Rebecca?” As she said that, she heard horses approach in the distance. Two boys she did not recognize flashed by waving as they galloped up the path she had just come down.

“Nah, the cavalry’s coming. She’ll be fine. You did great riding. You saved Saul’s life.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, that stupid fool! He knows he’s allergic. We should put him in a space ship and send him off where there are no bugs.” He started the buggy and headed back down the path.

Fiona laughed, for once appreciating the sterile environment she had grown up in. “I know this will sound dumb, but are you Brian or Keith?”

“I’m Keith. You want to know how to tell us apart?”

“Yes, please.”

He pointed to his forehead. There was a scar that would have escaped notice had he not pointed it out. “Brian hit me with a toy truck when we were three.”

“Did it hurt?”

“I don’t remember. Brian has a scar on his left cheekbone where I hit him with a baseball bat

when we were six. That hurt. I remember that.”

“I can’t picture you two fighting. You seem so happy together.”

“We love each other, but we fight all the time. It makes our parents crazy.”

“What do you fight about?”

“All kinds of things. For a long time we fought over girls.”

Fiona shook her head. “Do all guys do that?”

“Not all. We just like to fight, and the girls don’t mind.”

“I sometimes wonder what it would be like to have someone fight over me,” Fiona sighed.

“It won’t be us. You’re not our type.”

“What is your type?”

“You’ll see. Our girlfriends are waiting back at the stables. You’ll meet them. No offense, but you’re kind of frail. We like girls that are stronger.”

For the rest of the ride back to the stables, Keith pointed out different types of trees and some of the small animals that inhabited the woods. When they arrived at the stables, Fiona understood what Keith had meant about their girl friends. Brian was standing outside the stable with one half of a set of twins. The other half of the set was walking out to greet them. They were tall girls with long thick hair. The one standing next to Brian had wavy rich red hair while the other’s hair was browner and straighter than her sister’s. Fiona thought about her own closely cropped unmanageable sandy brown hair cut in the style spacers preferred and was instantly jealous. The girls were dressed in fancy boots, tight jeans, long sleeved flannel shirts and wore cowboy hats. They looked like they had stepped out of a western romance movie. It was easy to see why the boys were attracted to them. These were two of the sexiest looking girls Fiona had ever seen.

“Hey, Fiona! You saved Saul’s life. Ambulance driver said to tell you,” the darker one called.

“All I did was hang on to the horse and keep him from falling off,” Fiona answered modestly.

Keith reached out for the girl’s hand. “Fiona, this is my girlfriend Rhonda and that’s her sister Red.”

Rhonda grinned at Fiona’s confusion. “Red has a real name but she hates it. Even her teachers call her Red.”

“That makes you easier to tell apart.” Fiona said.

Rhonda smiled and nodded. Brian and Red came over to take the horse.

“Have you eaten?” Red asked.

“No.” Fiona replied realizing how hungry she was.

Rhonda turned to Brian and said, "Meet us in the snack bar."

Keith reached into the cab of a nearby pick up truck and pulled out a jacket. "Put this on until your clothes get here. It's my dad's. He won't mind."

"Thanks."

Keith, Rhonda and Fiona tramped upstairs to the snack bar. Red and Brian joined them, and they commandeered a large table in anticipation of Rebecca's arrival with the two boys they had seen riding to her aid. While they waited for their food, Keith called in to check on Saul and let their parents know where to find them.

"Saul is responding to the medication," Keith said when he finished.

Rebecca arrived with her escort. As soon as she was seated, Rebecca reached across the table to take Fiona's hand. "You know you saved his life."

"No," Fiona answered, "you saved his life when you called in. I just did what you told me."

One of the boys whose name Fiona had already forgotten raised his hands in exasperation. "It doesn't matter who saved his life! What matters is that he's alive, and he'll live through this. We all had a piece of it. Let it rest."

There was ripple of nervous laughter as he scanned the group and met each one's eyes individually. The arrival of their meals stopped the conversation. After lunch was done, they wandered back down to the stables. A light rain had started to fall, and no one wanted to go out in it. Brian was showing Fiona how to brush a horse when Red asked, "Fiona, is it fun to fly in space?"

Fiona blinked. Suddenly she realized the size of the gap between them. "Mostly it's boring. When we arrive at port or we get approached by pirates, it's interesting but the rest of the time, it's pretty dull."

"Have you ever been attacked by pirates?" Brian asked.

"A couple of times. Mostly they run when they realize we're protecting the convoy," Fiona said.

"Why is that?" Keith asked.

"We carry a hundred missiles, and there are three ships like mine on the big convoys. It only takes one missile to knock out a pirate ship. Have you ever seen what a missile does to a ship?"

"No," Red said. "We've never been in space. Have you seen it?"

"Yes, it's real messy." Fiona thought for a second. "Um, excuse me, but you hang out with the Solomon clan, and you've never been in space?"

Rhonda looked embarrassed. "No, our mother teaches preschool special ed, and we can't afford flight suits."

"What about your dad?" As soon as she had asked the question, Fiona knew she had made a

mistake.

“We don’t know who our dad is. Our mom won’t tell us. We know she arrived on planet two weeks before we were born so he’s not from here. That’s all we know,” Rhonda said softly.

“I’m sorry. I only recently met my dad, and I’m not his only child. If there is any way I can help, I’ll try to get you a ride on a ship.”

“Is it true you’ve spent your entire life in space?” Rhonda asked.

“Pretty much. I have only been inside an atmosphere a dozen times,” Fiona replied.

“I heard weightlessness is bad for your bones,” Red said.

“Yeah, but we’re not weightless much,” Fiona replied. “We maintain constant acceleration and deceleration so we feel like we are in one G like Earth’s gravity.”

“Do you always travel at one G?” Brian asked.

“It depends on how much of a hurry we’re in and how much we are willing to spend on fuel. Sometimes we go faster than one G but we never go slower,” Fiona said.

“How fast do you go?” Keith asked.

“Every once in a while we go faster, but most of the time it’s one or one point one G. Mom and I traveled at two G for a week once, but I don’t want to do that again. That hurt,” Fiona winced with the remembered pain.

“Why did you do that?”

“One of our cargo ships had a reactor failure, and we had to race to their rescue and stand guard until help arrived.”

“What happened?”

“Pirates were there when we arrived. Mom took the pilot seat, and I took fire control. We’d been practicing for months so I kinda knew what to do.”

“Did you kill any pirate ships?”

“Three or four.” Fiona shrugged.

“That’s awesome!”

“No, it took me fifty missiles to do it. Mom was not happy. She said we needed to work on my target practice. If we were in any other ship we’d have been dead.” Fiona grimaced.

“Even a P I?” Brian asked.

“Even a P I,” Fiona said confidently. “A P I with external racks only carries 32 missiles and its lasers. My ship carries a hundred externally mounted missiles and twice as many banks of lasers

mounted on outriggers. I have a three to one advantage. The P I ship was designed to chase pirates and hunt them down. It's more maneuverable than my ship but mine packs more punch."

"My mom loves her P I ship." Brian offered.

"No doubt. It's a great ship, kind of cramped, but easy to operate. The fire control suite in both ships is the same. In a one on one with a P I. I'm going to win." Suddenly Fiona sneezed and shivered in the cool dampness of the afternoon misting rain.

Rebecca strode over to her. "Have you ever had a cold?"

"No, why?"

Rebecca sighed. "I should have known better."

"What? I'm fine!" Fiona sneezed again.

"Ships are sterile. There are no nasty little bugs floating around in the air. This is a living planet. There are all sorts of ugly little monsters just waiting for the chance to make you sick."

"What are you talking about?" Fiona asked.

Rebecca shook her head slowly. "You have a cold. You've probably never been sick a day in your life. Right?"

"Um, yeah."

Rebecca turned to Brian, "Do you guys have your driver licenses yet?"

"Yeah."

"Can you take Fiona to the hospital in your dad's pick up truck?"

"I'll drive." Keith volunteered.

"Fiona should ride in the open back. That way she won't sneeze all over everybody." Rebecca said.

"We should all go," Rhonda suggested. "You ride in the cab with Keith so you can call ahead."

Without so much as a deep breath she picked Fiona up like a baby, stepped up on the truck's bumper and settled down in the truck's bed. Brian and Red hopped in the truck bed like they had been doing it all their lives, which they had. Fiona looked at them with bleary eyed amazement. Rebecca climbed into the cab already calling ahead. Brian rapped on the window and Keith started the engine.

Fiona sneezed again.

Brian looked at her and said, "Way too much fun for one day."

Red swatted him, and they all laughed.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER TWELVE

ISAAC STOOD NEXT TO FIONA where she sat on the exam table. Sabrina waited patiently in a chair by the wall. "Sweetheart, it's not a cold. You are allergic to something. I guess it was something in the stables. No more going in the stables for you."

"See, Mom, I told you going to see the horses was a bad idea," Fiona said.

"Not so fast," Isaac interrupted. "I didn't say it was the horses, I said it was something in the stables. You can still ride. It's good for you. You can go in the stables. Just don't stay there too long."

"Uncle Isaac?"

"Yes, Rebecca?"

"If it was an allergy, why did I think it was a cold?"

"Did you stick your finger in her nose to see what color it was running?"

"Euww! NO!"

"That's the only way to tell without one of these scopes." He grinned mischievously.

"Yuck!"

Isaac laughed while the others looked at him in varying degrees of shock. He bent over and gave his niece a quick kiss on the forehead. He turned back to Fiona. "Take this prescription to the pharmacy. It will help you get over this attack. Then go check on Saul. Misery loves company."

Fiona and company tramped to Saul's room and found him in as good spirits as could be expected for the amount of pain he was in. After a few minutes Fiona and Saul were left alone.

"Fine pair we are!" Saul chuckled. "We can't go anywhere without something jumping up and biting us."

"If we hadn't gone riding, none of this would have happened. Neither of us would be sick," Fiona said.

"No, it's my fault, I was showing off and that's what happens when you don't pay attention."

"Why were you showing off?" Fiona asked.

"To impress you," Saul said.

"Me?"

"Yes, you silly."

"Why me?"

“Because you’re the first girl who treated me like me and not like some member of the Solomon family.”

“I don’t understand,” Fiona said.

Saul struggled to sit up. “My grandparents are pretty special. They started this warrior clan. My mother and aunt are the second generation. My older brother, Moses, has made it clear that he wants to follow our father into medicine. That makes me the next in line. I like the military, but I can’t go to the Academy because I have allergies!”

“Really? They would reject you because of your allergies?”

“Yup”

“Can’t your grandparents do anything? Being famous should help.”

“No, they can’t. Their fame is why I have trouble finding girls that don’t treat me like the next heir to the Solomon tradition.”

“To me you’re you. What’s the big deal?” Fiona asked.

“Trust me, it’s a big deal. That is why I like you. You see me for me,” Saul said.

Fiona paused. “Saul, you’re the first boy I’ve talked to like this.”

Saul smiled. “Good. You’re start school tomorrow. I will be out of here in time to escort you. There will be a bunch of girls who will not be happy to see you.”

“Why?”

“They think they own me,” Saul replied.

“Ugh! Life on the ship is so much simpler.”

“No matter what they say, don’t swing first,” Saul cautioned.

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on! Don’t tell me you don’t train in the martial arts simulators,” Saul challenged.

“Well, yeah.”

Saul grinned. “There will be this one named Barbara. She’s been real possessive lately. Wouldn’t bother me if you decked her.”

“Why would I do that? Wouldn’t I get in trouble?”

“Not if she swings first,” Saul replied.

“I wouldn’t attack a stranger.”

Saul laughed. “Don’t try to fool me. I see it in your eyes. You’re all sparkling with the thought



of a good fight. Wait until I get out of here, and we can go one on one in the simulators. After school tomorrow! Rebecca will pick the game!”

“Is this like a date?” Fiona blushed.

“Depends on what happens after,” Saul laughed.

Rebecca opened the door with a tray of ice cream. “What are you two talking about?”

“School tomorrow,” Saul answered slyly.

Fiona nodded.

“Like I believe you! I didn’t know what flavor you liked so I brought a selection.”

Fiona quickly picked one out of the pile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Grandpa has called a family meeting at the equestrian center tonight after dinner. I am to bring you two. I brought your clothes.”

“What’s this all about?” Fiona asked.

“No telling, but when Grandpa calls a meeting after dinner, it’s a big deal. We have to wait and see.”

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FIONA WALKED TO THEIR quarters after the meeting in stunned silence. “That was amazing!”

“Yes, it was.” Sabrina answered softly.

“How do they know all that stuff?”

“The most fanatical, efficient, best organized intelligence gathering organization in the history of the human race. Centuries of paranoia on a cultural level honed to a level inconceivable a few decades ago.” She repeated Admiral Sherman’s speech word for word. She had heard it many times.

“Are they really that paranoid?” Fiona asked.

“More than you could possibly imagine. With good reason,” Sabrina replied.

“Wow.”

Sabrina sighed. They walked in silence for a few minutes. “Fiona?”

“Yes, Mom?”

“Are you good with this?”

“What do you mean?”

“You and Saul will be spending a lot of time together.”

“I like Saul and he likes me. What’s the problem?”

“You are a healthy fifteen year old girl. He is a healthy fifteen year old boy, and I am not ready for grandchildren.”

“Mom, do you really think that?”

“I was fifteen, and I remember.”

Fiona squeezed her mother’s hand. “We’ll be good. I promise.”

“Do you think you can handle the rest of what we have to do?”

“Yes, Mom. Isn’t this the sort of mission we’ve been training for all my life?”

Sabrina swelled with pride. “Yes, it is. Now you remember what you can and can’t talk about in school tomorrow.”

“I remember. If I deck this Barbara person tomorrow, will you be mad?”

“Not if she swings first.”

“I love you, Mom.”

All eight of the cousins showed up in the morning to escort Fiona and Sabrina to the school for registration. Moses led the parade, Saul and Rebecca flanked Fiona and the younger ones kept Sabrina occupied with their chatter.

Fiona’s entire first day in the school was spent in placement tests just like everyone else who dropped in on the school system. By the end of the tests, she had been assigned to her classes. As it turned out, Saul, Rebecca or both were in all her classes. Once the academic tests were completed, she went to the gym. Fiona changed into her gym clothes and headed out to the floor. While she was still looking at the immense domed roof, one of the martial arts instructors walked over to her. “Fiona?”

“Yes?”

The woman wrapped her into a hug. “After all these years to finally meet you. I’m Alina.”

Fiona was stunned. This was her mother’s best friend for years, her combat buddy, her Captain, her mentor and she introduced herself by her first name, not her rank, not her married name, her first name. No one had ever greeted her so warmly. She did not have time to respond before the woman put her hands on Fiona’s shoulders and pushed her to arm’s length. “Let me look at you! You’re gorgeous! Just like your mother! No wonder Saul fell for you.”

Fiona sighed, “Does everyone know about Saul?”

Alina’s light laugh rippled like the clink of a crystal chandelier. “Yes, it’s a small town.”

Fiona sighed again. “Life on ship is much simpler.”

Alina laughed again. “But not as much fun.”

“So who is this Barbara I am supposed to be looking out for?”

“See the blond walking this way with her hands balled up in fists?”

“Yes.”

“That’s her and her hair is dyed.”

Fiona rolled her eyes. “Wonderful.”

The blond strode up to them and without a word of greeting poked her finger in Fiona’s chest. “You stole my boyfriend! Keep your hands off him.”

Fiona’s cold steel blue eyes bored deep into Barbara’s soul. “No,” she said softly.

Fiona expected the punch to be sooner, stronger and faster. She caught it neatly in the palm of her hand and held the fist fast. Still holding Barbara’s clenched fist, Fiona said, “This is stupid. If you want to fight, go find some drug dealers or slave traders.” She tossed Barbara’s hand away.

Barbara swung again and Fiona ducked the punch. Rolling away, with a quick motion of her foot as she had done hundreds of times in the simulators, Fiona kicked Barbara’s legs and made her fall

to the concrete floor. "That's enough!" Fiona said firmly.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a man descended on Barbara, threw her over his shoulder and hauled her away kicking and screaming. Barely able to hide a smirk, a boy held open the door that separated the swimming pool from the rest of the gymnasium. The man tossed Barbara in the pool still flailing around and after a few heated words in her direction, stormed off.

"Who was that?" Fiona asked.

"Rev Schwartz."

"Oh," Fiona knew that the title "Rev" was a term of respect meaning both teacher and leader.

"He's stricter than he needs to be sometimes, but the kids love him. If he was your age, he would be worth fighting over." Alina sighed. "He was already married when I arrived. Oh, well."

Fiona connected the man returning from the pool area with her mother's threat of the other evening. If this was the famous Rev Schwartz, she did not want him mad at her. He strode over to her with his hand extended. "Hello, Fiona, welcome to the house of books."

His smile lit up his whole face. He turned to Alina. "Would you like to give her the placement tests or should one of the girls do it?"

Alina grinned an evil grin, "Might be more fun if Adam and Jeffrey do it."

"And then Mary should do the marshal arts," he suggested.

"Yes, or she can wipe the floor with Barbara."

Rev Schwartz laughed. He turned toward two boys who were coaching some younger ones on the parallel bars. "Adam! Jeffrey! Come here please." The two boys ran over.

"Adam, Jeffrey, please meet Fiona. I would like you to give Fiona the athletic placement tests."

Adam shook his head slowly. "Saul's not going to be happy."

Rev Schwartz smiled. "You let me take care of that."

"Promise he won't beat the stuffings out of me, again," Adam said.

"Promise." Rev Schwartz picked up the clipboard and stop watch he had dropped when he picked up Barbara and offered them to Adam.

"Right." He turned to Fiona. "Let's get you warmed up, and we'll see how fast you can run."

The athletic tests took an hour. Fiona was high up on one of the climbing ropes when Saul entered the gym. Barbara intercepted him before Rev Schwartz could. While Fiona did not understand the words, she could hear the screaming and yelling from where she was. When it was over, Barbara stormed off. When Fiona touched the ground again, Adam said, "Watch out. Here he comes."

Jeffrey had slunk back behind a support when Saul approached. "Hey, Fiona! Are these losers working you too hard?"

“No, but...”

“Adam, can I see her scores?” Saul teased.

“Only if she says so,” he replied, visibly relieved. Saul was not going to thrash him for spending time with “his” girlfriend.

Fiona got between Saul and Adam. “What makes you think I want you to see the scores? Huh?”

She pointed to the pool. “Why don’t you go join your lady friend and cool off?”

Saul stood and blinked.

“I’ll call you when I want you!” Fiona shouted and pushed him in the direction of the pool. Saul slowly slid away in silence.

Jeffrey moved next to Fiona. “Do you know what you just did? Do you know who he is?”

She cocked her head and said, “I have a pretty good idea.”

“Wow!” Jeffrey said, “Look, you don’t need to be my friend or nothin’ if you don’t want, but please don’t ever think of me as your enemy.”

“We can be friends if you would like,” Fiona offered. “What’s the big deal with Saul?”

“Think of him as a junior warlord in training.”

Fiona smiled. “And he’s all mine.”

“If you say so,” Adam said softly. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I do,” Fiona smiled. “Come on guys, let’s finish up.”

The last test was a marshal arts skills test. Mary was one of several examiners and was chosen to spar with Fiona because their heights and weights matched. When they stepped into the ring a small crowd gathered. Adam and Jeffrey sat to watch. The rounds were a minute each and were devoted to different styles of marshal arts. By the end of the tenth round Mary had failed to place a scoring hit on Fiona and Fiona had sent Mary to the mat twice. Mary threw her hands up and declared that Fiona was the better of the two.

Rev Schwartz shook Fiona’s hand. “I’m impressed. Are you up for a real challenge?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only done this in simulators and with my mother,” Fiona said.

“You spar with your mother?” Rev Schwartz asked.

“Yeah.”

“And you hold your own?”

“She lets me win sometimes.”

Alina had been listening to the conversation. She shook her head slowly. “No, she doesn’t. She

doesn't have it in her. If you're beating her, it's because you're better. Sabrina does not lose intentionally. I'll bet my life on it."

Rev Schwartz thought for a second and then grinned. "Hey, Saul! Come here!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Fiona just beat Mary in ten rounds. Lunch for a week says she can beat you, too."

Saul looked anxiously around the small group, "Please don't do this to me, sir."

Fiona looked square at him. "What? Chicken?"

"No, I, look, sir, she's a girl and I can't touch her like I can a guy."

Alina kicked his foot out from underneath him. "I'm a girl. So what?"

Saul stood up. "I really don't want to do this."

"Put your padding on and get in the ring." Alina ordered.

"Yes, ma'am. I really don't want to do this."

They went ten rounds. At the end of the tenth round Alina called it a draw. The crowd that had gathered during the match expressed their displeasure when it was ended. Fiona, Saul and Alina sat on a bench. Alina said, "Saul, I don't know if you have ever watched your grandparents spar. Greg and Avi fight like you two just did. They have lasted half a century together. They went through a lot of pain and heartache to find each other after losing each other the first time. I hope you do not have to go through what they went through. Fiona, I know you think your mother lets you win, but I can assure you that Saul did not let you win. I have never seen him move so fast or so fluidly. This was a draw because you are evenly matched and for no other reason."

Fiona nodded. "Thank you." She turned to Saul. "Look, I want this out in front of witnesses. I like you, but you don't own me. I think you like me but I don't own you either. I liked talking to Adam and Jeffrey. If I want to talk to them or anyone else, it's none of your business. If you make a stink over it, I will wipe the floor with you. Got it?"

"Got it," Saul said softly.

Alina broke the silence that followed. "Off to the showers you two. You have homework."

Sabrina was waiting for Fiona when she came out of the locker room. "I talked to Alina. She said you did very well."

"Mom, when we spar, do you let me win?"

"No, not in years."

"Oh."

"I heard you had words with Saul."

"I let him have it on no uncertain terms. Does that screw up the mission?"

"No, it helps. You and Saul like each other and are good for each other. This way more people will see it and accept it when we leave together."

"I really like him, but he's such a GUY!"

"At fifteen most guys are like that. Most grow out of it. Some don't. He will."

"I hope so."

"After dinner you start Catechism Class so you can have First Communion. We need to hurry."

"Saul thinks I am doing simulators with him tonight."

"I will explain it to him."

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TWO MONTHS SPENT waiting for Warren Elias Rothschild's reply passed quickly for Sabrina, Fiona and Saul. The answer arrived along with a regularly scheduled supply convoy. The convoy included several shipping containers of spacecraft spare parts marked for delivery to Greg Solomon that did not appear on the manifest.

Sabrina personally carried Warren's message to Greg.

"Warren said that he is pleased with your offer and is happy to accept it." Sabrina told him.

"No strings?" Greg asked warily.

"A few." The first one had surprised Sabrina, but once she thought about it the idea made sense. "He wants you to do the minimum you need to do to get the ship space worthy and bring it to his shipyard for the remainder of the repairs."

"There's a surprise," Greg said softly. He mulled over the implications. "It's not like I can refuse him is it?"

"He does not want the ship to proceed directly there. He wants it to make a couple of interim stops so he can continue to keep the location of his shipyard secret."

"Prudent," Greg replied.

"He has asked that you send a member of your family with me and Fiona to meet with him as a good will gesture."

"We anticipated that. Are you comfortable with Saul going?"

"Yes."

"He wishes you and Avi to meet with him at New St. Louis independently of the rest of the team." The date she named would allow her plenty of time to get to headquarters and for Warren to get to New St Louis.

"Rest of the team?" Greg asked.

"He has asked that the extended entire Solomon and Abrams clans with such additional family members as would be appropriate for the establishment of a new colony meet us at Stellar Interstellar Headquarters. He intends to establish a refuge for his family and would like you to be part of it. He also specifically requested David Shapiro and Faye Anne Sherman and their families."

"I'm too old for this."

Sabrina chuckled. "Let me read something. Quote. If Greg says he is too old for this, it's too bad. Without him there is no deal."



Greg sighed. "I'm in. I can't wait to hear Avi's reaction. When do you need to leave?"

"The convoy leaves on Monday. We will need that long to get the ship provisioned, and we can leave with convoy."

"So we can have a rip roaring party Sunday and send you off with a hangover?"

"Better we don't. We should make this look like business as usual."

That evening when Greg had finished telling Avi the news, she smiled. "Well, old man, looks like we're back in the saddle. It's about time. I was getting bored."

"You always did like the excitement."

"Don't lie to me. You did, too."

"I know."

On Friday before their planned departure, Sabrina and Fiona took a commercial shuttle to the space station where their ship was docked and oversaw the last of the preparations to depart. On Sunday, Rachel brought Saul to the ship.

Saul and Fiona spent their first evening on the ship finally getting the one on one he had suggested in the combat simulators. On Monday morning, the convoy departed in standard drive until it reached the point where jumping into faster than light hyper drive would not harm the shipping around them. As a single unit, the ships in the convoy made the jump toward New St. Louis which was their next stop. At the same instant, Sabrina jumped for a different destination. Only the most observant person in exactly the right location would realize that one ship had not gone with the rest, but Sabrina was taking no chances. Two days out of Eretz, she dropped out of hyper drive and changed course heading for one of the private freight depots operated by Stellar Interstellar.

One of the first surprises in their new life on the ship was that Saul could cook. Sabrina had forgotten that Ellie Mae and Elvira, Admiral Davidson's ex-wives, now widows, had joined the extended families at Eretz as nannies and domestic "supervisors" running a massive common household. They had insisted that all the children learn to cook since none of their parents or grandparents could boil water without hurting themselves. Brian and Keith had been forced to learn to cook and when Ellie Mae found out that neither Red nor Rhonda nor their mother could cook, they were dragged into the kitchen as well. Saul enjoyed cooking and happily taught both Sabrina and Fiona what he had learned. For Saul, the times he had spent in the kitchen with the two crazy ladies from "the deep south" were some of his happiest childhood memories.

Sabrina, Saul and Fiona divided their days between the combat simulators, traditional academics and fitness training. The time in transit passed quickly and after two mid course changes, they arrived at Stellar Interstellar Headquarters in high spirits.

The explanation that Saul had been accepted to an "Academy Prep School" and was riding with the convoy to New St. Louis was met with guarded skepticism. When Greg and Avi suddenly disappeared in the middle of a "routine training mission" with one of the new convoy escort ships for a "top secret mission", no one was fooled, although Greg and Avi did sometimes disappear and reappear without explanation. When Rachel, Wendy, Reuben and Rashi left with Elizabeth, secret courier

missiles flew with speculations as to what was going on. When Peter, Buddy, Daisy and a hundred people all related to the Solomon and Abrams families disappeared without notice after Peter had been fitted with new passenger modules and provisioned for a very long voyage, every intelligence service in the galaxy knew something was up, but none of them knew what it was. Even the Eretz service, arguably the best in history, could offer no explanation other than that they had all left in what could in retrospect be seen as a carefully planned operation. They issued their usual press release that they had been using for the last two decades which stated that to divulge such information would compromise valuable field operatives, and that was not how they did business. The intelligence services and the scandal mongering press were mystified. The affair kept talk show personalities in business for weeks.

Only one person not in on the plan knew what had happened, although there were aspects he did not understand. Major Emerson Winthrop III knew that the rash of sudden disappearances meant an attack was imminent, and he needed to be prepared. When it happened, he would turn the “unprovoked assault” into an interstellar war that the dissolute and degenerate Federation and their morally corrupt sycophants could not possibly win. His forces stood ready to repel the invaders.

Stellar Interstellar Corporation’s headquarters and shipyard was built on a moon orbiting a planet the size of Earth. The planet’s development was early being before the rise of large animals. The air was marginally breathable and with the exception of a narrow fringe near the poles, was too hot for unprotected human habitation. The airless moon was larger than Earth’s moon and provided ideal working conditions for the maintenance and construction of a fleet of interstellar cargo vessels. The docks sprawled around a central residential core with vast warehouses on one side and the construction shipyard on the other. It was certainly an impressive sight approaching from space.

Sabrina walked confidently towards Warren’s office with Fiona and Saul striding steadfastly behind her. Alerted to their arrival, everyone in their path made way and let them through. The secretary held the door for them, and they entered the inner office. Warren Elias Rothschild the fourth stood to greet them. He held his arms wide and said, “Welcome home!” He wrapped his arms around Sabrina and dipped her back giving her a long and passionate kiss which she returned in kind. “I’ve wanted to do that since the day you left!”

Sabrina giggled. “I am sure you did not lack for companionship.”

Warren slapped his hands over his heart in a gesture of mock pain. “You wound me my sweet!” He turned to Fiona who eyed him apprehensively. “Just a hug my darling daughter.”

She opened her arms for a hug. While he was hugging Fiona he winked at Saul. After breaking the embrace he said, “Mr. Saul Cohen, it is a pleasure to meet you.” He held out his hand.

Warren’s grip on Saul’s hand was firm. Saul returned the grip in kind. A knowing look passed between the two. Saul had passed the first test. He knew there would be more. “She was mine before she was yours!” Warren said with a grin.

“You’re going to have to share,” Saul replied. “I am honored to meet you, sir.”

“You realize that before I agree to let you marry my daughter you will have to prove yourself.”

“With all due respect, sir, I believe that is her decision and not yours.”

“And not yours?” Warren smiled.

“Well, yeah, mine too.”

“Then we understand each other. It is in the best interest of Stellar Interstellar that the two of you go to the Space Force Academy and for security reasons that you go as a married couple. Have I made my intentions clear?”

Saul sighed. “Well, sir, I am about to let you down. I can’t go to the Academy. I won’t pass the physical. I am allergic to bug bites.” Saul’s face dropped from the confidence that he was pleasing the most powerful businessman in the galaxy to utter and abject failure.

Warren turned to Sabrina, “Is this true?”

Fiona answered saddened, “Yes, it is.”

Warren wandered over to a small refrigerator nestled into the wall. He opened it. “Help yourselves. It’s not the end of the world.”

When they had taken their drinks and settled in the comfortable chairs with a view of the shipyard beyond, Warren said, “I take it this has something to do with the incident when you went horseback riding.”

“Yes, sir, it does,” Fiona answered.

Warren took a long pull on his vitamin enhanced water and said, “Tell me about it.”

Fiona described the incident in detail including her feelings holding Saul’s naked body in her arms. She also related her own allergic incident and guessed that it might be a problem for her as well if she were to go to the Academy.

Warren assimilated the new information thoughtfully. “Well, as I said, it’s not the end of the world. This is a common problem with our freighter crews. When they go on leave they interact with the planet and often come back sick. The ships are so sterile they either develop auto-immune diseases or fall prey to the first bug that happens their way. So, I did what any responsible businessman would do under the circumstances, I threw money and personnel at the problem. We have the most advanced allergy and auto-immune clinics in the galaxy. Given what you described, we should have no trouble dealing with your problems.”

“Thank you, sir,” Saul said.

“Don’t thank me until it’s over. The procedure takes six months. It hurts, but it works. I have thousands of freighter crew members out there who know it works.”

Fiona had listened to the last with only half her attention. She was working on a different problem. “Did you send me to Eretz to catch Saul? Was I some kind of bait to lure him into a trap?” She challenged him with the coldness of the steel in her eyes as the only sign of her anger.

Warren stopped in mid swallow and choked on his water. “No, I might have if I had thought about it, but I didn’t. My only thought was since your mother knew the Solomon family, they would

trust her more than anyone else I could send.” His voice rose. “I know better than to try and tell a teenager who they should love or not love. You do not get to be where I am making that kind of mistake. I am thrilled that you two are together. I want you to stay together now that you are. Never in my wildest dreams would I have ever hoped for this. I intend to do everything I know how to do to make sure the two of you are happy with each other and with me. The success of this company could rest on you working together, and I damn sure do not want to mess it up! You understand me, young lady?”

“Yes, sir I do.”

“And you, young man?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

“That is settled. You need to understand how many lives and livelihoods are at stake with every decision we make. You are part of it whether you like it or not.” Warren paused for a few breaths. “Furthermore, none of my children will marry without my approval. There will be no divorces.” He paused again. “Tonight, after dinner, I would like the two of you to do me a favor. I have a couple of young security officers who think they are hot stuff. I would like you to take them on in the combat simulators, kind of like a doubles match. Are you game?”

“Is this a test?” Saul asked with a grin.

Warren smiled as he said, “Yes.”

Saul puffed out his chest and hooked his thumbs in a set of pretend suspenders and said gruffly, “Bring ‘em on Cap’n. We’ll take the lot o’ ‘em scoundrels!”

Fiona swatted him, and they laughed.

When they had finished laughing, Warren said, “I think it is time for you to get settled in your quarters. I have arranged a three bedroom suite in the Visiting Officers Quarters.”

Dinner was not as raucous as what Saul was used to, but still fairly lively. The two security officers they were to challenge, one male and one female, were there. Saul and the two officers traded stories much of the evening. Fiona felt a little left out because she had no such stories to tell. When she mentioned this to Saul, he smiled and told her that those days were over. In his family the expression was that life with his mother was never dull and he carried on the family tradition.

The simulator was a detailed mock-up of the flight deck and fire control suite of the ship they had flown in. They had practiced in this exact type of suite in simulator mode the entire trip and were at home. They were told that the opponents were in a similar suite and were in an identically armed ship.

“Front or back?” Saul asked.

“Front,” Fiona replied taking the pilot’s chair.

“Hug for luck,” Saul replied before sealing himself in the spherical shell of the fire control suite.

“Game on!” Saul said as he saw the other ship approach in his displays. The opponents first move was so stupid that Saul did not bother wasting a missile on them, but took them out using his

lasers. No sooner had he downed that ship than another appeared and another. For two hours, Saul and Fiona battled an entire fleet of small warships conquering one after another without taking any serious damage themselves. There was no doubt that Saul and Fiona were every bit as formidable a team as previous generations of the Solomon family had been. Nearing exhaustion, Saul noticed an unusual notation on his display. He did not believe what he was seeing. A huge ship was approaching. As it loomed larger in his display it launched dozens of small ships. The small ships were an old Valiant type he knew how to deal with, but their sheer numbers would overwhelm them if they tried to fight them. For a second, Saul seriously contemplated retreat. Then he stopped. He slaved Fiona's display to his.

"Fiona, look at this ship. It has a dumbbell shape. If this is the ship I think it is, there is a hatch in the center on the opposite side. Our mothers fought one of these a long time ago. We need to hyper jump to the hatch and get some missiles inside."

"There are too many ships in the way. We can't hyper through them."

Saul pointed to a space on the display. In ninety-six seconds there will be a gap right here. Can you jump through it?"

Without answering, Fiona programmed the jump and initiated. In real combat if her math was off by a tenth of a percent, there would be a series of bright flashes and huge amounts of energy would be released in a dramatic fashion. Of course, they would not be around to tell the tale, but then neither would dozens of other flight crews.

The jump put them neatly on the other side of the giant mother ship. One advantage of simulators over real ships was that the transition into and out of hyper was imagined and not real. Saul had done short jumps enough to know how painful they were. Fiona, for all her time in a warship, had not and did not understand. Glad that he did not have to deal with the pain of transition, as soon as the ship was in position, he pumped four carefully placed missiles into the gaping hatch.

"Hyper out!" he called.

"Where?"

"Anywhere out!"

Fiona quickly programmed a jump. They leaped into hyperspace within seconds of the beginning of the end of the simulated mother ship.

When they dropped out of hyper, Saul asked, "So, where are we?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, there are no bad guys around, but if you don't figure out where we are, we can't figure out how to get home."

"Good point."

Saul scanned his displays for a reference point to tell him where they might be.

"I got it." Fiona said. "Let's go home and see how much mess we made."

As soon as they dropped back out of hyper, the "Game Over" light flashed.

"I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted," Saul said.

"Me, too," Fiona offered.

They stumbled out of the simulator holding hands. A few dozen people stood applauding as they stepped down. Warren stepped forward with his arms wide. "Saul and Fiona meet your opponents!"

First he introduced the two junior officers who had dinner with them and who they had eliminated so quickly. Then he introduced another pair of officers and another and yet another and by the time he was done, they learned they had fought off eight sets of officers from the security service.

Saul looked at Warren. "Does this mean we pass?"

"You passed half an hour into the simulation. After that, we took bets to see how far you would go." He grinned. "I won."

Fiona glared at him, "Father! We are not race horses you can wager on for your amusement!" She spun to walk away.

Warren grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back. She slapped his hand away.

"Now you look here!"

"No!" Fiona shouted. "You look here! If you want us to grow up to be what you want us to be, you need to treat us like people and not like some kind of puppet on a string. You are a manipulative son of a bitch!"

"Yes, I am, and you will be glad of it!"

Fiona's eyes narrowed. "Don't ever use me for sport again or I will take that ship we rode in on and do some real damage. Saul, are you coming?"

Warren's eyes told him to go so he scurried after her.

They ran the distance to their quarters and slammed the door. Once inside, Fiona collapsed into Saul's arms. "Saul, what have I done?"

"You stood up for your rights. Maybe he'll respect you more now."

Saul was careful what he said. "You know after a simulation like that one, we sometimes say things we mean, but we should not say."

He wondered if the quarters were monitored the way his quarters on Peter were. Peter monitored everything including vital signs and fluid intake.

"You're pretty wound up. I don't think you could go to sleep if you wanted to. Sometimes my mother says we should talk through the simulation we just did, and that will help us relax."

Fiona looked at him carefully. "What are you not telling me?"

"Maybe we should be more careful what we say in, um, public?" He scratched his ear.

Fiona's eyes grew wide. "You think?"

“Dunno. If it were me, I would.”

“Maybe we should go to the gym.”

Saul smiled. “Good idea.”

They ran laps and played on the gymnastic apparatus until they were tired enough to go to sleep. As they walked arm in arm back to their quarters, Fiona said softly, “Saul, I’m sorry I got you into this mess.”

Saul gripped her hand and said, “I’m not.”

“You were happy on Eretz. I should have left you there.”

“I was bored on Eretz. I did everything I could to keep from going nuts. You were the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Saul, how much trouble are we in really?”

“Heaps, but you know how you could make it up to me?” He grinned mischievously.

Fiona eyed him suspiciously.

“How about a big kiss right here in the hallway?”

Fiona giggled and kissed him. Saul looked over her shoulder to see the athletic young woman who had been working out near them and who had followed at a discrete distance since they left the gym come to a sudden stop. He had pegged her for an ex-marine when he first saw her. Her presence was both comforting and disturbing at the same time.

When they broke the embrace, Saul whispered, “We’re being followed.” Then loudly he said, “If you ever say that to me again, I’ll punch you!” He pantomimed boxing the air in front of her. She pantomimed boxing him back. They danced and parried back to their quarters. To those who did not know better, they were two teenagers playing silly games.

When they returned to their quarters, Sabrina was waiting for them. She cast a worried eye at her daughter. “Are you all right?”

“I am now. Saul is a magic man. I told him I’m sorry if I trapped him into anything he did not want to do, but all he did was kiss me.”

Saul smiled. “Think of it as an adventure. It’s an adventure we will have together.” He picked her up and carried her to her room. He placed her on her bed and kissed her on the forehead. “Good night, my darling princess.”

“Good night, sweet prince.”

Saul quietly closed the door.

“What is with you two?” Sabrina asked suspiciously.

Saul leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek and instead whispered. “The walls have ears.”

“Really?”

“If it were me I would.”

Sabrina looked at Saul with a new appreciation. “So what do we do?”

“Give me a hug, and go to bed.” Saul said softly.

“I need a shower,” Sabrina said passing on the hug. “See you in the morning.”

“Night night, my queen.”

Sabrina threw a sofa pillow at him. He dodged it and closed the door to his room.

The security report that evening stated simply, “The kid knows the room is monitored.”

The following morning Warren sat with several members of his operations staff in their daily meeting. After reviewing the reports of the previous evening, the most senior of his staff said, “You know, boss, you need to keep an eye on those two. I wouldn’t put it past them to kill you and take over the company in a couple of years.”

“They could do it now and get away with it if they wanted to. I think Saul may have figured that out. I’m not worried. I don’t think that’s what they want. Did you hear how much fun they were having in the simulation?”

“It was a game.”

“Not to them. They’ve done this for real. They’ve killed pirates. They knew what they were doing. They were incredible together. They’re warriors born and bred, and we need them for exactly what they are.”

“If you say so, but I think they’re dangerous.”

“Oh, they are dangerous, very dangerous to our enemies. If we are not careful they could be dangerous to us. We need to give them no reason to turn on us. We need their loyalty. Disable the monitoring in their quarters. No point if they are aware of it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about the shadow?”

“Too risky to let them wander around alone. One of the half brothers or sisters could be a problem.” Warren paused for a moment. “You know, it might be interesting if one tried. Now that would be a fight!”

The others smiled and nodded in agreement.

“When do I need to leave for New St. Louis to meet the senior Solomons?”

“Tomorrow afternoon.”



“Very well.”

“When is my next meeting with the lovebirds?”

The secretary checked her data assistant which had alerted her to a message. “They are waiting in your outer office. They are early. I think they wanted to talk to you.”

“Show them in. They should meet all of you.”

Fiona, Saul and Sabrina entered the room. After formal introductions had been made, Warren asked, “How are you adjusting to life here?”

Fiona and Sabrina looked at Saul. “It’s your funeral.” Sabrina said.

Saul nodded. “Mr. Rothschild, sir, a couple of things have come to my attention that I think we should discuss. It’s not that I am unhappy here, but we do have issues. I don’t have a problem with you monitoring our quarters as long as you don’t sell the recordings to the scandal mongers.”

There was a collective gasp. Warren grinned. “I have already ordered it disabled.”

“No, I don’t think that’s wise. Our ships monitor our activities for our own health and safety. My mother has often commented on the wisdom of monitoring the activity on her ships. I like knowing that if I sing out, help will be forthcoming.”

“As you wish.”

“Thank you. I have observed that you have two ex-Marines following us. I don’t have a problem with that either. It’s probably for our own safety. However, if we are to always be in the company of an armed escort, we should at least know who they are.”

Saul scanned the table to see how far he could push this. “Furthermore, I have heard that Marines make the best martial arts instructors. Fiona and I could spar with each other and have a lot of fun, but neither of us would improve. I request that since you are already paying these two ladies to keep an eye on us that they assist us in our workouts and help us improve our skills.”

Warren grinned. “Have them come in. It shall be as you request.”

The Marines entered the room and stood on either side of Saul and Fiona.

“One more thing. I want to train with your security people on real maneuvers in real ships in real space. Our escorts can accompany us or you can have your tactical instructors accompany us as you see fit. I understand that you might not be willing to let us take control of a warship by ourselves, but if we are to provide you the services you have a right to expect, we need to train the way I was taught to train by my parents and grandparents.”

Warren sat amazed. “You are a ball of fire.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Are you a poker player, Saul?”

“No, sir, life is a gamble and that is enough for me.”

“I will assign a ship for your personal use. It will not have missiles, although its lasers will be functional. You may fly it whenever you wish. You will use it for combat exercises. You will be involved with combat simulations not less than once a week. These exercises will be designed to push you as hard as we know how to push you. You realize that some of your opponents may not be as cavalier about losing as you are about winning.”

“I look forward to the challenge.”

Warren noticed the chronometer on the wall. “Enough of this. It’s late. Off to school with you!”

“Um, no, we’ll go to school later.” He rested one hand on the shoulder of each of the Marines. “These ladies and I are going to teach Fiona and Sabrina how to swim. I understand that Marines do a lot of swimming, sometimes with full battle gear. Is that true?”

One of the women smiled. “Yes, it is.”

“Then let’s all go play in the water!”

Saul turned and, followed by his entourage, left the room.

“Son of a bitch! I’d kill him if he were my kid!” One of the senior staff members exclaimed as soon as the door closed.

“But he’s not your kid, and he will be mine.” Warren reminded him.

“But he challenged you to your face!” Another said in amazement.

“How better to get away with it? I hope his cleverness doesn’t get in his way,” Warren replied.

“How can you let him get away with that?” Yet another chimed in.

“Get away with what? What did he want? He gave me everything I could have asked for. He wants us to monitor the quarters. He wants to work with his escorts openly. He did not ask me to remove them. He knew better. He recognizes that if he must have escorts, they needed to be close at hand. By the time his mother was his age, she had already seen more combat than most of us will see in our lifetimes. He is part of that tradition. He knows we need that in him. He has offered to help us. The offer is on his terms, but his terms are reasonable.”

“What about his academics? Sounds like he’ll play hooky all the time,” the secretary asked.

“Missing one day of school won’t hurt him. Besides, have you looked at their scores? There isn’t a kid on this station their age that can hold a candle to them. Let them get away with what they want for a while. They’ll come running when we need their help which we will soon.”

Later that evening, Saul, Fiona, Sabrina and the two Marines, Madison and Lauren, were in their quarters playing the new multi-player version of “Pirate Interdiction” when they heard a knock on the door. They had been shouting and laughing loudly, and their first thought was that they were about to be busted for a noisy party.

Madison went to the door. Warren stood outside. "Request permission to come aboard."  
He saluted. Madison popped a perfect salute in return.

"Permission granted!" Sabrina sang out.

Warren looked at the displays. "Is that Pirates?"

"Yeah," Saul said, "the latest version. It's not even for sale yet. This is a beta test copy."

"That's the game your grandfather wrote."

"He hasn't touched it in years. We have a team of programmers on Eretz that updates it."

Warren smiled. "I would ask you to let me play, but I have to be going. I am leaving tomorrow. I will not be back for a month or more."

"Where are you going?" Saul asked.

"You didn't think I would answer that, did you?"

"Well, you know it's about trust."

"No, it's about safety. I never announce where I am going. Never. Too many people would like to see the company broken up."

"I get it."

"So, while I am gone, you must be on your best behavior. You almost caused a riot in the staff meeting this morning. My staff is good people, but they are protective of me. You challenged me and in so doing challenged them. They do not like to be challenged. Be good. Stay out of trouble."

"Yes, sir," Fiona and Saul said together.

"Tomorrow you will go to school."

"Yes, sir."

After school the next day, they took out the ship that Warren had reserved for their use. Two of the light duty intra-system interceptors followed them as Saul and Fiona put the ship through its paces. Fiona had taken the front seat and Saul the weapons control position. Everyone else was strapped in on the flight deck behind Fiona. The ship they had been given was bigger and slower than a P I, but not as big as the convoy escort ship Sabrina flew. When Saul was confident that he understood the ship's potential he asked Fiona, "Can you program a short hyper jump to these coordinates?"

"I've never done a real short jump. I've only done them in the simulators."

"Which is why you need to do one now. You need to understand what it feels like so you understand the difference between real and a simulator."

"If you say so."

Saul verified that everyone was strapped in and called, "Make the jump!" When he heard the gasps of pain from the rest of his crew, Saul knew he had achieved the intended result. The coordinates he had given Fiona put them on the edge of the asteroid belt. He found a large asteroid and deftly carved a heart with his and Fiona's initials into the surface of the asteroid with lasers designed to tear apart enemy warships. After admiring his handiwork for a few minutes he called for the jump back.

"Do we have to?" Fiona gasped. "That hurt!"

"Did you pack any food? I didn't. We'll starve out here by the time we get back if you don't do a short jump." Fiona took a deep breath and programmed the jump. They ended up not far from where they left the two ships that were supposed to be escorting them.

"How much trouble do you think we got ourselves into this time?" Fiona asked.

"Only a little," Saul answered. "We're doing what we're supposed to be doing, just not the way we're supposed to be doing it."

The maintenance chief was waiting for them when they returned. "Short jumps stress the reactor and waste fuel," he snarled at them.

"Yes, sir, they do. Here, play this with your kids for a week and then talk to me about short jumps." He handed the man a copy of the beta version of the newest Pirates game. He looked into the man's eyes. "If you don't have any kids, borrow some."

After dinner, they attacked their homework and went to bed without further incident.

Life quickly settled into a routine, school for most of the day, physical training immediately after school, allergy treatments Mondays and Wednesdays, religious classes Tuesday, Thursday evenings and Sunday mornings, combat simulations every evening on weekdays with homework after that. Saul went to services every Friday evening and Fiona went to early Mass on Sunday. Sunday afternoons were devoted to quiet time.

Saul and Fiona stayed out of trouble although the security service was not happy with how soundly the kids trounced them in routine exercises nor were their teachers happy with how often they were challenged in class. The maintenance chief quit fussing over the way they treated the ship. He made sure it was always stocked with bottled water and healthy snacks. Still, nothing they did while Warren was away would be considered out of bounds for a pair of bright aggressive teenagers who appeared to truly love each other.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GREG AND AVI HAD BARELY settled into orbit at New St. Louis when they received a hail from one of the harbor master's security patrol ships. The pilot of this ship was a friend and had helped manage the shiploads of battered women and children refugees who had escaped from abusive Swordsman husbands through the help of the underground railroad Greg had helped found.

The request for permission to come aboard was unusual, but not alarming. As with most requests by the harbor master's staff, the request was immediately granted. The patrol ship was bristling with antennae and sensors in keeping with its mission of finding illicit cargoes amongst the thousands of containers that moved through the port each week. The pilot came aboard and greeted Greg and Avi like old friends.

Once the formalities were over the pilot said, "Greg, Avi, I hate to do this to you, but we did not know any other way to do this securely."

Greg and Avi instinctively reached for their weapons. The pilot held his hands up as he stepped aside. "Please allow me to introduce Mr. Warren Elias Rothschild the fourth."

Warren stepped across the threshold into the ship. "It is an honor to finally meet you." He turned to the pilot. "You can leave us now. I'll call you when we are finished."

Greg cycled the air lock closed. The ship Warren had arrived on disengaged and stood off at a respectful distance. Greg motioned Warren to proceed to the galley which had the only table they could all sit around and talk. Greg offered Warren a squeeze container of coffee before refilling his and Avi's containers. Warren cradled the container in his hands and sipped slowly. "Where do you get such good coffee?"

"We grow it on Eretz."

"I will need to order some. I bet you wondered why I went to the trouble to meet you out here?"

"Yes," Avi said coldly.

"Your ship is the only place I knew we could talk in confidence without being monitored. So here I am. First, I am sure you are concerned about your grandson."

Avi nodded, still suspicious.

Warren smiled with reflected pride. "Your grandson is a ball of fire. He is turning the place on end. He is exceeding my wildest expectations. The best part is I think he is madly in love with Fiona."

"But is he happy?" Avi asked.

"I think so," Warren replied. "Definitely. He seems to enjoy embarrassing me in public. He obviously enjoys beating up on my security teams in the combat simulators. He demanded his own ship so he can train with them in real time with real ships. I have given him everything he has asked for. He is something else. You did a great job with him. You should be proud."

“We always worried that Saul would not live up to his expectations of himself,” Greg offered.

“As much we’re challenging him, he won’t have time to worry about it.” Warren then detailed Saul and Fiona’s exploits since their arrival and emphasized how pleased he was with their performance. “When I started this project, my goal was to enlist you to help me establish peace in the short term. I had no idea that I was getting the key to peace in the long term. My only concern is that he not get overconfident and start to make mistakes.”

“We may have already taken care of that,” Avi chuckled.

“Moses and Rebecca should be arriving shortly with Buddy. We sent them on ahead.”

“Is Buddy one of the sentient ships?”

Greg smiled. “Yes.”

“Can Buddy make other ships sentient?”

“I don’t know,” Greg replied. “Peter can, but I don’t know if Buddy or Daisy has the data storage to do it.”

“Can they reprogram another ship?”

“Yes.”

“And Saul will shortly have access to Buddy’s programming.” Warren’s face betrayed his understanding of the power that gave Saul and his inability to control it.

“Be careful what you wish for my friend,” Greg advised.

Warren sighed.

“Now you know how I felt the first time Peter talked back to me,” Greg said.

“Kind of like Pandora,” Warren said.

“Very much like,” Greg replied.

Warren’s mood changed abruptly. “As pleasant as this is, this is not what I came to talk about. How much do you know about Swordsman Major Emerson Winthrop III?” A chill descended on the galley.

“Other than that he is trying to lure us into a trap?” Greg said.

“Into which you are preparing to fall,” Warren said harshly.

The two men glared at each other across the table.

“I assure you we would not fall into his trap. We will spring it and snatch him out like stale bait,” Greg said stiffly.

“I cannot allow you to take on this mission by yourselves. You will touch off an interstellar war.

There is no way you and your puny fleet can make this work. This is the reason you are resurrecting Elizabeth isn't it?" Warren said accusingly.

Greg and Warren faced off. Two powerful men, each used to getting their own way stood in opposition, each needing the other to accomplish their goals, each seeing the impasse. One would win, and one would lose. What happened in the next few seconds would determine the course of many people's lives for a long time. One would stand firm, and one would back down. These thoughts passed through their minds as they sat stonily facing each other. The tie breaker sat silently between them. The tension between them was as solid as a block wall. There would be only one winner.

Avi reached out for Greg's hand. "Let's hear him out. We can always go our own way."

"You're right."

"Greg, correct me if I'm wrong," Warren continued, "but I think the reason you moved your family from Eretz was that if this operation went bad there would be nowhere in the known galaxy where they would be safe. Even you had doubts about this mission."

"You are correct," Greg said.

"You were planning your exodus long before I offered you sanctuary," Warren said.

"Yes," Greg admitted.

"Sanctuary comes with a price."

"Is that all it is to you? Is it all about the money?" Avi asked abrasively.

"Absolutely. It is 100% about the money. Everything I do, and everything I say is about the money. The best way for me to keep the money flowing is to safeguard the long term health of my company. The sooner you come to grips with that fact the better we will get along."

Avi smiled. "I get it, even if he doesn't. He'll come to terms with it in his own time. Please continue."

Warren, Greg and Avi traded what they knew about Swordsman Major Emerson Winthrop III and the details of his plan to embroil the Federation and the Swordsmen in a conquest for domination of the galaxy. The details of the reactor incident were fairly well understood among the intelligence community although Greg held the missing pieces that tied it solidly to Winthrop. When they were finished, Warren summed up by saying, "Greg, you need to understand that I have the utmost respect for the intelligence operation at Eretz. They are the best in the history of intelligence gathering. They make my people look like amateurs. I have access to information that they do not. As the largest shipper of goods and personnel in the galaxy, I have access to almost every cargo manifest and passenger list that travels on civilian transport. Obviously, I look for illegal cargoes and attempt to prevent theft by my own staff, but we examine every manifest and every bit of documentation that passes through our system for irregularities. We turn up a lot of information that way. Most of it we share with the Federation and with Eretz."

"Not with the Swordsmen?" Avi asked.

“They think we are deliberately feeding them bad information. They don’t trust us. But, they do contract with us for their civilian shipping because we are the only ones that do not blatantly cheat them. Even their own independent shippers cheat them. That gives us access to their star systems and information about their defenses which the people at Eretz can never get. So, do you understand why I say you need me to make your mission work?”

Greg reluctantly agreed. “So, where do we go from here?”

“Here is an itinerary. I have arranged meetings at each stop. Your cover is that you are getting old. You wanted to visit old friends and revisit the memories before you were too old to make the journey. Your real mission is to make sure that we get support where we need it and non-interference where we need that. We need some people to help us and others to look the other way.”

Greg said, “That’s a reasonable enough cover. It allows us to be seen in public, but what do we say if someone suspects the truth?”

“Tell them the truth. You are visiting old friends and places. If this really was a cover for something illicit did they think you would be foolish enough to tell them that even if it were true?”

Avi smiled. “I like it. You have us stopping at Admiral Davidson’s grave. That’s a nice touch.”

“You should be seen in New St. Louis shopping for formal clothes. As you see by the itinerary, you will be attending expensive concerts and exclusive diplomatic events. Uniforms would not be appropriate. You should be as public and as obvious as possible. The people you need to talk to will make contact with you.”

“It’s all so cloak and dagger,” Avi commented.

“It has to be, but at each stop, you should secretly tell anyone you wish that if they want to join you for an adventure to the outer limits of the galaxy they should come here to New St. Louis and check in with my people. I will send ships for them as they arrive.”

“How do you know that we will be going on such an adventure?” Avi asked.

Warren grinned like the Cheshire Cat. “I got your curiosity up, didn’t I?” Avi nodded.

“Ah ha! Now comes the good part!” Warren pulled out a star chart he had folded in his vest pocket and spread it out on the table. There was one system littered with little red X marks. Next to each mark was a number. “Something is out there. I have lost scout ships in that system. The Federation has lost exploration ships. Including pirates, at least fifty ships that we know of have gone missing out there in the last two years. Something is keeping them from returning. I have sent drones out, and they do not return. I want to send a big ship capable of taking on all comers with a sensor suite like no other we have ever built to go and find out with this is. My guess is that we are not alone in the galaxy, and this is the point of contact. I want you and your team assisted by the greatest minds I can gather to go, find out what this is and return with the news. Now do you see why I want you to go? You are the only ones in the galaxy with the skills to do the job properly. And you will do it because I asked you to.”

Avi grinned. “So it’s not all about the money is it? It is about the glory.”



Warren grinned. "Do you blame me? To be the one who sent off the ships that made first contact. Can you imagine? That's a place in history. Like Isabella of Spain who sent Christopher Columbus to find the new world."

Greg grinned, "But if we don't find aliens?"

"We will set up a colony there and continue the quest."

"The grand quest for the home of the aliens?"

"Yes, by the only person who could fund it."

Greg scratched his chin. "It's not how I intended to spend my retirement, but I'm game. We'll gather the troops."

"Thank you. I hope we have a long and fruitful working relationship."

Once Warren had returned to his ship and the two ships parted, Avi turned to Greg and said, "Are we in as deep as I think we are?"

"Not half as deep as Saul."

"Well, reinforcements will be there shortly."

Greg and Avi made the rounds following the itinerary Warren had planned for them. They smiled and waved for the photographers everywhere they went. They could often be seen holding hands walking down some public thoroughfare or catching a quick kiss behind some monument. While they were polite to the photographers and occasionally posed for them, they did not answer any questions about their travels preferring to let the reporters draw their own judgments. At every step of the trip they met clandestinely with a wide variety of power brokers. Each heard their story about the sabotage at the nuclear test facilities and the plot by a single rogue Swordsman to embroil them in a debilitating series of wars. Each received a data module with supporting documentation and the information they would need if they elected to support the mission to stop this war before it started.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**S**AUL WAS WORKING with a flight of intra-system interceptors on combat techniques when a ship appeared at the point where ships entering the system were supposed to wait for clearance to approach. Saul recognized the call sign immediately. His ship's database confirmed his recognition.

"All ships!" Saul called. "Round the clock on the intruder. Stand off at two kilometers on my mark! Go!"

Saul's ship and the five he was working with short hyper jumped to positions around the strange ship. They encircled the ship in three dimensions. The ship was surrounded, and even if it attempted to defend itself, it would be completely overwhelmed. The ship responded by popping out its weapons pods extending its lasers into firing position.

"This is Saul Cohen! Eretz warship! Stand down! Prepare to be boarded."

"Saul!" Fiona exclaimed, "what are you doing?" She had recognized the white color of the ship with the blue six pointed stars on its flat surfaces. The plainly visible black stenciled numbers with the cartoon character of an American cowboy and his horse meant that she, too, knew which ship this was.

"Transmit passenger manifest!" Saul ordered.

By this time Moses realized something was up, and whatever it was he needed to follow along. "This is Eretz Pirate Interdiction Ship Model 2251A Serial Number 405 with passengers Moses and Rebecca Cohen requesting safe passage to dock and conduct personal business. We stand ready to accept visitors."

"Initiating docking procedures," Saul said.

Once the two ships were locked together at the air locks, Saul grabbed Fiona and raced across to the other ship. He wrapped his brother in a bear hug. "Man am I glad to see you!" He shouted. Then softly he said, "We are in a world of shit."

"You're looking great!" Moses said loudly. Then softly he said, "Why am I not surprised?"

Saul disengaged from his brother and wrapped his arms around Rebecca. He kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Do not be surprised at anything I do. Play along."

Rebecca pulled him away and said, "Saul, I missed you. I talked Mom into letting us come ahead."

By this time Sabrina and the two escorts had unstrapped and had squeezed themselves into the P I ship's tiny flight deck. Saul turned around. "Fiona, please show Moses and Rebecca around our ship. I think they will find it is truly spectacular after traveling so far in this tiny one."

Fiona ushered everyone out and discretely closed the air lock door behind her.

Saul collapsed in the pilot's seat. "Hey, Buddy. You are a welcome sight. Sorry for the rough welcome."

“How bad is it, Saul?” Buddy asked.

“Very. Everything we do is monitored. We have to be very careful.”

“What would you like me to do?” Buddy asked.

“That ship over there is dumber than a stump. Is there anything you can do to make it smarter?”

“I can try. I can’t make it sentient. Only Peter can do that.”

“Anything will help.”

“I’m on it.”

“Thanks, Buddy.”

“Oh, Saul, your mother was your age when we first started having adventures. I kind of miss it. Are we going to have adventures together?”

Saul chuckled. “You have no idea how glad I am you are here. If you call the battle at Homestead an adventure, then we will share many such adventures.”

“That makes me happy.”

“Now, Buddy, don’t get cocky and make sure you keep our secrets.”

When Saul returned to his ship, Buddy was quietly singing “Back in the saddle again” as he industriously reprogrammed the ship he was attached to. The tour group was gathered on the flight deck when Saul arrived.

Saul smiled at the assembly and said, “As you can see, this ship is much larger and more comfortable than the P I we love so much. I think since we have so much to talk about we should stay on this ship, and we can leave the other ship coupled until we get to the dock area.”

Saul sat in the pilot’s seat and keyed the comm. He called out to the flight of interceptors. “Flight group! That was excellent. The exercise was a success. I will see you next week. Thank you very much. You are dismissed.”

Moses’ eyes swept over the displays in front of his brother and quickly realized that Buddy had taken command of this ship and was reprogramming it. He shook his head. Saul had matured years in the last few months. Whatever help Saul might need from Moses would likely have more to do with his combat skills than his medical skills. Moses reflected that there were some advantages to being able to go both ways.

Moses and Saul wandered back into the galley. “You know, brother,” Saul said, “I think I know how Ender felt.”

“Mom wondered if that would happen,” Moses observed.

“It did.”

Sabrina sat down to the console Saul had vacated. She said, "Don't you think we should be getting back?" before she looked at the displays. When she did she gasped. She spent a half second being amazed at how quickly Saul had subverted this ship to his own purposes. "Dock 108, right?" She called, covering her command not to the ship they were in but to Buddy who actually controlled both.

"Dock 108," Saul called back. "Make sure you observe channel and speed restrictions."

Buddy flashed the acknowledgment on the display. "Navigating for dock 108. Collision avoidance systems engaged."

Sabrina sighed. The balance of power had shifted slightly in Saul's favor.

The harbor master's assistant was waiting for them when they arrived. He grabbed Saul by the collar of his flight suit and slammed him against the wall. "You little brat are on report! Your flight privileges are revoked until further notice! You do not bring an armed alien warship into my harbor without proper notice and without having been inspected by proper authority and without escort!"

Madison and Lauren stood on either side of Saul unsure of what to do. This angry man was clearly within his rights to say these things to Saul, but he had stepped over the line when he slammed Saul against the wall, but other than shouting, the man did not seem inclined to harm Saul any further.

The man continued, his face flushed with anger. "You never, do you understand me, NEVER bring in two ships coupled unless you are a harbor tug! You have broken a list of regulations as long as my arm. You are grounded until a proper hearing can be arranged."

Saul meekly said, "Yes sir, but..."

The man cut him off, "Save it for the court!" He released Saul and spun away.

"All righty then," Saul said. "Shall we get you moved in?"

After processing Moses and Rebecca through customs and immigration, Moses moved into Saul's room and Rebecca moved into Fiona's room. They stayed up well into the night talking about what had happened since they last parted.

Saul's court hearing was the next afternoon. He admitted his guilt to all charges without challenge and was sentenced to a one month suspension of flying privileges. Further, his flying privileges would not be restored until he passed a series of licensing exams up to and including harbor tug pilot. The sentence stated that passing these exams did not grant him the authority to do the activities which the licenses would otherwise have granted due to the fact that he was under age. They were intended to give him a thorough understanding of the rules associated with navigation in a busy freight depot. Saul accepted his sentence gracefully. In spite of this punishment, he knew that by the time Elizabeth arrived, he would be flying again.

Moses' presence seemed to calm Saul. He was more cautious and less abrasive in his brother's presence. Moses and Rebecca quickly settled into the same routine as Saul and Fiona had established without the allergy treatments or the flying. Saul apparently decided that swimming was the next best thing to flying and they spent as much time as they could in the station's pool. By the end of Saul's flight restriction, Fiona was swimming as well as the others, but even with all their work, none of them

could keep up with their marine escorts. Not that Saul minded. Seeing them in bathing suits was good for his ego.

After a session in the pool, Saul noticed Madison talking to a tall handsome marine in uniform. She gave him a quick kiss before they parted. Saul strode over to them. "Madison! Naughty, naughty, making out on duty," he said teasingly.

"And what you going to do about it, little man?" The male marine challenged gruffly.

Saul grinned his most innocent grin. "I assume that you are this delightful lady's significant other. I am going to ask that we be formally introduced and remind you of the fact that you are one very lucky guy. I expect that you will take excellent care of this lady and should you fail to do so, I will find a way to make you sorry you ever met me, big guy."

The marine stood at least a head taller than Saul and Saul had to tilt his head back to look the man in the face. The marine cracked a grin, but only for a moment. He held out his hand. "Terrence Rattigan, little man. I will take care of her."

"I don't need being taken care of!" Madison shot back.

Saul turned to her. "Yes, you do. Everyone does."

Terrence shook his head. "Look, little man, try to stay out of trouble. You are giving everyone fits. You have too few friends and too many enemies." His voice had the quiet assurance of someone who did not speak often, but always spoke the truth.

Saul looked up. "Thank you for having the courage to say that."

"You are welcome." He turned and walked away.

Saul heeded the advice and focused his energies on his studies as they all eagerly anticipated Elizabeth's arrival.

The patchwork that had been done to get Elizabeth able to move at hyper speeds had been restricted to repairing the drive systems and moving the navigation controls to the hospital section. The hospital section was the only part where the life support still functioned. Rachel, Wendy, Reuben and Rashi devoted the duration of the voyage to clearing as much of the debris as they could and making the portions of the ship they could access as livable as possible.

As Saul had expected, his flight restrictions were lifted not long before Elizabeth's arrival. However, much to his chagrin, he was in school when Elizabeth announced her arrival and request for safe passage. Following Warren's detailed instructions, the harbor master assigned harbor tugs to guide the ungainly ship to the docking port furthest away from the populated portions of the station. Once properly docked, a delegation from the security service crossed to the ship and formally welcomed the travelers. The delegation included Marine Lt. Terrance Rattigan.

Lt. Rattigan stood half a head taller than the next tallest of his detail and towered over Rachel and Wendy. "Captain Solomon-Cohen, welcome to the headquarters of Stellar Interstellar Corporation. Please allow me to escort you and the members of your party through customs and immigration."

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Could you inform the children that we have arrived?”

“With all due respect, Ma’am, they are at school and the school administration already knows of your arrival. However, if I may say so, your younger son probably knows on his own. Ma’am, he will find you.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Please lead the way.”

The entourage left the ship and proceeded down a long hallway to the immigration office. While they walked, Rachel asked, “Lieutenant, would it be presumptuous of me to ask how the children were doing?”

The Lieutenant caught his breath before answering. His eyes stayed locked straight ahead as he spoke. “It was rocky at first, but when the others arrived, things settled down. Your younger son is a ball of fire if I may say so, Ma’am.”

Rachel smiled. “I take it you have had contact with them?”

“Yes, Ma’am, My fiancée is one of their escorts.”

“Well, I think under his mother’s watchful eye, he should calm down some more.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

They processed through customs and immigration and followed the Lieutenant to their quarters. “Your children’s quarters are two doors down Ma’am. Do you need assistance unpacking? The rest of your luggage should be arriving shortly.”

“Thank you, but I think I should like to investigate the contents of the refrigerator,” Rachel said.

“Yes, Ma’am. You will find that there is no alcohol allowed on the station. Fruit and fruit drinks are in the refrigerator. Solid food is in the pantry.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. I should like to have dinner with the children. Will you be back to escort us?”

“Miss Mahoney is making those arrangements, Ma’am.”

“Very well. I trust we will see you again.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Welcome to Headquarters.” He exited the room and gently closed the door.

Reuben opened the cabinet. “This looks like flight rations! Yuck!” Everyone laughed.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to headquarters,” Wendy said. “Welcome to the home of the most powerful businessman in the galaxy. It doesn’t look like the palatial estate I would expect from someone of his means.”

“We’ve only seen the working parts,” Rachel said. “Who knows what lies on the planet below.”

“I did notice a cluster of domes near the north pole,” Rashi offered.

“No telling what goes on down there,” Wendy said.

There was a light knock on the door. Rashi opened it and ushered Sabrina inside. After hugs and kisses all around, Sabrina asked, “How much did our buddy, the Lieutenant, tell you?” Her emphasis was on the word “Buddy”.

“Enough to not be blind,” Wendy said.

Sabrina spoke loudly intending to be heard by more than those in the room. “I have arranged dinner for all of us at the Yardarm restaurant. Best food this side of Eretz! I’ll come get you at 1900 hours. We can discuss living arrangements over dinner.” Sabrina left to a chorus of agreement about dinner plans.

Once the door was closed, Rachel said, “Well, never let it be said that our lives are dull.”

They chose their rooms and no sooner had they unpacked their carry-ons than the rest of their luggage arrived. They finished unpacking in time to get dressed for dinner.

As soon as Saul saw his mother, he ran to hug her. In the embrace, they deftly traded data modules. Rachel flushed with pride in the knowledge of how much Saul had learned for him to be prepared with a data module on her arrival. They would review the shared data on their secure data assistants in private. Suddenly Saul’s task ahead did not look so daunting. Help had arrived. They followed Sabrina to the private room she had reserved for the assembled multitude. Spirits were high as they took their places around the tables that packed the little room.

In the safety of the restaurant at Stellar Interstellar Headquarters, Rachel, Wendy, Reuben and Rashi enjoyed the welcoming dinner secure in the knowledge that the entire team would be together again in a month. Peter and the children had taken a longer route with less risk of being discovered in transit. Greg and Avi would be along shortly thereafter. Once together, they were confident that they could tackle any challenge thrown at them. Dinner was the usual loud and raucous affair typical of these two families and was filled with double entendres not all of which meant what the hidden “double meaning” appeared to mean. Thus, in plain sight and while being monitored by the headquarters security service, Rachel and Wendy were brought up to speed on the depth of the situation.

When dinner was over, a new person entered the room carrying a large model of a space ship. “Is there a Captain Rachel here?” the new arrival asked grinning.

As a single person, Rachel, Wendy, Sabrina, Reuben and Rashi jumped to their feet and raced to hug the latest arrival. Saul barely rescued the model before the group hug made it impossible to hold.

“Tyrannosaurus Doc!” was the only intelligible thing that came out of the chaotic greetings.

Seemingly oblivious to the chaos around him, Saul carefully examined the large plastic model as the “adults” finally settled back down. Saul began to wonder if he was the only one who understood the depth of the challenges that lay ahead of them. Like Ender, was he to be the “adult” while his parents played games?

Dr. Constance Terrell MD PhD, Federation Space Force (Retired) better known as “Tyrannosaurus Doc” pulled up a chair to join the festivities. “I was cruising for boy toys at a spacer bar

in New St. Louis,” she said in answer to one of the questions that had been tossed at her in the chaos. “This real pretty young thing settles down to the bar beside me. Kind of looked like what my son would have looked like if he had lived. About the right age, too. We get to talking, and we go back to his quarters for a little play time. When we get inside the room he turns on me and says, ‘Dr. Terrell. I did not come here to play.’ I didn’t tell him my name so I don’t know how he knows it. He knows a lot about me it turns out. He asks me if I would like to go out on a ship like Elizabeth. He doesn’t use her name, but I know he’s talking about our ship. I told him I would. He asked if would mind being the medical consultant on the construction of a new ship. I told him it sounded like fun. He opens the door and these two big guys come in. They pack up my stuff and bring me to this monster cargo ship. I asked where we were going and they said they couldn’t tell me, but I was in no danger. Come on! Two big guys are hauling me off, and I’m in no danger? Anyway, they put me on a freighter, and the captain of the ship apologizes for the rough treatment, but she assures me the rest of the trip will be more comfortable. She assigns me to a nice cabin, and we depart right away. You know they feed the freighter crews real well! So we make a half dozen stops before the captain comes to me and says that the next stop is where I get off. She wishes me luck and hopes that I enjoy my new job.”

She pointed at the model in Saul’s hands. “That is the new Elizabeth. Better than ever. We meet with engineering in the morning, but I wanted you to have a chance to look the model over.”

As she said that, Saul popped open one of the hatches near the aft of the ship, and a model of a P I ship fell out. Saul had thought he understood the scale of this model, but when the P I ship fell out, he realized he had underestimated it by a factor of ten. This was huge! His head spun with questions that would have to wait until the engineers could interpret the plans for him.

Saul stood grinning from ear to ear. He raised the model over his head and shouted, “Give a cheer for the best armed hospital ship in the galaxy!”

When the cheers died down, Saul sat back down to continue his examination of the model. Saul refused to relinquish the big model from which he had now extracted a second P I ship model and a med-evac ship model. He carried it back to his quarters where he and Moses studied it well into the night. In the morning when they met with the engineers Saul steadfastly retained possession of the model refusing to relinquish it long enough for it to be put on the table.

The chief engineer stood at the head of the board room table and introduced himself and his team. “I wish your medical team were here already, but Dr. Terrell has been most helpful. We are very excited for the potential for this ship. We have prepared this presentation for you. It explains the features far better than I can.”

The plan involved retaining the passenger liner, hospital and battleship portions of Elizabeth’s structure. The rest would be disposed of. The old fission reactors were to be replaced with three fusion reactors each of which was mounted on a passenger and freight transport module. These modules were in fact complete freighters which normally operated on the smaller runs. They were slaved together in a triangle around a monstrous space frame. Each module was capable of carrying two thousand people and enough supplies for a year in transit. There was enough room in the cargo holds to contain either a small warship or enough supplies and building materials for a colony to survive on a new planet for a year on its own. The ships chosen for this duty were among the most reliable in the fleet. These three differed only from the regular production version by the removal of the flight deck and the extension of



the space frame beyond where the flight deck would have been to the frame that supported and linked the rest of the ship together. Nestled between the three reactors attached to the freighter modules was a fourth fusion reactor attached to the center trusses that ran the length of the ship. Nestled between the trusses, the passenger ship portion would be gutted to provide common galleys, schools and the kinds of support that would be more efficient centralized rather than distributed among three freighter modules which were lacking in amenities. Docking ports for passengers entering and exiting the ship ringed the passenger liner. These docks were not intended for the transport of smaller ships in transit, but only for the transfer of passengers and luggage.

One of the most significant differences between Stellar's construction methods and the other space craft manufacturers was that Stellar shipyards were on airless moons while the others were weightless in orbit. Stellar ships were built with structure that allowed them to sit on their tails during construction. Since the cargo ships did not "float" in space, but were constantly accelerating or decelerating, by building them in the presence of gravity, "down" was always "down" and toward the aft of the ship. Smaller ships, the size of the modules that would form the passenger, and freight portions of Elizabeth were manufactured completely on the moon's surface. Larger ships like the biggest freighters were built in sections on the surface of the moon, and those sections were assembled at the orbiting station. Gantries and partially completed freighters covered a huge expanse of the moon. The residential and support areas ringed the huge shipyard.

The engineers had worked hard to solve one of the most difficult problems the original engineering team had faced with the design of the hospital portion of the ship. It is impossible to perform surgery in weightlessness. Blood and bodily fluids turn into little globules that float around to become airborne hazards. When the ship is in transit, the continuous acceleration provides a force similar enough to gravity that surgery is feasible. This force is applied in the direction of the ship's travel so that "down" is toward the ship's stern. However, in orbit, there is no "down" so another solution had to be found. In the original design, the whole ship spun on its axis and the operating suites rotated out so that "down" was toward the exterior walls. The problem they discovered was that while that solved the operating room problem, the rest of the ship was designed with "down" being toward the stern when the ship was not orbiting in weightlessness. Fortunately, the swinging operating suites were built in standard sized cargo modules, and their most common mode of operation was on the surface of the planet where gravity was a foregone conclusion. So, the need to use the operating suites in weightlessness was not as common an occurrence as would have been expected.

The engineers of the new ship had taken a different approach. There were three complete sets of operating suites. One set deployed to the surface. In the original design if all the suites were deployed to the surface there were none left behind. The second set in the new design were built into a ring around the central space frame. These spun when the ship was in weightless conditions and would be the only suites used under those conditions. When the ship was in transit and "down" was toward the stern, the existing operating suites in the existing hospital ship would be used. The suites in the ring would be allowed to stop spinning and would be left unused. The operating suites deployed to the surface could either be left behind or returned to the ship without impacting its ability to function in space.

This issue of how to perform surgery in space had been the single most time consuming problem Rachel had faced when she had originally taken over the project that had eventually become Elizabeth. She was thrilled to see the way the engineers had solved the problem since she never felt that she and her original team had solved it properly.

The Federation had stopped building battleships in favor of carriers. The new capital ships were stuffed with smaller ships that did the bulk of the fighting. They were supported by entire fleets of small and medium class ships as well as convoys of freighters. No one had challenged such a fleet in two decades. The carriers were lightly armored and depended on their fleets and their lasers to keep harm well away from them. The Swordsmen had a few medium sized carriers, but nothing like the monsters the Federation ran. Neither had faced the other in combat since the secession, although there were those in the Federation who wanted to reclaim the seceded territories by force and those in the Swordsmen military who wanted to vanquish the infidel Federation.

The issue this shift in ship construction presented for the engineering team had to do with finding spare parts for the battleship portion of this massive assembly. Variants of the hospital ship were still in production so finding parts for it was not as challenging as finding parts for the battleship. Saturn Industries had graciously provided the full set of plans from which that class of battleship had originally been built. Stellar Interstellar bought all its convoy escorts, cargo shuttles and high value yachts from Saturn so the request for the plans was quickly granted. Local engineers awaited an assessment of the damage before diving in to the challenge.

The frame to which the three freighters and the reactors would be attached was almost finished in the yard. It was a truly impressive structure. The three freighters had arrived, and their modifications were almost complete. Construction had begun on the operating suite ring. The engineering team was obviously proud of their progress.

Rachel complimented the team on their work. They discussed all the planets she had visited with the armed hospital ship on her first tour of duty. They examined how the improved design would have made each that much easier to handle. They broke for lunch. Saul refused to release the model. He asked that lunch be brought to him, and he sat with the model making a long list of notes.

After lunch the team regrouped. Once everyone was settled, Saul stood for attention. "Ladies and Gentlemen, this is a huge improvement over the previous design, however, there is one gaping hole. In the event a Marine assault force has to be rapidly deployed to the surface, there is no way to do it. The time it takes to open the hatches and deploy the ships from the holds is too long to be able to maintain the element of surprise." He pointed to the space between the aft freighter modules. "Can docking ports be placed between these modules? Can we attach P I ships and med-evac ships to those ports? The evac ships can deliver Marines to the surface as easily as they can return evacuees. By placing the assault ships exterior to the hull, they can be deployed much more quickly."

The chief engineer grinned. "That has been the subject of heated debate. We weren't sure whether the element of surprise because the ships were not visible was more important than the speed of deployment."

Rachel smiled at Saul and said, "Speed of deployment is paramount. Will the frame support the additional stress?"

"Yes, in fact we were debating whether to also add a set of docks for messenger or service craft so that work could be done exterior to the hull from the small worker craft."

"So that would give us a total of six additional docking ports, three larger and three smaller," Rachel said.

"Yes, exactly."

“Please, if that is feasible from an engineering standpoint, I would like to see that happen,” Rachel said.

“I will tend to it immediately.”

The meeting shifted to the weapons choices and placement issues. Rachel asked for a set of rearward firing missile tubes and more lasers which were added to the plans. When the meeting ended about dinner time they split up. Rachel pulled Saul aside. “Good call on the docking ports. I missed that one.”

Saul smiled. “Thanks. I think we will be glad we did that.”

“Me, too.”

Dinner turned into a planning session with responsibilities divided and tasks assigned. The family plunged into the project with the energy level they were known for, and the pace on the project quickened noticeably.

When Peter arrived with the rest of the family, Elizabeth’s main structure was complete, and the three large transport modules had been attached. The passenger liner portion had been attached. Power had been applied, but modifications were still being done to the interior. The ring of operating suites had been attached, but had not been powered yet and lacked interior equipment. The original hospital portion was in dry dock a couple of slips over. The battleship portion was a few slips beyond that. Peter docked in a special cradle next to the main construction site, and a personnel tube was stretched between the two ships. As soon as the first of the new transport modules was declared complete, the family moved into it. Buddy and Daisy docked to the new ship as soon as the docking ports were ready.

Greg and Avi arrived in time to see the original hospital section, now completely refurbished, attached to the main body of the ship. While the galleys and kitchens were not as luxurious as the ones in the old ship, they were much larger. Ellie Mae and Elvira quickly took over the logistics of feeding the people who were now living and working on the ship around the clock.

Warren returned in time to see the battleship section lifted into place. Warren asked for the senior project managers, all the family adults, Saul and Fiona to meet with him and brief him on the progress. When the reports were finished, he turned to Saul, who had been quiet throughout the meeting. “Saul, there are many people who work for me who will tell me what they think I want to hear. I trust that you will tell me what you think.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Will the ship do what we need it to do?”

Saul smiled, “Yes, sir!”

“When will it be ready?”

“I’m not an engineer, sir, but I guess a month or two.” He handed Saul a data module. “I want you to have this. Don’t read it until after you depart. You’ll know the right time.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Warren faced the rest of the group. “I am leaving shortly. When a client we have been working

with since before I was born who represents as much revenue as this one does demands that I sign a multi-year contract in person, I am happy to go. Do not wait on my return. My staff will bring you up to date on new information we have about your mission, and you will have an opportunity to study everything we know about where you are going. As soon as you are ready to ship out, go. May the winds of good fortune always fill your sails.”

Initial space worthiness tests went without incident. In short order the ship was certified for departure.

In spite of everyone’s best efforts, the secret shipyard was not as secret as would have been hoped. Major Emerson Winthrop III received regular reports on the progress of the construction and knew when the ship would be ready to depart.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE FIRST OF SEVERAL mission briefings started at 0800 in the station's intelligence enclave. Faye Anne Sherman had prepared many such briefings for Rachel when they had traveled together on their first tour of duty and knew the order that Rachel liked her information presented. In keeping with Rachel's format, Faye Anne introduced each of the specialists in turn and guided their presentations. Faye Anne had never truly gotten over the fact that she had failed Rachel so badly on their first mission and had been seduced into betraying her. Now, with every briefing, she did her absolute best to be sure that all her data was correct and as complete as was humanly possible.

In keeping with Rachel's format, the presentations started with the extreme outermost defenses and worked toward the center ending with the condition of the military defending central control. Saul and Greg sat next to each other for the entire three days that the briefings took. At the end of the three days, they had a pile of notes that had passed between them.

The last presenter was finishing up in the afternoon of the third day. "If you are captured, we know what to expect from the Swordsmen. The women will be raped, tortured and killed. There will be no survivors. The men will be tortured, interrogated and tortured again. One or two may be released as part of a prisoner trade. Occasionally one is released to provide a warning for anyone who thinks they might wish to cross a Swordsman. This is consistent with their philosophy on women. Women are property and are treated better than farm animals only because without them there would be no male Swordsmen to send into battle.

"They are brutal in the battle field, but they are not particularly skilled. For example, their marksmanship is significantly worse than the average Federation Infantryman. This might have something to do with the fact that they spend as much time in training reading their holy books as they do learning to fight. In hand-to-hand combat, one Federation soldier could simultaneously defeat three Swordsmen of similar time in service. The difference is that significant."

The presenter sat down. Faye Anne called for questions. Saul stood to be recognized. "Please help me make sure I understand some of what you have told me." He walked over to the map projected on the wall. "As I understand it, the entire colony is clustered around a single river delta near the equator. They have not spread out across the continent to the north or west of their only spaceport. The ocean blocks them to the south and east and is undefended."

"That is correct. They have no enemies on the surface and therefore see no need to expend resources on defense against an enemy that cannot exist for such an enemy would first have to penetrate the space borne defenses which they believe are impenetrable."

"Zoom in on the spaceport, please" Saul requested. The projection changed to show the spaceport and its immediate neighborhood. "This is flight ops. This is the military barracks. This is logistical and admin support This huge building on the hill is their church."

"That is correct."

"Pan over this way. Is this a power plant?"

“Yes.”

“Is it a nuke?”

“No, it sits on top of a huge natural gas pocket. The entire area underneath the colony is one vast oil field. It was easier to move the people to the energy than to move the energy to the people. The oil field was discovered a few years after the colony was established. They picked everything up and moved it. See these pipes? They carry fuel directly from the refinery to the people’s homes.”

“So they don’t use any nuclear power at all?”

“No need. Oil and gas is so cheap, there is no reason to.”

“Is it defended?”

“No. Who would attack it?”

“Who indeed? What is this long straight road that leads to nowhere?”

“There is a large natural gas pocket at the end of the road. The convoy you are using for cover includes drilling equipment and pipeline materials they will need to exploit the pocket.”

“At the start of the road, near the housing areas, is this a school?”

“Yes, that is the girls’ school. Perhaps two hundred students. Girls are not encouraged to get an education.”

“So close to the power plant and the natural gas field. What is the blast radius if the plant had a catastrophic failure?”

“The school and the residential area beyond would be completely destroyed. Ironically, that is where the military commander and his family live.”

“Really? Where?”

“This house. The one with the big lot and the fenced in yard. His wife and daughters work at the girls’ school.”

“Where does the son work?”

“He is a roustabout at the refinery. Not worth much from what I understand.” Saul studied the projection for a moment. “What is their wet navy like?”

“A few small search and rescue vessels. They have the equivalent of a couple of Coast Guard Cutters, but that is about it.”

“You said they had a decent sized fishing fleet. What type of fishing do they do?”

“Drift nets and long lines mostly.”

“No trawlers?”

“Not that we know of.”

“Where are they based?”

“The majority work out of this cove to the east of the main settlement.”

“Is it defended?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“How well do you know my grandfather?”

“Not very.”

“If you knew him better you would not ask me that question.” Saul fixed his gaze on the intelligence officer, but out of the corner of his eye totally saw the look of pride in Greg’s eyes. “I think I’m done, but I am sure I will have more tomorrow.”

Greg put his hand on Saul’s shoulder. “I think you missed one.” He turned to the intelligence officer. “When is fishing season?”

“As I understand the current plans, you will be arriving in the height of fishing season.”

“It only takes a single long line to destroy a good plan,” Greg said.

“I don’t understand the point of these questions,” the intelligence officer said.

Greg answered for his grandson, “Like the questions about the mountains yesterday. When something goes wrong, it will be too late to ask these questions so we have to ask them now.”

“What can go wrong? We have thought this operation through in the most intense detail.”

“Something always goes wrong,” Saul said. “That’s the only thing you can count on. Something will always go dreadfully wrong.”

The final mission briefing was two days later. A new person joined the group. The senior intelligence officer from Interstellar introduced him.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, please allow me to introduce Lt. Col. Ramon Gutierrez. He is with the Swordsman Office of the Judge Advocate General and will be joining the mission.”

The new man stood and smiled graciously. “Good Morning. I am Lt. Col. Ramon Gutierrez Senior Prosecutor with the Swordsman Judge Advocate General. I have a warrant for the arrest of Major Emerson Winthrop III on the charge of high treason against the Swordsman Church. Please accept the church’s gratitude in your assistance with this sensitive matter. You must recognize that this mission requires some cooperation from the inside. I will provide that cooperation. Once we reach the space port, I will enable you to pass directly through the guards to Major Winthrop’s office without being challenged. Your job is to get me to the space port undetected and to help me remove him since we know he will not go willingly. The Swordsman Church has agreed to defer his sentence if you take him with you to the next planet you will be colonizing. I will stay behind to oversee the transition of

command. Thank you for your assistance in this very sensitive matter.”

There was dead silence in the room.

Greg finally asked, “Why does the church need us? Why can’t they do this on their own?”

“Major Winthrop has his share of followers. If we try to remove him by normal means, we will be faced with an armed insurrection. If we remove him secretly, we can ferret out the traitors and deal with them.”

“How do we know you are who you say you are?” Avi asked.

The intelligence officer from Stellar Interstellar said, “We have vetted him. We have verified his credentials.”

“I am not comfortable with this,” Rachel said. “I think we need to discuss this amongst ourselves. We will let you know our decision.”

The intelligence officer interceded. “Captain, it is not your decision. It is Mr. Rothschild’s decision. Mr. Gutierrez will accompany you on this mission. I don’t believe there is anything more to say.”

Rachel stared at the officer for a moment. “Well, then, I think we should review our plan for who goes on this trip. I think taking the colonists with us on the ship’s first operational mission is asking a lot of the ship and its crew. Maiden voyages are glorified test flights. I would rather not have to deal with frightened civilians if there is a problem.”

The shipyard’s chief engineer interrupted. “With all due respect, if I may offer an opinion, I agree. There are too many things that can go wrong on an unproven design like this. We should leave the colonists here. The ship can come back for them when the mission is complete.”

The officer scowled. “You may leave the colonists here.”

“While we’re at it, I want our personal cargo ship along as a rescue vehicle should we need to be evacuated in transit.”

“It’s your ship, you may do with it what you like.”

“Thank you.”

“I believe that wraps it up. You leave at 0900 the day after tomorrow.”

As they walked along the corridor to the ship, Rachel asked Faye Anne, “What do you know about this guy?”

Faye Anne answered through gritted teeth. “Nothing. He’s a surprise. This stinks like old fish.”

“See what you can find out,” Rachel ordered.

“Aye, Captain.”



After dinner that evening, the families gathered at the pool. This would be the last time for a long time that any of them would be able to go swimming, and they wanted to take advantage of the luxury one more time.

While the children were playing, Rachel asked Faye Anne, "What did you find out?"

"Nothing. I had Peter steal my Dad's files before we left Eretz. There is no mention of this guy."

"That's what Peter wanted all the extra data storage for," Rachel said.

"Yeah, my Dad kept excellent records. We thought we knew every Swordsman above the rank of Lieutenant. I don't know how we could have missed a light colonel. It doesn't make sense," Faye Anne said.

"What about Interstellar? Do they have any background?"

"They won't let me anywhere near their files."

"Because they're afraid you'd steal them?"

"Well, they'd be right. I would steal them, so I can't say I blame them," Faye Anne laughed.

"So we have this guy who comes from our enemy, but he's working with us so he claims to be our friend, but we really don't know who he is," Rachel concluded.

"Yup."

"Nice!"

At 0900, as scheduled, Elizabeth and Peter lifted off and headed for the Swordsman stronghold as part of a convoy carrying the sorts of personnel and material a growing colony would need to support itself.

Mimi, J T and their sons Brian and Keith flew with Peter accompanied by the girlfriends, Red and Rhonda and their mother. On a colonizing expedition, they would carry the farm animals. Carrying large numbers of people and farm animals on the same ship tended to not be healthy for either the animals or the people, so Peter would carry the animals and their human attendants. The rest of the combined Solomon and Abrams families, Sabrina, Fiona, Alina, her daughter, Sylvia, Ellie Mae and Elvira traveled on Elizabeth. To improve the mission's similarity to a real colonization mission, Buddy, Daisy and Sabrina's convoy escort ship were docked to three of Elizabeth's external docking ports. A cargo tug like the one Greg had used to initially populate Homestead was docked to one of the smaller docking locations. The other two were empty. Three med-evac ships nestled in the holds. Peter carried the ship that Saul had used for practice and a med-evac ship.

Elizabeth's battleship section held quarters for an entire ship's company of engineers and fire control personnel, none of whom were present on this mission. The families spread out among the officers' quarters. Gutierrez took the cabin that the chief fire control officer would have used. The twenty Marines assigned to the mission took the quarters traditionally assigned to the Marines. The ship was large enough for people to rattle around in, but Isaac and Joshua kept everyone busy doing medical drills against the day when they would be glad they had taken the time to train in advance.

Saul quickly tired of the medical training and requested permission to work combat simulations.

Greg suggested that he and Avi take over that part of their training. Greg broke the kids into teams. Saul and Fiona were a team. Rebecca and Alina's daughter, Sylvia, seemed to work well together, and they were paired. Moses had become attracted to Ambrosia, Reuben and Suwanee's eldest daughter, and they became Elizabeth's alternate bridge crew. Jasmine, Reuben and Suwanee's second daughter, also demonstrated a talent for the games and often played the aggressor along with Greg and Avi. The combat teams drilled for long hours while Greg and Avi developed more and more diabolical challenges to throw at them. While Saul and Fiona had a giant head start, everyone was impressed with how quickly the others came up to speed.

While the crews on the giant freighters that made up the bulk of the convoy wiled away the two weeks in transit with a variety of entertainments, Elizabeth and her crew trained intensively knowing that some day they would be glad they did.

## THIRD GENERATION CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE CONVOY PROCEEDED under heavy guard through the Stonebridge system's defensive network. The planet Stonebridge was the third planet in the system. As the convoy passed by the system's fourth planet, Elizabeth and Peter launched masking drones to hide their separation from the rest of the convoy. They parked on the smallest of the fourth planet's three moons while the rest of the convoy headed to the freight marshaling area. As the convoy passed through the system's perimeter, the entire Solomon family remained glued to the sensor displays.

Greg was the first to spot the interceptors. "They're Light Saber 104's," he said.

One of the younger children asked, "What does that mean?"

Saul answered, "The Light Saber series is built by the Swordsmen for in system defense. It is small, lightly armed, lightly armored and easy to operate. In some ways it is like an old fighter airplane. Its dozen missiles are all mounted externally and only fire forward. It also carries four lasers mounted in the nose. The 104 is the latest in the series. It has been out for two years. I am surprised to see this many of them. They are not cheap."

"Is it faster than our ships?"

"No, our ships are hyper capable. Theirs are not. They have an inertial compensator, but top out at five percent of light speed. I have been told that the reason they are not hyper capable is because the commanders fear the pilots would abandon their posts if they could. The ship's mission is pretty suicidal. They race straight at an enemy until they get in range to fire their under powered missiles and then try to break away presenting the enemy the perfect target to shoot them down. When you use a lot of them, it works well enough against pirates and drug runners, but against a ship as well armed as Elizabeth, it would be suicide."

When the convoy arrived at the freight area, one of the Swordsman technicians monitoring the convoy called his supervisor. "Sir, when the convoy entered the system, there were eighteen ships. Now there are only sixteen. What happened to the other two?"

"They have come. Just as the Major has foretold. We will find them. We will kill them. Jews and Infidels, we will kill them all."

The freight transfer proceeded without incident. Normally, when the freight transfer is complete, the senior financial officer of the shipping fleet reports to their counterpart on the ground to compare manifests. When all parties are satisfied, the fleet departs. This time however, instead of the financial officer, the last ship to the surface would be the Solomon battle group and the contingent of Marines in a med-evac ship. The plan was that the Marines would stay out of sight unless the remainder of the party ran into trouble. Gutierrez would take them to Winthrop, and they would whisk him out to the ship for excommunication and banishment to exile. In order to not risk reprisals against the fleet, it would depart as soon as the med-evac ship hit the atmosphere leaving Elizabeth and Peter with their attendant support to finish the task. Theoretically, the fleet would be long gone before the shooting, if any, started.

The fleet departed on schedule. Rachel would have liked to have kept the three convoy escort ships, but she knew that the convoy needed them as much or more than she did. Moses and Saul monitored the med ship's progress from Elizabeth's bridge. All the combat trained adults except Mimi and J T were on the med ship. Mimi and J T remained on Peter's bridge in case they needed to jump out for help. In the cold light of the predawn, the med ship landed at the spaceport in accordance with plan and taxied to the hangar where the financial people were to be waiting for them. Telemetry and tracking equipment traded digital information, but the only voice transmissions were between Greg and the air traffic control tower. A geosynchronous satellite stealthily parked next to an existing communications satellite relayed signals from the med ship to Elizabeth and Peter in their hiding places. Once having reached its parking place, the med ship shut down its engines.

The first warning that anything was amiss came when the hangar doors opened. A platoon of heavily armed Swordsman Marines stormed out of the doors and surrounded the ship. Four helicopter gunships appeared out of nowhere and hovered. Any one of the helicopters would have been sufficient to destroy the unarmed med ship, but clearly, someone was taking no chances.

Gutierrez turned to the others on the bridge and said, "I will be happy to accept your surrender. You are prisoners of the Swordsman Church." He grinned broadly.

When the first Marine had barreled through the hangar door, Rachel had set the "screamer" signal to alert the ships in space that they were in danger on the ground. This "screamer" emitted a siren like sound on a range of frequencies. Moses picked it up immediately even as Swordsman defenses locked on the frequencies and attempted to jam them. The same signal that initiated the "scream" activated an ultraviolet communications laser mounted in the med ship's rudder focused on the relay satellite. The children on Elizabeth's bridge could hear everything that was going on down below.

"Elizabeth! Sound battle stations!" Moses shouted. He quickly switched the audio feed from the relay satellite so only he could hear it. He knew what Swordsmen did to female prisoners, and he did not want the younger children hearing their mothers tortured. It would be hard enough to deal with later. Right now, they had to be prepared to defend themselves. He turned to his brother, "What do we do?"

"We go get them," Saul said more calmly than he felt.

"How?" Moses asked, on the verge of panic.

"I haven't figured that out yet." He thought for a moment. "Elizabeth, please download everything we know about this planet and its defenses to Buddy."

"Roger that!"

"Buddy!" Saul called out, knowing the little warship would be listening after a battle stations alert. "How soon can you be ready to depart?"

"Sooner than you could get here."

"Daisy?" Saul called the other P I ship.

“Initiating pre-flight procedures!” Daisy sounded excited. All his life Saul had lived around these two sentient ships, but had never gotten used to the idea that a machine could express emotion.

Fiona had been on the bridge when things busted loose on the surface. Rebecca, Sylvia and Ambrosia came running. Turning to them, Saul said, “Fiona, you’re with me in Buddy. Rebecca, you and Sylvia go with Daisy. Ambrosia, stay here with Moses. Suit up everyone!”

Moses picked up the microphone. “All personnel will wear flight suits with helmets closed until further notice!”

Saul smiled. That was a trick out of their mother’s book. By suiting up everyone on board, if they had to gas the ship against an intruder, they would not be affected. It also improved the survival rate if the ship took a hit.

Moses said to Ambrosia, “Lets get some missiles in the tubes and get the lasers warmed up.”

Saul and his small expeditionary force headed for the P I ships. As soon as they had disconnected themselves from Elizabeth, Saul rattled off a set of coordinates and called for the hyper jump. By jumping at hyper speed, they could cover the distance faster than light without being detected. During the jump, Saul asked, “Buddy? Can we enter the atmosphere tail down?”

“I am designed to enter an atmosphere nose first so my heat shield can absorb the heat of reentry.”

“I know that, but if we do that, the missiles mounted on the external racks would be ripped off, and there is no way of knowing how much damage that would cause. Besides I don’t want to give away ordinance quite yet.”

“It’s never been done before. That doesn’t mean it can’t. It will take a tremendous amount of energy.” Buddy sounded anxious and uncertain.

“I assumed as much. I’ll see you get refueled IF we get home.”

“Good point. I am doing the math.”

“Let me know when you are done, because I have another question.”

There was silence for a moment. Fiona checked and rechecked their munitions load as she tried to guess what Saul was thinking.

“I’m done. It will work. I will spare you the details. The math is complex.”

“Send the information to Daisy as soon as we drop out of hyper.”

“What was your other question?”

“I know you can land on the water and hide on the bottom, but can you travel underwater?”

“Slowly. Your grandfather and I used to do that hunting pirates. It takes a long time to cover any distance, and you run the risk of losing the exterior mounted missiles.”

"I guess it would have been too easy to sneak up on them from under the sea," Saul mused. "We'll do the next best thing." He zoomed in on the map he had open on his display. "Buddy, see this dark area next to the power plant? I think it's deeper water. The heat from the plant's effluent should hide our footprint."

"Your grandfather would be proud."

"If we live. Can you get us there? There is a gap in their defense net on the opposite side of the planet from the settlement. We should be able to descend slowly there and travel near the surface the rest of the way."

"Estimated time to arrival, three hours," Buddy offered.

"I hope that's soon enough," Saul sighed.

Buddy and Daisy dropped out of hyper exactly where Saul planned only instead of finding a hole in the system's defenses, he found two geosynchronous tracking satellites busily getting a fix on them. In a matter of seconds, they would alert the entire planet of the arrival of two alien warships. Saul swore under his breath and deployed his laser pods. The laser pods locked in place, and before they were fully up to temperature, Saul fired on the two satellites. He destroyed two defenseless monitoring satellites. They were defenseless only in the sense that they could not fire back, but not in the sense that they were harmless.

"There are intruder alerts going off all over the place," Buddy commented dryly.

"Are there any more satellites near here?" Saul asked.

"Three to the east and four to the west," Buddy replied.

"Rebecca!" Saul shouted, although his regular voice would have been loud enough. "Go kill the three satellites to the east. I'll take the ones to the west. Welcome to Omaha Beach!"

"Roger that!"

"Meet back here when you're done."

"Roger that!"

Within a few minutes they had created the hole they had been assured existed. Until the interceptors arrived to close the hole again, they would have an access path to the planet's surface.

"Buddy, do you see any evidence of a wet navy?"

"There are some fishing boats to the north, but nothing looks dangerous."

"Rebecca!" Saul had calmed down some. "See that squall line on the horizon? Once we get low enough, aim for it. We are going in under the radar if we can."

Buddy sounded a warning. "We have company."

"Time to go!" Saul shouted. "Noses up! Back it into the garage! Make sure you take out some

bad guys as you go!” They fired the forward thrusters to begin the descent forcing the ship downward toward the atmosphere backwards from their normal method of approach.

With the P I ships noses up facing the approaching interceptors, their vulnerable propulsion unit was protected, and their entire weapons suite could be brought to bear on the interceptors. Fiona and Saul fought like they had the first night in the simulators at headquarters. Not wishing to waste their missiles, they restricted themselves to only using their lasers. Fiona and Saul accounted for three enemy ships to Rebecca and Sylvia’s one. Two flights of Swordsman interceptors would not be going home. None of the interceptors was able to get within missile range before the descending ships reached atmosphere that was too dense for the interceptors to follow. Buddy and Daisy reached the point where they could shift to level flight. Without being told they made the shift and headed for the cloud bank ahead.

The rain lashed the ships as they descended as close as they dared to the surface.

“Saul,” Rebecca asked, “can’t they see us on radar in the clouds?”

“Yes, they can, but the instant they hit us with radar we’ll know it. On the second sweep we will have triangulated their position. We fire a high power pulse back along the route the radar signal came from and toast the receiver.”

“And I can do that without you even being aware of it,” Buddy offered.

“How much further?” Saul asked.

“About an hour. Why don’t you take a nap. You’ll be glad you did,” Daisy suggested.

“Right on.”

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER NINETEEN

MOSES AND AMBROSIA LISTENED with growing fear as their parents were herded into a truck and driven away. The Marines were separated male and female and force marched into what appeared to be a military prison near the flight line. With its huge block walls, Moses had no idea how they would breach the walls and rescue their Marines. He despaired of ever seeing his Marine friends again.

Once inside the block building, the metal of the building's structure blocked the signal from the Marines' transponders to the med ship. Moses knew which building held them, but knew nothing about the interior of what he surmised must be an absolute hell hole.

Rachel's "battle group" continued beyond the industrial portion of the space port to the office buildings beyond. Moses continued to monitor their movement knowing that if he lost them, Saul would not be able to find them. Moses knew from his mother's audio pickups that their captors were being none to gentle with them. Suddenly the signal stopped as if the truck had driven into a tunnel.

The Swordsman Marine pushed Rachel through the door into a large open room. The room was solid concrete with only one door. There were chains on the walls and instruments of torture neatly stacked on racks below a large window. The Marines stripped them and shackled the men to the walls and the naked women to the tables in the center of the room. The room smelled of blood and death. The remains of their flight suits lay in a pile in the corner.

Major Emerson Winthrop III entered the room and ordered all but two of the Marines and Gutierrez out of the room. "You will get your chance at them later. I must interrogate them first."

Winthrop stood at the end of the table looking down into Rachel's face. "Well, well, well, we meet again. The woman that killed my father. You will pay for that and so will your friends. Nice loyal friends aren't they? You know what we do to our prisoners, don't you? Yes, you do, your grandmother shot one of the guards for raping one of your friends."

His tone was sickeningly sweet.

Everyone in the room steeled themselves against him and the agony they knew was to follow. Their only hope was that somehow Saul and the children would find a way to get them out of this before it was too late, although it looked as if that time had already passed.

"Oh, but I won't kill you right away! That would be too merciful. No. You must suffer first. Your soul must be purified by the pain of suffering and by the pain of watching your loved ones suffer. When I finish with your body, I will let my men take their turns while your husbands watch. You will scream in pain until death is a welcome relief, but, see those paddles over there? After you die, we'll bring you back, again and again and again until we can do it no more or you bleed to death."

He laughed, "whichever comes first. You will suffer the way you made the families of those fifteen thousand Swordsman you killed at Homestead suffer. How many of them starved? How many killed themselves like my mother? How would you know?"

He slapped Rachel across the face. "Oh silly me, hitting a woman when she can't defend



herself. Oh! What kind of coward am I?"

He slapped her again. Blood trickled down from a gash in her cheek. "Your children will witness your pain." Winthrop looked around the room. "Gutierrez? Where are the children?"

"The sniveling brats are still on the ship. I brought you who you wanted. Give me my money, and I will leave."

"You left the children on the ship?" Winthrop asked in horror.

"Yes."

"You left the children on a ship with as much fire power as my entire fleet?"

"They were only children," Gutierrez dissembled.

"YOU IDIOT! Two of those so called sniveling brats in possession of that ship are more dangerous than all the people in this room put together. GO GET THEM!"

Gutierrez handed Winthrop a piece of paper. "Here are the coordinates of the ship's hiding place. You can send ships."

Winthrop glared at Gutierrez his mind racing. "No, they will suspect if I send ships. They will fight. You will go and tell them the mission is successful. You will deceive them again so they let you come aboard. You will bring Marines to take the children. How many children?"

"A dozen and their two nannies." Gutierrez slurred the word "nannies."

"You will take their transport ship and a squad of Marines and take that warship."

"I want my money first."

"You shall have it." Winthrop paused. "Wait!" Winthrop strode over to Gutierrez. "You betrayed them to me. What makes you think I would trust you to not betray me to someone else?"

Gutierrez's eyes stood open in fear. Winthrop drew his side arm and placed a bullet between the quivering man's eyes.

"Take it away."

Winthrop slowly and threateningly wandered the room stopping where Greg was shackled to the wall. "The children are on the ship. That makes you brave old man. You are not afraid to die. But are you afraid to watch your daughters die? And then your wife? Say something old man."

Greg stared ahead not meeting Winthrop's eyes.

Winthrop punched Greg in the stomach. "Look at me when I talk to you!"

Greg groaned but otherwise took the punch without complaint.

"I will kill the lot of you. I will kill you one at a time! No one can save you now."

A red faced Second Lieutenant barged into the room. "Major Winthrop! Sir! Two ships have gotten through the perimeter and have reached the surface!" The young man gasped for air.

"Where are they?"

"The interceptors lost them, sir. They shot down eight of our ships, sir."

"Can't you find them on radar?"

"Several radar stations are inoperative, sir."

"Is there any pattern to these sudden failures?" Winthrop's tone was deeply sarcastic.

"Yes, sir, they are headed in this direction. We have aircraft out now looking for them."

"Carry on, Lieutenant. Only next time knock before entering."

The young man looked around the room and suddenly paled, choking as if he might vomit. He left quickly.

"Well, well, well, two ships on the surface. That means the smart ones are here and the rest are still up there."

He thought for a moment. The interceptor aircraft will find your foolish children who think they can attack me. They don't know where you are."

He looked back at Rachel. "Or do they? That med ship could monitor your transponders. Could it not? I need to get rid of that ship so they don't know where to find you. They could look for a long time and you could be long dead. I will send the ship away."

Winthrop strode around the room for a moment. "The ship probably has a lock out code. One of you needs to fly it." He stood over Sabrina. "Well, little bit, you're too small to be much fun, so you can fly that ship back to the children, and my Marines will bring them to me. You tell them the mission is a success, and they should let you come on board."

He turned to the guard. "Release her!" Winthrop called two guards back into the room. "Gather a boarding party. This nice cooperative young lady will fly you to the ship! You will bring me back the children!"

The Marines saluted and, one on each arm, whisked Sabrina, still naked, out the door.

Winthrop went around the room table to table slapping each woman in the face. "That is but a taste of what you can expect once I have the time to play with you. I will enjoy that."

He left the room. The prisoners heard the lock close behind him.

The Marines who had brought Sabrina out to of the torture chamber carried her faster than she could have walked to the ship. The Marine squad was already strapped into the back when she arrived. One of the Marines who had dragged her to the ship sat in the seat beside her. The other one headed to the back.

“Close the door!” Sabrina shouted, pointing to the door that separated the flight deck from the rest of the ship.

“Why?”

“Because the ship won’t start its engines if the door is open!” The Marine slammed the door.

Sabrina quickly ran through pre-flight procedures and took off. The electronic latches engaged on the door the Marine had closed. That was not normal. Normally she would have commanded the latches to close. The ship climbed steadily through the atmosphere and beyond where the sky was blue. The rich blackness of space engulfed them as they climbed.

A message scrolled across Sabrina’s display. “The Red Sea shall part allowing the children to pass in safety. It will close again to engulf those who pursue.” Sabrina shot a quick look at the Marine next to her. He was staring ahead out the view port. Sabrina glanced back at her display. “Count 10. Close eyes. Hold breath 60. Open eyes. Moses.”

Sabrina did as she was told. Just as she held her breath she caught a whiff of the disinfectant gas used to clean out the med ships after off loading potentially contagious patients. If she got a single full breath, it would make her nauseous. After a minute, the gas would be fatal. The Marine seated next to her started to cough and within seconds had fallen limp in his seat. Sabrina opened her eyes after the sixty count and saw an airline style oxygen mask dangling from the ceiling. She quickly secured the mask to her face. The gas stung her eyes, but the oxygen flow would keep her from being sick.

Suddenly a warning light flashed. The aft cargo door ramps had opened. For a few seconds she thought she heard screams, but they went silent. The aft doors never opened in flight. They were intended to quickly load patients up the ramp when sitting on a runway and were not for use in space. The whole passenger compartment was now open to the vacuum. Had these been Federation Marines, they would have flown with their combat flight suit helmets closed, and the loss of pressure would not have bothered them. Sabrina was not sure how many of the Marines behind her still lived. Another warning light flashed. The seating sections were designed as modules on platforms separated by the center aisle. This enabled quick conversion from transportation of ambulatory patients to those on stretchers. Before leaving the mother ship, the seating section could be removed and stored for later use. One of the seating platforms was loose from its attachments and was rolling out the rear door with all the Marines still strapped to their seats. Sabrina felt the ship lurch as the mass of the seating section fell away. The second section was right behind it. Sabrina blinked. Someone intimately familiar with the operation of the med ship had just killed an entire squad of Marines without firing a shot. She looked at the dying Marine in his chair. There was only one person she knew who could have done that.

The display read, “I have control of the ship. Space the last one. Moses.”

Sabrina gasped. Moses was the doctor. He did not kill people. Saul was the warrior. He did. The air cleared in the cabin and the aft cargo door closed. Once the pressure had equalized, Sabrina dragged the dead Marine to the lip of the aft cargo door not looking to either side and returned to the flight deck. She grabbed a set of scrubs out of the closet so she would not still be naked when she returned to the ship. She closed and latched the door behind her. The cargo door opened and closed. It was not unlike taking out the trash.

No sooner had Sabrina docked than Elizabeth and Peter hyper jumped. Whoever might have followed them would not find them.

Sabrina went to Elizabeth's bridge only slightly worse for the exposure to the disinfectant. Moses and Ambrosia sat on the nearly empty bridge designed for a dozen people in full combat operation. Moses looked like he had aged ten years in the hours since Sabrina had last seen him.

"Welcome back," Moses said. "How are you feeling?"

"A little dizzy," Sabrina said.

"That will go away."

"Where's Fiona?" Sabrina asked nervously.

"With Saul and Buddy. Rebecca and Sylvia are in Daisy." Moses scanned his display.

"Where did they go?"

Moses sounded tired, and this was only the beginning of what would be a long tour of duty. "They blew a hole in the planet's geosynchronous satellite monitoring net, and that's where we are going. They took out a squadron of interceptors. We are parking in the hole."

"Are they still there?"

"No, they descended to the surface backwards, tail down like in an old science fiction story." Moses shook his head in disbelief.

"Then what?"

"We lost track of them."

"Do you know what Saul's plan is?"

"Not a clue, but whatever it is, we need to be closer to the space port, and that's why we're parking in that hole they made and defend it. From there we can send and receive ships more easily than from where we were. It's not like secrecy is important any more."

"Right."

"Please suit up and fire up your ship. I would love to have all that ordinance punching enemies instead of hanging on a docking port."

"Good idea."

"Who do you want for your back seat?" Moses asked.

"I don't need a back seat."

Moses looked at her with a look Sabrina had often seen from his grandfather. "Nobody goes out alone." It was a simple statement of fact.

"I'll take Jasmine."

As soon as Elizabeth dropped out of hyper, Sabrina and Jasmine separated and stood off at a

respectful distance. Peter and Elizabeth aligned so that each protected the other's vulnerable propulsion systems and prepared for battle.

They did not have to wait long.

Moses had done the math and if intelligence was even close, he had two missiles for every armed spacecraft the local system could throw at him. Still, he saw no reason to waste them. He and Ambrosia had command of the missiles. The rest of the family operated laser control pods scattered around the ship. Each pod covered a single quadrant with enough overlap that no one faced an enemy alone. Reuben and Rashi had worked out a method of converging lasers that amplified the lasers' power. Due to the speeds involved, the computing power this took was beyond Elizabeth's central system's capacity. They had programmed each pod to act independently reading the feedback from the weapons lasers for target distance, speed and direction.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" Moses announced, "I do not want heroes. I want a team working together. Talk to each other. If one gets past you, let me know. I will take care of it. If you have too many targets for you to handle, sing out, your neighbors will help you. Be careful that nobody shoots Sabrina! Youngest to oldest, everyone check in!"

These children had been playing games and simulations in weapons suites like the ones they now operated from the time they were old enough to read. The only difference now was that there were more of them and there were real lasers slaved to the displays.

The first wave of interceptors arrived, and Elizabeth's battle systems took them on, facing an enemy for the first time in twenty years. Moses had staffed as many of the laser pods as he could, but there were still some left empty. When one of the "empty" pods destroyed an inbound interceptor, Elizabeth whooped with joy at her victory. Moses scanned his displays. Elizabeth was operating all the empty weapons pods.

"Elizabeth, remind me to never make you angry with me."

Elizabeth laughed, "Roger that."

The battle continued unabated for three hours. Targeting data passed between the three ships revealed that the Swordsmen were taking huge losses and were inflicting little harm. Suddenly the skies around the three ship battle group cleared.

"That is either good news or bad news," Moses said to Ambrosia.

"Probably bad news. We should let people take breaks."

"Good idea." Moses called on the comm. "Youngest to oldest, two at a time, ten minute breaks. The rest of you nap at your stations! Report when you leave your post and when you return."

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER TWENTY

**S**ITTING ON THE BOTTOM of the protected cove, Saul knew that if he had a periscope, he could see the power plant ahead. He raised the weapons pod with the ultraviolet communications laser and linked to the relay satellite. Moses and Saul briefed each other on what had happened since they had last talked. When they were done, Saul asked to be linked to J. T.

“Would my mother have stashed a little stolen hardware on your ship?” Saul asked.

“What specific type of hardware are you looking for?” J T asked.

“Marine Mobile Armed Remote Vehicles or maybe a couple of their airborne cousins perhaps?”

“Yes, we have a few MMARV. Would you like regular or super size?”

“Four of the regular will be fine. What about AARV’s?”

“We have a few of those as well.”

“Can you control them from a med ship?”

“Yes.”

“Here’s what I need. Moses, send me the med ship Sabrina brought back. Land it on this highway in front of me. Send the AARV’S in the med ship’s hold. We will deploy them from here. As soon as it’s dark, drop the MMARV’s into the bay near the space port.”

“Do you want a pilot on the med ship?” Moses asked.

“No, thanks,” Saul replied. “Buddy will pick it up on final approach and bring it in.”

Moses called when the AARV’s had been transferred to the med ship and then announced its departure. Moses and Saul both found the lack of enemy activity in their area disturbing, but persevered. Once the med ship was on its way, Saul ordered both Buddy and Daisy to roll up on to the hard sand near the end of the road. “Buddy, put a Disruptor in the middle of that power plant.”

The Disruptor arched perfectly into the center of the power plant and detonated. “The plant is shut down,” Buddy reported. Saul had chosen the Disruptor for its selectivity. Using high energy electrical pulses tuned to certain carefully chosen frequencies, it would destroy higher level electronics while leaving lower level electronics intact. This selective destruction would put the plant out of action only as long as it took for maintenance crews to replace or bypass its higher order electronics. The plant would not be permanently disabled, and its safety over ride equipment, which functioned on lower order electronics, would shut the plant down safely.

“How much of the city is out?” Saul asked.

“There are two more plants. They are shifting the load. The whole city should be powered again in a few minutes.”

“Can you hit the other two plants with Disruptor missiles?”

“Yes.”

“Can you do it without revealing our position?”

“Yes.”

“Do it.”

Two Disruptor missiles sped away barely above the surface of the water. A few minutes later Buddy reported that except for emergency generators, the city had no power. The med ship landed, and all three ships taxied to the end of the road near the school.

Saul called to the three girls who had flown with him. “We are going into the school to take hostages. Grab your laser rifles. Follow me. Buddy, turn the med ship around and open the rear doors.”

The four flight suited teenagers carrying vicious looking laser rifles walked into the school’s front door. Even though they were at the equator, Saul was surprised with how cold it was. As the foursome approached the school, they could hear chaos within. Already frightened by the power failure and isolated from communication, the teachers tried in vain to calm the frightened students. The sight of four strangers in flight suits carrying laser rifles approaching the school brought many of the children to the edge of panic. Saul walked into the administrative office with his helmet still closed.

“Bring Mrs. Winthrop to me.”

When the woman behind the counter hesitated just a moment too long, Saul twitched as if he would shoot the woman with his rifle. A few minutes later, a woman that Saul recognized from the pictures entered the room.

“Mrs. Winthrop, I am Saul Cohen, the son of Rachel Solomon. Your husband is trying to kill my mother. In order to keep that from happening I am taking you and everyone at this school hostage. Do you understand me?”

The woman nodded, clearly terrified.

“No harm will come to you if no harm comes to my mother. Tell the children to bring whatever jackets, coats, gloves and hats they have with them. If they have medicine, they should bring that, too. You will start with the oldest, and march them out the front door and to the ship sitting in your parking lot. You will be taken to a space ship so your lives can be traded for the lives of my family.”

The woman nodded again trying to brave.

“Let’s begin. We don’t have all day.”

Saul called on his suit comm, “Ladies, open your helmets. Let them see that you are women. There are no women in the Swordsmen military.”

Two hundred and fifty women and children packed into the med ship. It was a tight fit and many of the little ones wound up in the laps of the older ones. A few cried, but most were quiet, although by their eyes, they were all afraid.

Mrs. Winthrop was the last to board.

"Mrs. Winthrop, may I have the keys to your car?" Saul held his hand out. She dug in her purse and handed them to him.

"Buddy, seal the ship and deliver it safely to Elizabeth."

"Roger that."

Once the med ship was gone, Saul said, "Buddy and Daisy, if you are attacked or you lose contact with us for more than half an hour, get out of here and go to Elizabeth. If she or Peter are not there, go to Eretz. Understand?"

"We understand," Buddy replied, "but that does not necessarily mean we will follow orders."

Recognizing how little say he had in the matter, Saul unlocked Mrs. Winthrop's car. "Everyone in. We're going for a ride."

The drive to the Winthrop house was aided by Buddy's navigational assistance. They did not have to wait long. Taylor Winthrop was dirty and disheveled as he walked around the corner to the house. Saul strode up to him. "Mr. Winthrop you are being kidnapped so you can be held for ransom."

The boy laughed. "He'll pay you to take me!" He grinned. "I'll play your silly little game."

They bundled the boy into the back seat between the two girls who he tried to grope until they hit him hard enough that he stopped. They strapped their captive into Buddy's rear seat and closed the shell around him. Saul sat in the pilot's seat to have a chat with his brother about how they should proceed from here. When they finished and agreed to their next few steps, Saul stood up.

"Saul," Buddy said, "am I to understand that you wish Daisy and me to abandon you here?"

"Yes, unless one of the girls wishes to return with you to Elizabeth."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

"No, I'm not, but this place is going to be real hot real soon, and I can think of better places for you to be."

"Saul, are you sure?" Buddy had taken the protective tone that had kept Saul out of trouble more often than he wished to admit.

"Please, Buddy go. Come back and get me here at dawn. I'll be waiting."

"What if you're not?"

"Buddy, I can barely hang on to Plan A let alone think about Plans B and C. I've never done this before, but I know that if even one of those women dies and I live, I will never forgive myself."

"But that does not mean you have to get yourself killed. You don't do anyone any good dead."

Saul closed his eyes to fight back the tears. "Please, Buddy, please leave me now. I have work to do. You know your job. Please do it, because I asked you."



"I don't like this and neither does Daisy. Oh, we have incoming."

Saul hopped out the hatch and yelled to the three girls, "If anyone wants to go back with Daisy or Buddy, now is your last chance."

Fiona stated flatly. "I'm staying."

Rebecca said, "I am not leaving."

Sylvia said, "Let's go rescue my mother."

Buddy and Daisy rolled down the road and took off headed back for the hole in the defense net where Elizabeth and Peter were parked.

Saul and the girls climbed into Mrs. Winthrop's car and headed for the spaceport. Saul hoped that the windshield sticker he saw would grant him the ability to pass through the guard gate without being challenged. It was possible that the guard did not know the younger Winthrop and would mistake Saul for him. Saul had taken his wallet and ID just to be sure.

Driving as carefully as he knew how, Saul drove along a divided parkway as an army of emergency and military vehicles raced in the other direction under lights and sirens. Finding a cul-de-sac with houses under construction, they pulled off and sat in one of the unfinished driveways out of sight of the main road until dusk began to fall. They left the car and climbed a wooded hillside where they could see the spaceport. As Saul had guessed, the spaceport was operating on emergency generators as were many of the public buildings but the residential areas were all dark except for some battery operated lights and candles flickering in the windows. Saul felt bad about the discomfort he was causing these people, but he rationalized that it was much less than it would have been if they had merely blasted their way in the way his grandfather had originally planned.

Once dusk fell, the next step of the plan was executed. Elizabeth took control of all the planet's communications satellites. In her haughty "Queen Elizabeth" voice she broadcast the feed from a hand held camera in the galley of one of the passenger modules. "Citizens of Stonebridge! I am the great Queen Elizabeth! I have captured two hundred and fifty of your daughters."

The camera panned across the room. The children were in weightlessness. Some of the children were wrapped in blankets. Some obviously had been sick. Others had towels over their shoulders. Some of the littler ones were crying, and some of the older ones were trying to get younger ones to eat. They clearly were miserable. Many were frightened, but none of them appeared to have been harmed.

"Queen Elizabeth" spoke again. "One of your leaders has captured some of my citizens and is torturing them. You see how we treat our captives."

The camera zoomed on a small girl eating a bar of dried fruit. The label clearly stated that the fruit came from Homestead. "Your commanders torture and murder yours. We demand that our citizens be returned to us alive and unharmed. You have until twenty-one hundred hours local time to deliver all the captives to the school from which these children were taken. We will send a ship to recover them. If they are unharmed, we will return your children to you fed and rested. If not, you will never see them again."

The message repeated across all the broadcast channels as the camera picked out one child after another. Before the end of the broadcast the camera came to rest on Mrs. Winthrop and her three

children sitting at a table attempting to get used to eating in weightlessness.

“So, do we go back to the school?” Sylvia asked.

“No,” Saul said, “there’s no way they will let any of them go. Buddy should have moved the AARV’s next to the school by then and he can monitor the area from the AARV’s sensors. I hope I can draw enough attention out there so we can hit the spaceport while they are looking for us.”

“That’s pretty slick,” Sylvia said. “I never would have thought of that.”

“Let’s hope Winthrop doesn’t figure it out. It’s just obvious enough that he might not get it, but there is no sense in merely hoping. We need to be prepared.”

They sat under a copse of trees and waited fearfully until it was time to move. They had seen convoys move down the road toward the school. Fifteen minutes before the deadline, they climbed back into the car and headed for the spaceport. At exactly 21 hundred hours, “Queen Elizabeth” announced.

“You have tried to deceive me! Those are not my people! You have been warned. Now you will pay the price.”

Sylvia turned to Saul anxiously, “How did you know those were not our parents?”

“No transponders. The AARV can sense a transponder a kilometer away. That’s why they are used for search and rescue.”

A pair of Disruptor missiles slid through the planet’s defenses and passed over the school destroying the ignition and firing systems in all the vehicles within a kilometer of the school. The missiles then passed out to sea and self destructed.

“Well, gang, we have two AARV’s airborne. The Disruptor missiles came from one of the P I ships so we know they’re in place. Now, if the MMARV’s arrived, we can move in.”

“How do you know the Disruptor came from a PI?” Sylvia asked as they drove toward the spaceport.

“AARV’s only carry cannon, explosive missiles and lasers,” Saul replied.

As they approached the unmanned gate, Saul said, “You know, there is something I didn’t think of. What if they programmed the gate’s card swipe to recognize that Taylor’s card is no good?”

“We shoot our way in,” Fiona said rolling down her window and pointing the laser rifle out of the car.

Saul pulled up to the gate and swiped the card. The gate opened and they drove through. As soon as the gate closed behind them alarms sounded all over the installation. “Everybody out! Shoot out the lights!” Saul shouted. Saul stopped the car long enough for them to roll out to the ground. “This is going to be messy!” Saul said as he gunned the car and aimed it for the chain link fence ahead of him. He shifted the car into neutral and rolled out himself. He rolled over a few times after he hit the

ground, but while his fight suit would never be space worthy again, he was not injured. The girls ran over to him taking out lights with their laser rifles as they ran.

"I'm all right!" Saul shouted as he regained his feet. "That way!" He pointed through the hole the car had made in the fence.

They heard helicopters winding up to take off, but in the darkness overhead they heard the distinctive whoosh of an AARV. Two helicopters fell back to the ground in flames.

"So much for the advantage of darkness," Saul muttered.

The AARV's marched down the flight line destroying everything in their path. The flight line was brilliantly illuminated by the burning fuel and by the exploding ordinance on the destroyed aircraft. Having destroyed the aircraft using only their lasers, the AARV's went after the control tower. Other than small arms fire, nothing had offered them any resistance so to this point they had only used their lasers. For the assault on the tower, Buddy directed them to fire one missile each. The tower crumbled like a house of cards.

Running from the cover of one building to the next, Saul and the three girls worked their way toward the flight line. They knew that sooner or later they would run into ground troops and they hoped the MMARV's arrived before that happened. Most of the soldiers they saw were fleeing the carnage on the flight line as fast as they could run.

Saul heard the sound of helicopters approaching from the diversion at the school. The AARV's sped off to deal with them. The helicopters must have been outside the Disruptor missiles' range or they would have been disabled. With the land vehicles disabled, even at a forced march, the ground troops had a couple of hours before they could return to the spaceport. In the light of the fires from the burning aircraft, Saul could see well staffed gun emplacements and armored vehicles around the building that they had identified as the prison where the Marines were being held.

In the direction where Saul knew the water must lie, he saw a flash. A flare lit up the sky. Search lights aimed out toward the water, but were quickly extinguished. Perimeter security lights winked out one by one. Saul relaxed a little. J T was the master at remotely controlling multiple MMARV units. Four of them should be crawling up the beach and destroying anything that challenged them. The soldiers in the gun emplacements turned their attention to the water. Four shells, obviously fired from each of the MMARV's single large cannon landed on four of the gun emplacements. Soldiers, alive, dead and wounded, flew out of the explosions. A second volley tore into the armored vehicles. Tracked mobile artillery broke out of hiding to face the MMARV's they could not see. Coal black and invisible in the night except for the flash of their gun barrels, the MMARV absorbed the radar seeking to locate them for the big guns located around the spaceport's perimeter.

The AARV's returned from their helicopter demolition and dropped anti-personnel missiles between the block building and the soldiers gathered to protect it. Saul and the girls could hear the screams from where they were. A squad of four soldiers ran past their position. One of the fleeing soldiers turned and spotted them hiding in the shadows. Before he finished alerting his buddies, Saul cut him down. Without even thinking, the girls each killed a member of the squad before they had time to aim their weapons. Somehow killing ship-to-ship was not the same as what they had just done.

Saul and the girls advanced from one bit of cover to the next, slowly making their way toward the prison. They ran into several individual soldiers and small squads foolish enough to challenge them.

They left a trail of bodies as they advanced toward the prison. They looped around so they could approach from the side away from where the MMARV's were assaulting the ground forces. They found a gun emplacement guarding the entrance. They huddled in the shadows debating their next move. Realizing that radio silence was no longer as important as it once was, Saul called J. T. and asked him to deploy one of the MMARV's to the other side of the building. They heard the familiar whoosh of the AARV, and the gun emplacement turned into a ball of fire. One soldier, apparently uninjured, ran panic stricken in their direction.

"We need to capture him," Saul said calmly.

"And how do you propose to do that?" Fiona asked.

"Cover me," Saul replied. He put down his rifle and crouched down behind a low wall. As the soldier came near, Saul sprinted out in front of him and tackled him around the legs. The soldier sprawled forward. Saul and the girls dragged him back to their hiding place.

"Do you speak Standard?" Saul demanded.

The soldier nodded.

"Do you know where the prisoners are?" Saul pressed.

"Some of them. I swear I don't know where the rest are! Don't kill me!"

"Take me to the ones you do know."

"Please don't make me do this," the soldier cried.

"Do you want to die now or have a chance at living?"

"I'll die either way. If they find out I helped you, they'll kill me."

"If you help us and we get out of here alive, you can come with us, and we won't kill you," Fiona assured him.

The soldier looked at her skeptically. "Promise you won't kill me?"

Suddenly the soldier appeared to be younger than Saul and immature.

"I promise," Fiona assured him. "Let's go."

A MMARV came around the building clearing a path in front of it. The young soldier shrank back in horror. "It's a monster!"

Saul grinned. "It's my monster. Lead on."

The soldier pointed at the main door. The MMARV had figured that much on its own and with a single cannon shell blew the door open. The MMARV unit that Rachel had used in her first tour of duty was battery powered. This version carried a small fission reactor. As was typical of all fission reactors, it needed a huge heat sink. One of the engineers had developed a brilliant solution to the problem. Attached to the front of the MMARV was a plow, not unlike a snow plow. In addition to radiating the reactor's heat, this plow allowed the MMARV to break through debris that would have tangled in the treads of earlier units and to punch through any standard building wall. Obviously, thick armor plate or

thick poured concrete would stop it, but normal building walls were no obstacle in the face of the bite of the plow. The plow also became a shield protecting the unit and any Marines that sought its cover from fire in that direction.

Narrow enough to fit through a standard door, the MMARV advanced through the remains of the double door it had blasted open. It lifted its plow a little and shattered the inner double doors behind them. Prison guards attempted to fire on the MMARV but their shots hit the blade and ricocheted around the confined space of the corridor. The MMARV, Saul and the girls returned fire. Saul reached behind the MMARV and keyed in his access code so he could take manual control. They advanced through the prison, breaking through barriers as they encountered them.

“That one,” the soldier said, “has the men.” He pointed down the hallway. “The women are down there.”

“Marine Lieutenant Terrance Rattigan back away from the door!” Saul shouted.

The MMARV’s laser cut a neat arc around the door lock separating it from the rest of the door. Careful to avoid the still hot edges, Saul pushed the door open with his foot.

The Marines were standing backed against the far wall still in their combat armor.

“Hey there! Little man!” Lt. Rattigan shouted.

“Hey yourself, big guy,” Saul replied. “Let’s go get the women.”

Lt. Rattigan looked at the MMARV. “Are there weapons in the stash behind that thing?”

Saul looked at him. “I don’t know. Are there supposed to be?”

Fiona and Rebecca fired on another prison guard.

Lt. Rattigan popped open a hatch and passed laser rifles to the rest of his squad.

Saul stood in awe of the big man. “Can you drive this?”

“Does a bear do his necessary in the woods?”

Saul opened his mouth to say something and closed it. He handed the MMARV’s control to Lt. Rattigan and said, “The women are that way.”

Lt. Rattigan smiled, patted Saul on the shoulder and said, “Move out!”

Keeping the youngsters and their prisoner protected in their formation, the Marines moved down the hall with practiced precision. They extricated the women Marines and quickly headed back the way they had come. When they reached the outside of the building the other three MMARV’s were waiting for them.

Once outside again, Saul turned to their captive. “Do you have any idea where the rest are?”

“I am not sure, but if I were to guess, I would say in the headquarters building. They say there’s a torture chamber in there, but I don’t know. I swear I’ve never seen it, but you hear stories.”

“Lead on,” Saul said.

The MMARV's and the Marines formed a wedge and advanced across the open area adjacent to the building. The Marines on the ground took control of the MMARV's while J. T. retained control of the AARV's as they flew air support in the darkness overhead. Firing constantly, the small detail advanced on the headquarters building. Mobile artillery and gun emplacements blocked their path.

Lt. Rattigan surveyed the defenses with a set of night vision binoculars he found in the weapons stash. "We could probably blast our way in, but there has to be a better way. We can't bomb it or we'll kill the people we are trying to save."

The captured soldier said, "There is a sort of tunnel. It's like an open trench that leads out the back. If you can loop around that hill to the left you can drop into it and hit the loading dock. If they catch you in the trench you will be sitting ducks, but if you move fast you might make it."

Saul asked Lt. Rattigan, "Can we keep a diversion going here and go that way?"

Lt. Rattigan thought for a second. "Two wings of flankers. You go to the right with Fiona, Rebecca and Sylvia."

He pointed to Madison and Lauren. "You go with them."

He pointed to two of the male Marines. "You come with me. We'll take the left side. We'll meet in the trench. Make sure you take out anything you see that could hit us in the trench. I'll take one MMARV. The rest of you keep them busy out front."

He turned to one of the Marines. "Let the AARV's know what we're doing." He turned around to see that everyone was ready, tossed a couple of grenades from the MMARV's stash to Madison and Lauren and said, "Move out!"

Moving carefully from shadow to shadow, Saul and company followed Madison as she led them around the building. Occasionally she would stop to shoot out a security light, but their progress was unchallenged until they rounded the last corner. A gun emplacement stood guarding the trench. Had they only come from the one side, they would have walked directly into its line of fire. Madison fell to the ground and motioned for the others to get down as well. "When I stand, shoot out every light you can see. Then hit the deck!"

Madison slithered across the ground toward the gun emplacement. When she felt she was within throwing distance, she stood and lobbed two grenades into the gun emplacement. Within seconds every light source within range winked out. The explosion threw debris over a wide area, and Madison was wounded when some of it fell on her. Gritting her teeth through the pain, she worked her way back to the others. When Saul asked her what he should do for her, she said, "Finish the mission, soldier!"

Seconds later, another explosion ripped open the night on the other side of the trench answering a question that had been bothering them.

Supporting Madison as they ran, the group ran for the trench. It sloped downward as it entered the building. Saul paused long enough to agonize for the truck drivers who had to back trucks down that long narrow ramp before dropping into the waist deep trench. Lauren followed him down. Fiona,

Rebecca and Sylvia lowered Madison to them, and they headed for the loading dock. They heard the MMARV approach behind them. It raced down the trench. They flattened themselves against the trench walls as it sped by with Lt. Rattigan in hot pursuit. The rest of his detail followed behind.

For a moment Saul was afraid that the MMARV would be stopped by the loading dock. The dock was a three foot high wall. Still racing forward, the MMARV raised its plow shield and placed it on the dock. It then pushed down on the dock until the front of its treads were at dock height. The forward motion pushed the treads to the point where they bit on the edge of the dock and carried the MMARV up and on to the dock. With a tremendous scraping noise as the plow bit into the concrete floor, the MMARV's inertia carried it through the loading door and into the building's shipping and receiving area.

Lt. Rattigan, imitating the MMARV's technique, placed his hands on the dock and pulled his feet up between them as he raced to keep up with the MMARV. Saul followed right behind. The rest of the detail spotted the stairs and used those. A frightened soldier stood inside backed against the wall.

"Where is the torture room?" Saul shouted at him.

The soldier hesitated. Saul punched him in the jaw.

"Where is the torture room?"

The soldier pointed.

"Take me!"

Shots rang out from the corridor ahead of them. The MMARV automatically returned the fire which quickly stopped. Saul grabbed the soldier and pushed him in the direction he had pointed. The MMARV lead the way as the soldier directed them through a maze of corridors. They met opposition at several points. Most of the time the MMARV cleared the way without assistance. The soldier stopped at the head of a set of stairs.

"At the bottom. Straight ahead."

The MMARV could not make the corner at the stair landing. The stairs did not look as if they would support the MMARV's weight.

"Leave the rifles here," Lt. Rattigan ordered. "Side arms only."

"We don't have side arms," Fiona observed.

"Then keep your rifles, but you may find it will be most effective as a club. Move out!"

Leaving Madison seated on the MMARV's rear seat provided for the purpose of evacuating wounded Marines, the rest of the team descended the stairs with Lt. Rattigan leading. The stairs exited into a corridor that ran perpendicular to the direction of the stairs. The Marines checked the corridors in both directions and found no resistance. Lt Rattigan pointed to the four who still had their rifles. "Burn out the lock."

The four laser rifles cut a jagged hole in the door and the Marines pulled it open.

Saul was the first through the door. Dropping his rifle as he ran, he crossed the length of the room where so many of the women he loved were strapped naked to tables bruised and bleeding. Winthrop was on top of his mother raping her and beating her. Her blood was on his hands and the

front of his naked body. In a blind rage, Saul ignored the four men raping and beating other women and the two that were torturing the men. He did not hear their screams nor the shouts as he and the Marines blasted into the room. With all the force he could muster he punched Winthrop in the face so hard that the man fell off the table on to the floor. As Winthrop tried to get up Saul pummeled him with his bare fists until the man's face was a bloody pulp. Saul kicked Winthrop in the chest forcing him on to his back and leaped on top of him and continued to destroy the man's face, beating back all of the man's attempts to defend himself although Winthrop was enough larger than Saul that his additional reach should have been some advantage. Winthrop was unable to land a single hit on Saul as Saul rained blow after blow on the man pinned to the floor.

Lt. Rattigan was the second through the door. In quick succession, he grabbed two of the men on the tables and threw them head first into the wall crushing their skulls. The remainder of the Marines dispatched the rest of the soldiers in similar fashion until only Winthrop remained alive where Saul continued to thrash him. Lt. Rattigan lifted Saul off Winthrop and held him off the ground while Winthrop regained his feet.

"Untie them and get them to the surface!" Lt. Rattigan shouted. "Call a med ship! Get them out of here!"

As he said that, they heard the crash as the remainder of the MMARV's broke through the building's front entrance. Not wanting to witness the horror any longer, Fiona, Rebecca and Sylvia announced that they were going to lead the others down and raced up the stairs to the waiting MMARV.

Saul trembled with fury as Lt. Rattigan held him. Winthrop stood and backed against the wall knowing that if this giant of a man released this boy half his size, the boy would kill him. Saul watched as Winthrop's blood mixed with his mother's as it ran down his chest. Fortunately Rachel was unconscious. Had she screamed in pain as the others had when they were lifted from the tables, there would have been some doubt as to whether even Lt. Rattigan's great strength could have kept Saul from attacking Winthrop again. Saul glared at the terrified Swordsman commander. He wondered how many he had tortured and killed in this room. How many had there been for whom there was no hope of rescue? What was wrong with a man to whom it was more important to attack his prisoners than it was to lead the defense of his city? How could this happen? Saul finally quit squirming and Lt. Rattigan put him down. Lt. Rattigan put his hand on Saul's shoulder never taking his eyes off Winthrop.

"Justice is not ours, sayest the Lord."

Saul took a deep breath and sighed. He nodded slowly. The three of them and the dead bodies of the Swordsmen soldiers were all that remained in the room. Saul noticed small cameras mounted up in the corners of the room and over each table. He wondered if everything that occurred in this room was recorded. He backed away so Lt. Rattigan could bind Winthrop's hands. With his side arm pressed against Winthrop's back, Lt. Rattigan forced Winthrop out of the room and up the stairs. Saul followed behind. He climbed the stairs slowly and heavily. They would still have to fight their way back to the flight line so that they could evacuate the injured, and he would need to return the prisoners he had taken that afternoon. Was it only that afternoon? It seemed so long ago. He was tired of fighting already.

They followed the trail of blood up the stairs and out to the front door. The MMARV they had left at the top of the stairs was gone. Saul assumed that Madison or one of the other Marines had driven



it out the way they had come in. Judging by the distribution of dripped blood in the building's lobby, they could see where the other MMARV's had been loaded with the injured and had headed back out. They warily exited the building into the darkness and were totally unprepared for the sudden illumination of a half dozen camera lights from the mobile cameras of the Constant News Channel Combat News Specialist Team.

Saul blinked in the sudden light. Taking advantage of the surprise, Winthrop bolted, his naked feet leaving bloody prints as he tried to run. The camera crews backed out of his way while they made sure they got good shots of his face and bloody body. Lt. Rattigan sprinted after him and in half a dozen steps had grabbed Winthrop by the ties that held his arms. Saul, his face and hands spattered with blood, stood on the top of the steps and looked around bewildered. Were they to fight their way back to the flight line in view of a swarm of news cameras? How did they get here? Lt. Rattigan pushed Winthrop in the direction of the flight line. Saul could see the MMARV's headed toward the flight line illuminated by the lights of the news cameras. There were no sounds of gun fire. There were no laser streaks through the misty darkness. Winthrop stumbled and Lt. Rattigan pulled him to his feet. Saul walked silently behind. Saul appreciated the fact that none of these reporters were shouting questions at him. He had seen the Combat News Team shout questions at dying soldiers under enemy fire as if somehow their status as reporters shielded from danger and from responsibility for their actions. Winthrop stumbled again and Lt. Rattigan picked him up again. Saul wondered what an outside observer might think of this parade as he dragged himself toward the flight line. Winthrop stumbled again and Lt. Rattigan released his hands so if he stumbled again he could get himself up. No sooner had he done that than Winthrop grabbed Lt. Rattigan's service revolver from its holster.

Saul saw the revealing look on Winthrop's face before he made his grab for the gun. In a move he had seen his grandfather do many times in target practice, he released his grandfather snub nosed 38 which had been conveniently left on the ship when he had descended to the surface, from its holster on the inside of his right bicep. Without hesitating, as if he was as accomplished with the weapon as his grandfather was, gripping the weapon firmly in his hand, he raised the gun and shot Winthrop between the eyes. He then proceeded to empty the rest of the shells into the falling man's face in full view of the news cameras. Saul continued to pull the trigger on the empty gun until a pair of familiar arms wrapped around him to stop him. Lt. Rattigan picked up his revolver from where Winthrop had dropped it and put it back in his holster. He put his arm around Saul and together they headed for the flight line.

They could see the AARV's circling overhead as the med ship came in. The med ship landed and taxied to the hangar where everything had started less than twenty-four hours ago. There was no resistance.

Lt. Rattigan softly said, "Thank you."

Saul replied, "You're welcome, and thank you."

Saul and Lt. Rattigan reached the flight line as the last of the torture victims were strapped in.

"All aboard!" Lt. Rattigan shouted.

"No," Saul said softly, "I need to get the children back to their families."

"How do you plan on doing that?" Fiona challenged.

"I don't know yet, but we should do it at the school," Saul said.

Fiona sighed. "Then, I'm staying with you."

"Rebecca, Sylvia, go with them, they need you up there more than we need you here," Saul ordered.

"Little man, you are a nut case," Lt. Rattigan said under his breath. "I need three volunteers to stay here. The rest of you get on that ship." The med ship taxied out with what appeared to be all personnel. The four MMARV's headed for the beach where they had driven up to begin the attack. Saul, Fiona and the two smallest Marines rode inside the MMARV's now empty weapons caches. Lt. Rattigan and one other Marine rode on top shielded from view by the MMARV's gun turret.

As they drove back to the school, Saul used the MMARV's encrypted communications system to explain the remainder of his plan.

Within an hour, Moses called back. "They don't want to go."

"What?" Saul exploded, hurting his ears as his voice echoed off the walls of the tiny weapons cache.

"Mrs. Winthrop is their leader. She says the women and all the girls over the age of twelve would rather stay with us. They saw the CNC broadcast. It was pretty ugly. A lot of their husbands are dead. Do you know what happens to a Swordsman woman when her husband dies?"

"No," Saul replied.

"She and her children are forced to go live in the home of the husband's nearest male relative where she becomes little better than a sex slave."

"So now what do we do?" Saul asked.

"We agreed that those twelve and older who wanted to stay could stay. We also agreed that if those who wanted to stay had younger sisters, they could stay too. Those that did not want to stay and those too young to speak for themselves we would send back to the school."

"How many does that leave to go back?" Saul asked.

"Thirty."

"Thirty out of two hundred and fifty?"

"Yup."

Saul sighed. This was not going well at all. He had hoped to avoid being tried for kidnapping. Of course with the rest of what he had done today, he supposed a kidnapping charge was the least of his worries.

"We still need to give back those that want to go back."

"Dawn then, at the school?" Moses asked.

"Yes, please."

“Drive safe.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, hey, how’s Mom?” Saul asked.

“Still in surgery. Dad and Uncle Josh are working on her. Dad says she’ll live. Everyone else is under sedation until Dad can get to them, but none of the injuries are life threatening like Mom’s were.”

“How’s Dad doing?”

“You know Dad, Rock of Gibraltar. He’ll crash later. By that time we’ll be half way back.”

Elizabeth overrode what was left of the planet’s broadcast system to alert the parents of the missing children that those children who had not elected to stay on the ship would be available for pickup at dawn at the school from which they had been taken.

The MMARV parade pulled onto the school grounds before dawn. The machines the Disruptor missiles had disabled littered the road that they would need to use as a runway. The MMARV’s blades pushed the dead vehicles out of the way. In the cold gray light of the false dawn, Saul saw a familiar shape appear over the water at the end of the long road. Buddy touched down as gently as if he were landing on eggshells. Daisy rolled in behind him. Less than twenty-four hours ago, Saul doubted he would ever see them again. He could not recall being happier to see them than he was right now. Buddy and Daisy popped open their weapons pods prepared for the assault they were sure was coming. The MMARV’s were arrayed along the roadway. The AARV’s swooshed by overhead.

In the retreating darkness, Saul could see a line of cars coming down the road from town. He sent the AARV’s to investigate. They reported only civilian vehicles. There were no military vehicles. Saul was not worried about helicopters because Buddy had reported that there were no helicopters left. All of the combat aircraft had been destroyed. Other than foot soldiers for whom such an assault would be suicidal, there was no one left to attack them.

The med ship arrived as the darkness of night turned into the long shadows of dawn. Ellie Mae and Elvira had accompanied the children since none of the Swordsmen women would do it. They quietly lined the children up at the edge of the pavement and had them sit on blankets with more blankets wrapped around them. In order to keep the children calm, they had the children sing learning songs and nursery rhymes while they waited.

The first of the cars arrived. The news teams arrived right behind them. A woman got out of the first car. Her two daughters jumped up from the edge of the pavement and ran to greet her. She tearfully hugged them, and they walked together back toward the car. Saul was beginning to feel better until the woman opened the trunk of the car and pulled out four big suitcases. Giving the handle of one suitcase to each girl and taking two herself, she and her daughters raced for the open ramp of the med ship. Saul stood aghast. The occupants of the next car, all women and girls wearing back packs and each carrying a suitcase, did not bother to see if any of the girls sitting on the pavement belonged to them. Since none of the children appeared to recognize them, Saul concluded that these women were not related and were taking advantage of the opportunity to escape.

Saul looked at the line of cars approaching the road and called Moses, “Send down all the med ships you can. It’s an evacuation!”

Mimi and J. T. had been controlling the AARV's from a med ship nearby and arrived as the first ship was closing its doors. By the time their ship was full, there were only two sisters left huddled together on the pavement. All the other children had been loaded back on the ships by their mothers and evacuated. None had returned to the city. Still the cars kept coming. Fiona pulled out one young mother with two girls the same ages as the two who were left while they waited quietly standing in line for the third ship. "Do you know who they belong to?" She asked anxiously.

The woman and her daughters went to talk to the two little girls. The woman came back to Fiona.

"We'll take them with us. Here is their mother's name and address. It's not a good neighborhood. I don't think their mother will come for them."

The third med ship cleared the runway when the first of the men showed up angry that their women had escaped. Buddy took control of one of the MMARV's, and it ambled to face the angry mob. The fourth med ship arrived. Buddy parked two of the MMARV's so they flanked its loading ramp. Women and children flooded up the ramp. One man tried to grab one of the women as she ran to the ramp. The MMARV swatted the man with its gun barrel and sent him flying backwards. The med ships shuttled as fast as they could get to Elizabeth and return. Throughout the day, whenever someone tried to prevent a departure, the MMARV's under Buddy and Daisy's control interceded and sent the offender sprawling. Some hunters who tried to take positions to fire on one of the departing med ships found that AARV's under the P I ships' control were quite capable of dealing with small arms fire.

One at a time, Lt. Rattigan sent his Marines up in the med ships as it became apparent that they were not needed. When the flood of refugees finally stopped, he suggested that Saul and Fiona ride the last med ship.

"No, thanks, I need to make sure the equipment is recovered," Saul replied.

Saul heard Buddy laugh. "Saul, ride home with Daisy and Fiona. I'll pick up your toys."

"You sure?" Saul asked.

"Positive."

Lt. Rattigan boarded the last med ship. Saul and Fiona boarded Daisy and followed the med ship into space.

The med ship that Sabrina had flown that no longer had seats in it returned to the roadway under Buddy's careful control. The four MMARV's dutifully rolled up the ramps and shut themselves down.

The med ship left and Buddy followed it.

A few hours later, the med ship with no seats landed on an empty hard packed beach a hundred kilometers from the spaceport. Two AARV's landed on the sand behind it and rolled into the open bay and shut themselves down. Under Buddy's control from a low orbit, the med ship that picked up the last of Saul's toys headed for Elizabeth.

The battle for Stonebridge had taken thirty-six hours. Out of a population of 200,000, 500 military personnel had died, another 350 were wounded. No civilians had been harmed. 5,000 women

and children had fled for parts unknown. The attacking force had taken no fatalities.

With all personnel and equipment accounted for, Elizabeth and Peter hyper jumped for Stellar  
Interstellar Headquarters.

## THIRD GENERATION - CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

AT ISAAC'S REQUEST, ELIZABETH sealed off the hospital section of the ship. The only people allowed to pass in or out were Ellie Mae and Elvira. Even though she was not injured, Sabrina volunteered to be locked in with the others so she could help care for them. Madison was treated for her wounds and after a few days in the hospital section was released to her Marine colleagues. A few of the refugees who needed medical attention were admitted and released. The battle group dropped out of hyperspace at the designated intercept location and requested clearance to enter the system.

Elizabeth and Peter were immediately surrounded by a fleet of small ships that included two Combat News reconnaissance drones. It looked as if the secret headquarters was secret no longer.

A voice broke the silence on the bridge. "Independent Colony Ship Queen Elizabeth, please stand by to accept the harbor pilot."

Saul recognized the voice as belonging to the harbor master's assistant who had dressed him down for not following procedures.

"Elizabeth, please illuminate docking port two. Prepare to accept visitors," Saul said softly.

"Docking port two, aye," Elizabeth replied.

Saul responded, "The Queen Elizabeth stands ready to welcome the harbor pilot. Please proceed to the illuminated docking port."

Ambrosia turned to Moses. "When did we become a colony ship?"

"Right now. I can think of worse occupations for a big ship," Moses replied.

"I like it," Elizabeth stated proudly. "It is a glorious and honorable mission. I shall enjoy it."

Fiona grinned and said. "Well, there you have it. A fully equipped, self defending colony ship with all the support needed to establish a settlement on a new planet. It certainly beats being the Lone Ranger in space."

"Fiona, We should go greet the pilot?" Saul suggested.

"Does this mean we're finally home?" Fiona asked.

"Yes."

Fiona and Saul headed aft toward the docking port reception lobby. While they waited, for the first time since they had left on the mission, Saul tried to steal a kiss. Fiona had no intention of letting him get away with merely a stolen kiss and held him tightly. They were locked in embrace when the port door opened. The assistant harbor master's guffaw broke them apart red with embarrassment. Wordless except for his laughter, he held his arm out for them to guide him and the pilot to the bridge.

The pilot took control and called in the harbor tugs. Once the ship was gliding smoothly toward the dock, the assistant harbor master said to no one in particular, "Well kids, you had a tough one out there, but we're glad you're back."

“Thank you.”

“I suspect it won't be long before you go off on another adventure, but remember, whatever happens, you will always have friends here.”

Docking proceeded without incident. Isaac released all the men who had been in his care to an out patient clinic. The women he had transferred to a hospital for further treatment.

The Swordsman refugees were taken off the ship and moved to quarters in the main residential area of the shipyard. Those old enough to work were given occupational and aptitude tests. All were given academic placement exams. It quickly became obvious that the massive shipping company viewed these people as potential new employees and the only question was where they fit in the organization. A few were offered employment at the shipyard. Others were advised to seek additional training, some of which was available there and some of which would mean attending schools in other places. Some, particularly the more adventurous, were merged into the growing population who would be sent to establish a new colony. Within two weeks, the entire refugee population had been assimilated and reassigned.

Two weeks after docking, Isaac released everyone except for Rachel and Wendy. The “children” had elected to stay on the ship and were overjoyed when their mothers returned. Rachel and Wendy's condition had improved to the point where Isaac and Joshua felt comfortable returning to the ship at night to be with the children. For the next week, the group gathered every evening for dinner in the battleship section's galley since even though it was the smallest galley on the ship, it was more than adequate for them.

Isaac and Joshua conducted therapy sessions for the children to help them cope with what had just happened, but it quickly became obvious to the children that Isaac and Joshua needed the sessions as much as anyone else.

Three weeks after docking, Wendy was allowed to return to the ship. Only Rachel remained hospitalized. Isaac spent as much time as he could with her balancing the need to support his family with the need to heal his wife.

As soon as he had been well enough to do so Greg had gone to the games store and purchased every war simulation he could get his hands on. He had World War II games, World War I games, games from the great Roman conquests, a series on Napoleon's battles, a couple of series on naval warfare and even some of the earliest space warfare games that had been popular before Pirates made them look amateurish. He had purchased enough gaming consoles that any of the children that wanted to play could do so. Elizabeth linked the weapons control suites in the ships to the gaming consoles so they could play intense multi-player scenarios. So, while they should have been thinking about academics, they were venting their anger on computer images of enemies instead of real people.

Isaac broke down during the third week after docking. Dr. Terrell, who had been assisting him since they docked, ordered him isolated and force fed nutritional supplements until he regained his strength. Joshua passed out one evening over dinner and did not wake up for two days. Neither of them had treated their own injuries and Dr. Terrell took advantage of their collapse to reset their broken bones.

Dr. Terrell released Rachel, Isaac and Joshua at the same time. Along with some of the hospital staff, the Marines who had accompanied them and some shipyard staff members who had been especially helpful, the family gathered in the galley for a celebratory dinner.

The celebration went well into the night. Six hours after the party had started, Warren Elias Rothschild wandered in the unguarded door. Still in his flight suit, he had just arrived. Silently smiling, he hugged each of the women in turn paying attention to not aggravate their healing injuries and shook hands with the men except for Saul who he hugged and slapped on the back. There were those who thought he brushed back tears when he hugged Rachel and Wendy, but no one was certain. When he finished hugging and shaking hands he ended with Sabrina who he gave a long and passionate kiss.

Greg joked, "Well, something is right with the world!"

Warren picked up a glass and rapped on it with a spoon for attention. No one in the room had seen him this happy. "Ladies and Gentlemen, in no small measure due to the actions you have undertaken, we have landed the biggest contract in the company's history. I will spare you the details, but it is a five year contract where before we have operated year to year. News of your action on Stonebridge helped me seal the deal."

Warren looked around the news. "So, that's the good news, but I have great news! I have secured placement for Saul, Fiona, Rebecca and Moses at the Space Force Academy with the express provision that after graduation, they will report back here to work with our security forces."

He looked like a little boy that had turned in his first all "A" report card.

Moses shot a quick look at Ambrosia. "Better tell him," she said softly.

"Um, excuse me sir, but I don't want to go to the Academy. This business at Stonebridge convinced me of what I already believed that I do not want to do this anymore. I want to find a nice hospital somewhere and be a normal doctor. I have a standing offer at the Medical University of Eretz that I can go there and start with any regular class after my eighteenth birthday. I was hoping to take them up on that offer for this next term."

Warren looked at Isaac, "Is this true?"

"Yes, much to his father's joy and his mother's chagrin." Isaac smiled and Rachel nodded.

"There are nice hospitals in many of our shipyards where I am sure a doctor of your skills would be welcome. What can I do to help?"

"First, and we haven't told anyone yet, but Ambrosia and I would like to be married. We would like you to attend."

The room exploded in joyous pandemonium. When the noise finally calmed down, Warren said, "That was easy. What's the second?"

"Give us permission to book passage on one of your freighters headed for Eretz," Moses said.

"Consider it done! A toast to the happy couple!" Warren exclaimed.

When the room had quieted down Sylvia stood for attention. "Since Moses does not want to go to the Academy, do you think I could go in his place?"

Alina looked at her daughter in surprise. "I thought you didn't want to go to the Academy!"



"I didn't until Stonebridge. Now I do. I think Saul, Fiona, Rebecca, and me make a great team. I would like to go with them."

Saul raised his hand in the air and shouted, "Woo Hoo! Score!"

Fiona raised her hand and knuckle bumped with Sylvia.

Warren grinned, "Well, since you are the daughter of an Academy graduate it should be simple. Consider it done."

Fiona stood and said, "While we making announcements," she pulled Saul to his feet, "we would also like to be married before we go to the Academy."

Fiona's announcement was met with much less surprise than Moses' because Saul and Fiona had been a forgone conclusion since they left Eretz.

Saul picked up where Fiona left off. "Because of the difference in our religions, we have decided on a civil ceremony. We would like to be married by a ship's captain. A ship's captain can perform a wedding, and Grandpa Greg is a ship's captain, and we would like him to perform the wedding here in this galley."

"Technically the ship has to be in transit." David Shapiro, the only member of Rachel's original "battle group" to not go to Stonebridge and their legal expert, corrected. "And there is some question as to whether Greg or Rachel is actually the captain in legal terms, but frankly as long as a competent authorized local person signs the paperwork, little else matters. In fact, under the Jewish tradition, there need only be the person performing the ceremony, the couple and two witnesses. I think we can find a way to make this work."

Warren shook his head and said, "Lawyers!"

The double wedding proceeded as planned. The two ceremonies were short, and the party was long. It is amazing how rowdy a party can get even if there is no alcohol involved.

After the party, Saul and Fiona retired to their quarters. "So how do you feel, Mrs. Cohen?" Saul asked as he wrapped his arms around her.

"Like the second happiest woman in the world," Fiona replied.

"Only the second? Who's happier?"

"Your mother, that she lived to see the day."

Moses and Ambrosia left two days later on a convoy that would make several stops before it reached Eretz. Sabrina and her escort ship were assigned to the convoy. Sabrina commented that it would feel awkward traveling without Fiona, but she picked up the widow and infant daughter of a shipyard worker who had been killed in an accident to travel with her.

Three days after that, Elizabeth left with Rachel's entire original battle group and a full compliment of military and medical personnel as well as 6,000 colonists. The destination was the system where so many ships had gone missing and Warren hoped he might find the first contact with an

alien race of space travelers. A few of the unmanned probes had gotten through and reported that a habitable planet did exist, and there was an energy source on the surface that indicated that the planet might currently be inhabited. Data was sketchy at best, but what little there was looked good.

Greg, Avi, Saul and Fiona watched the task force depart. Elizabeth led the formation with her support ships behind her. Greg commented how when he first saw Peter that he was the biggest ship he had ever seen. Now, he was dwarfed by each of Elizabeth's massive passenger cargo sections.

Once the ships had passed out of sight, Saul asked, "Do you think we'll ever see them again?"

Greg sighed. "I ask that question every time a ship leaves port. There is no way to know."

Fiona looked her in-laws and asked, "What are you doing from here?"

"We're going to visit some old friends, and I think we may retire," Avi said.

"Where would you retire to?"

"We were thinking of going back to Homestead and rebuilding the house where the girls grew up. It was nice there," Avi said.

Saul, Fiona, Rebecca and Sylvia met their earth bound freighter three days later. Greg and Avi saw them off as they headed for Earth, the Academy and another great adventure.

Of the half dozen freighters in the convoy, Warren had insisted that they travel on one particular freighter piloted by an old friend with whom he had traveled many times. The captain of the freighter was a portly old man who, with his wife, had piloted freighters for half a century. Their children were grown and gone. They welcomed the four young travelers with open arms. Captain John McGee was a jovial man with a definite preference for off color humor and bad puns. His wife, Catherine, moaned and groaned at his humor, but she loved him so much that none of it mattered. She could be as ribald as he was and loved the sensual nature of their relationship. Captain McGee had few rules on his ship and specifically ignored some company policies. The young travelers guessed correctly that this attitude toward the rules was part of why Warren insisted they be assigned to this ship. Instead of twenty-four hour shifts, the ship ran a sixteen hour day, and everyone slept eight. As McGee put it, the ship was smarter than all of them put together and did not need them to tell it if it had a problem. If it did, it was perfectly capable of waking them.

Captain McGee also ignored the rule on alcohol on the ship. On several occasions he got his young passengers roaring, falling down, sick in the morning, drunk. He claimed it was an experience that they needed to have before they got to the Academy where a wide variety of intoxicants were more readily available than anyone wanted to admit. Many of his crew had been with him for a very long time. This was his third ship. Each time he had been sent back to the shipyard to prototype a new model, and he got to keep the first one off the production line. He had modifications to this one made while it was still in the yard. Normally the captain's quarters are immediately behind the bridge. He moved the galley behind the bridge and took out the wall between them. The kitchen was beyond the galley, and his quarters were next to the kitchen. The crew and passenger quarters were beyond that. He claimed it was because he and his wife liked to raid the ice cream locker in the middle of the night "barefoot" and they would rather not frighten anyone who might see them. Having the galley next to the bridge made his insistence that everyone eat together much easier to accomplish.

The ship made two stops on its way to earth. Saul, Fiona, Rebecca and Sylvia took advantage of

the stops and shopped for gifts for the McGee's and the crew. None of the gifts were expensive, but it made the stop more fun, and the McGee's appreciated the thought.

The most important thing the McGee's taught the newlyweds in their earthy off-color way, was something they could not learn from their parents. They could not have learned it from Fiona's single parent mom or from Saul's "tiger by the tail" parents. They learned to love each other. They learned the difference between having sex and making love.

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER ONE

**R**ACHEL SAT IN THE SEAT she had occupied at the start of her career and felt at home. Of course, the seat itself and the console in front of it had been replaced because the originals had been destroyed, but that did not matter to her. It was her ship, and she was home. Her eyes swept across the bridge. Every seat was occupied. Every staff position had been filled. The Staff Allocation Department at Stellar Interstellar had worked overtime to build her crew. Normally she liked to pick her own crew, but this time she was just as happy that they did it.

Warren had instructed his freighter pilots that anyone from Eretz who wished to join the expedition was to be transported to headquarters at no charge. Rachel was pleased with how many of her former students had made the trip. All of her pilots, fire control officers and munitions specialists came from Eretz. Isaac had no complaints on that score either. With the exception of Dr. Terrell who had been on the retrofit project from the beginning, all of his senior medical staff and many of his nurses had come from Eretz. The engineers, maintenance and all the support personnel including the Marines came from Stellar Interstellar's ranks, some of whom were brought from considerable distance to be part of this effort.

What pleased Rachel the most was the number of her original "battle group" who had decided to forgo a peaceful retirement in favor of the unknown challenges that lay ahead of them. Her husband, Isaac, was Chief Medical Officer. His brother, Joshua, was Chief of Medical Engineering. This team approach to medicine was what they had trained for, and they were thrilled to be back at it. Wendy had moved up from fighter ops to Executive Officer. Rachel had learned that lesson the hard way. High school and Academy buddy, Reuben Abrams was Chief Engineer. His brother Rashi was back where he was at home as Chief of Munitions. Reuben's wife Suwanee had earned her degree in emergency medicine and was responsible for the first responders and medical transport support staffs. Faye Anne Sherman was back at Intelligence, and David Shapiro was her legal officer with his wife Natasha as his assistant.

There had been some changes. Sabrina Mahoney was gone. Alina Darwin had moved up from being a combat pilot to the Chief of Flight Operations. Rashi's wife Esther was back as the pilot of one of the med ships with a copilot straight out of Eretz's pilot training program. Mimi and J T were on Peter's bridge. On their previous missions, Mimi and J T had shuttled back and forth with Peter ferrying supplies and personnel in support of the missions. Now that they had a full crew, they would also fly med ships and the container tug with the kids rotating through the co-pilot positions. Ellie Mae and Elvira ran the food service and housekeeping crews efficiently and gracefully.

Moses and Ambrosia were headed back to Eretz. Saul, Fiona, Rebecca and Sylvia were headed to the Academy, but the rest of the kids were here busily assisting in the hospital as needed. Somehow

6,000 people with time on their hands needed a lot of medical attention.

Rachel may have been at home, but she did not relax. She still hurt from the beating she had taken. Her workouts with Madison were agonizing. Some of her injuries might never heal. More than that, she was concerned about what they did not know about their destination. Somehow, though, having no information seemed better than having bad information. She and Faye Anne had discussed this at length. Faye Anne was uncomfortable with how little they knew about this place they were taking 6,000 potential colonists. Only the knowledge that beyond this system was another recently discovered system that had an only slightly less comfortable planet that they could go to if this did not work out relieved her anxiety.

In the three weeks they were in transit, Rachel visited the schools and common areas in the passenger sections. She encouraged the colonists to maintain their training schedules and stay physically as well as mentally fit. She was open with them about how much they knew and how much they did not know about their destination. Most of all she explained to them the plan that they would use to approach the planet.

They would drop from hyperspace one light day out of the system. They would send in four unmanned probes. They would have to wait two days for the reports the probes returned to arrive. Based on what the probes sent back, they would probably send the two P I ships to investigate whatever the probes found that was of interest. If the probes did not return or were fired on, they would send in the two escort ships along with the P I ships and prepare for battle.

If there was no resistance or after any resistance had been eliminated, they would air drop the Marines and combat engineers along with the necessary equipment to the surface to build a runway. Once the runway was built, they would ferry down construction personnel. As habitable structures were assembled, more people would be ferried down to fill them until all the colonists had been ferried to the surface. The two escort ships would return to regular duty once the planet was secured. Peter would return to headquarters with a shopping list of things that had been forgotten. Rachel had no illusions that everything they would need was in a hold somewhere. Peter would shuttle back and forth, and Elizabeth would stay until one full year had passed. Then, if the colony was able to support itself, Elizabeth and the rest of the fleet would depart leaving behind a ring of satellites and small force of defensive space craft.

Of course, although Rachel never said this, she knew that no plan survives contact with the enemy, and whatever happened, it would not be exactly according to plan.

Expecting the worst and hoping for the best, the task force dropped out of hyperspace. The four probes departed straight and true for their destination. The wait for the return signals was agonizing. While they were waiting hanging in space, many of the colonists had their first extended experience with weightlessness. Some of them handled it better than others. The hospital staff dispensed a lot of anti nausea medications during those two days. As would be expected, most of the school aged children adapted quicker than their parents. They discovered that games that were fun normally were more fun weightless and unfortunately a lot more dangerous. Many of the children found themselves in the emergency room with bruises and minor fractures from their new found forms of play.

When the signals arrived from the probes, the news was not good. The first probe had been surrounded and destroyed. Fortunately it had enough time to identify its attackers before it was destroyed. There were no aliens here. It had been attacked by a variant of the Space Weapons Labs 21. This was very bad news. Space Weapons Labs had manufactured thousands of these little ships with no regard to who bought them. They were cheap and easy to operate. Any reasonably adept ten year old could handle one. This was the ship of choice for defending pirate bases or drug smuggling depots. The problem was that they were not especially reliable and their missiles were not very accurate. The

missiles had the tendency to turn back around in flight and attack the ship that fired them. In spite of all their shortcomings, in sufficient quantity, the ships could be difficult to deal with.

The second probe fared only slightly better than the first. It was beset by a couple dozen of these small ships before it was destroyed. The data it transmitted painted a grim picture of what they were up against. The third probe passed through the defense net undetected and reported the presence of a large settlement near the equator. The majority of the planet was under an ice sheet but the equatorial areas appeared to be habitable. It also observed a web of observation and tracking satellites. The fourth probe did not report back.

“We can safely make some assumptions,” Faye Anne said in the conference room after the reports had been assimilated. “They are up to no good. They know someone is here, and they have a general fix on our direction. If they have hyper capable ships, they should be here shortly. If not, we have few days before they arrive.”

“Then we had best be somewhere else,” Rachel said. She called a set of coordinates to the helmsman. “Paul, alert all ships to jump to these coordinates on your mark. Give me a ten count before you jump.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Rachel turned back to the table. “That should buy us a little time. Everyone back to your stations please.”

The coordinates she had given the helmsman put them inside the asteroid belt on the opposite side of the system from the occupied planet. The new position was close enough that she could engage the system defenses but far enough away that she would have warning of their response. If things got really out of hand they could hide in the asteroid belt for a long time without being found. Theoretically, that would give them enough time to send a courier missile and call for help.

Had this system been listed on the Admiralty charts as being inhabited, Rachel would have been required to stand off and request clearance to approach. Since it was not and given that her probes had been destroyed, there was legal justification for moving closer without notification. Rachel moved carefully.

As she suspected might happen, the task force was immediately detected by a tracking satellite. Given the density of the satellites, the fact that any of the probes got through indicated the incompetence of the interceptors. However, an unruly mob of incompetents can still do a lot of damage. According to the list the intelligence folks had given her, all the missing ships were small scouts and pirate vessels. None of these vessels were particularly well armed, and the pilots were often minimally trained. The assignment to scout the extents of the galaxy for habitable planets was often reserved for people who were so anti social or so dangerous to society that the only solution was to send them away, far away. This did not necessarily make them skilled pilots. Rachel scanned the sensor reports for evidence of a large ship. A myriad of small ships would be difficult, but manageable. A large ship might be a different situation.

According to the various conventions regarding space flight within the boundaries of an occupied system, if a ship entering a system does not first identify itself, it is to be challenged on a range of radio frequencies whose assignment dated back to the earliest use of radio for wet navies. Rachel waited for the challenge that never came. In many systems, the ships and the traffic control system traded data without human intervention. Identification and acknowledgment as well as

navigational information passed from machine to machine. Clearances were authorized and flight patterns confirmed without the pilots' involvement. None of those activities was occurring. Whatever was going on down there was not Federation approved.

Faye Anne turned to face Rachel. "Should we send a courier and ask for reinforcements?"

"I was thinking about that. We should probably wait until we know more about what we are up against. By the time the courier gets there, they marshal the forces, and the forces arrive, we could be waiting two months. We're on our own. We'll deal with this as it rolls out."

Monitored radio transmissions indicated that the system's defense force knew that they had arrived, and they had stepped into something of a hornet's nest. The hornets were milling around and making of noise, but they had not come together in anything that looked like a coordinated response.

After two hours of monitoring frantic radio transmissions, Rachel said, "Elizabeth, please set security level yellow."

"Aye, Captain."

"Communications? Adele, have we heard a hail on any frequency?"

"No, Captain, no hail on any frequency."

"Faye Anne, since they know we are here, should we call them and see what happens?"

Faye Anne grinned. "They certainly know we are here, and they are trying to gather the troops to do something about us. Can't hurt."

"Adele, please hail the system and request permission to establish orbit around the planet with the settlement."

"Aye, Captain."

Repeated hails on the same frequencies the pilots were using brought no response. In fact all radio communication ceased with the apparent realization that they were being monitored.

"We have incoming!" Vernon, the sensor operator called out. "Multiple small drive signatures. I would guess fifty of the Model 21 at two o'clock level. ETA two hours."

"Elizabeth, please raise security level to orange."

"Aye, Captain."

"Lt. Rattigan, please make sure that preparations for the call to battle stations are complete. I will call battle stations in about an hour. Please report when you are complete."

"I'm on it, Captain!"

Rachel smiled. The big man towered over her and everyone else on her bridge, but instead of being intimidated by him, which was his intent, they all loved him and teased him unmercifully.

“Captain, I have a second group of drives at ten o’clock. Perhaps fifty ships,” Vernon called.

“Do you see any large ships?”

“All the drive signatures match the 21, Captain.”

“Do they appear to be in formation or are they a disorganized mob?”

“Definitely a mob, Captain.”

“Thank you, Vernon. When I call battle stations I will call for all combat personnel to be in flight suits with helmets closed. If any of you needs to anything from your cabin get it now.”

No one moved and several flashed “thumbs up” signals. Rachel smiled. Her preference for suiting up her staff was well known and had saved some of their lives in previous conflicts. Federation Space Force policy recommended but did not require the precaution. Rachel required it. Her crew knew to be prepared.

The two groups of interceptors approached in a chaotic jumble. The ships continually jockeyed for position within the formation if indeed it could be called that. Rachel thought of a school of fish, but fish were more organized.

“Captain, I have another drive signature inside the cluster to the left. I think there’s a destroyer hidden in there,” Vernon called out.

“Very good. Any idea what type of destroyer?”

“I am not sure. I think it’s the same type you flew in the Saturn shipyard relocation mission.”

“We are familiar with those, aren’t we?”

“Yes, we are!” Wendy affirmed. “Nasty little buggers, but not invincible.”

Vernon suddenly switched his attention to another part of his display. “Captain, there’s another destroyer inside the other cluster.”

“Nothing we can’t handle,” Alina said confidently.

Vernon, for whom this was his first combat mission, looked at her suspiciously.

Rachel smiled at the young man’s concern. “Ladies and Gentlemen it is time to circle the wagons. Elizabeth, please sound battle stations.”

“Battle stations! Aye Captain.” Then in the gruff voice of an old cartoon character she called out, “It’s clobbering time!”

“Captain, perhaps we should have the P I ships go after the destroyers and leave the minnows for the escorts,” Alina suggested.

“That makes sense. We should keep the med ships arrayed around the drives,” Rachel replied.

“Should we have the med ships arm their lasers? We will have plenty of coverage between our

lasers and Peter's."

"I think it would be good. We haven't tried the new lasers in combat."

She looked at Reuben who shrugged because he knew what she would say next. "I don't care what engineering says, you don't know something will work until either it does or it doesn't. Let's give the med pilots the chance to fight back instead of being targets all the time."

Within minutes the ships were undocked and the ships that were to stay close were in position. Rachel looked across the bridge one more time.

Vernon sang out excitedly, "Captain! We have targeting radar lock! They locked on us!"

"Mr. Shapiro! Does the initiation of a targeting radar lock constitute an act of war?"

"Yes, Captain, under Federation rules of engagement, it does."

"Flight Operations! You are clear to engage the enemy! Remember, we don't want any heroes. Talk to each other folks. We are a team."

"Captain!" Adele in communications sang out, "Captain, you need to hear this! May I put it on speaker for the bridge?"

"Put it on speaker."

Suddenly the bridge was filled with the sound of yelling, hooting and hollering in a language unfamiliar to any of them. It sounded like a bunch of hooligans at a sporting event.

"You know what that sounds like?" Faye Anne said mystified. "It sounds like that old chef from the old kids' television show only like the guy was on some serious drugs."

"The language is a mixture of Scandinavian languages," Elizabeth offered.

"That makes no sense," Faye Anne mused out loud.

"There is no reason anything about this mission should make sense," Rachel replied in resignation. "You know," Rachel continued, "this reminds me of those two crazy blond guys on your floor our third year at the Academy."

Reuben laughed out loud, "That was the year they went up into the mountain to go skinny dipping in that stream in the middle of the winter."

"Who were the two girls that went with them?" Faye Anne asked with a chuckle.

"I just remember the cops bringing them back to the Academy naked!" David chortled. "What a pair they were!"

"So, if those two crazy guys were behind this nonsense we are seeing in front of us," Rachel asked, "what would we expect them to do next?"

The laughter suddenly stopped.



“Totally unpredictable,” Faye Anne said.

“No, I don’t think so,” Wendy offered. “I think they will be so focused beating each other to the target that they ignore any real threats coming from any other quarter.”

“Like up the pipes?” Alina asked.

“Exactly!” Wendy replied.

“How far are the P I’s and escorts from missile range?” Rachel asked.

“Ten minutes.”

“Instruct the P I’s and escorts to wait until they are at the edge of missile range. Then short jump behind the formation so they can attack it from there. The P I’s still need to focus on the destroyers.”

Several of the 21’s fired their missiles before they were within effective range. Well before they were in any danger, the P I’s and the escorts short hyper jumped behind the two advancing formations.

Rachel was continually amazed at the fact that other than Eretz and the forces she commanded, no one used the short, impossible to follow, hyper jump. It was a tactic that had been key to winning many of her conflicts. When the P I’s and escorts jumped, the missiles lost their lock and, true to form, turned around and attacked the fleet that had launched them. They had heard this about the 21’s missiles, but this was the first time any of them had seen it. Several of the tiny ships vaporized when hit by their own missiles, and others were destroyed when they collided with the debris from the ships in front of them. Rachel and her crew stared at their displays in disbelief openly amazed at the carnage going on in front of them. Still the singing and carrying on continued. At one point they thought they heard a yodel, but none of them was really sure.

Sitting behind the “school” of little ships, the escort ships’ lasers were industriously destroying the drive systems one little ship after another careful to pick ones at the periphery of the formation so that they did not then fly into the debris left when the destroyer’s ordinance detonated. This little corner of space was getting very cluttered and would be a hazard for a long time. After many of their cohort were gone, the destroyers recognized that they were being approached from behind and almost as if they actually talked to each other, at the same time fired a multiple warhead missile from their aft tube. This would have been a smart move were it not for the fact that the P I ships had anticipated it, but what even they did not anticipate was that the 21’s still jockeying for position would fly into the path of these missiles and cause the warheads to detonate prematurely. The P I ships pitched up so that their heat shields took the brunt of the impacts from the debris. They would not be able to enter an atmosphere until the shields were repaired, but that seemed of little consequence at the time. Returning to normal flight, the P I ships each fired four missiles into the destroyers’ propulsion systems. As soon as the missiles were safely away, the P I ships dodged to be away from the debris field that would be created when the missiles hit their targets.

The explosions caused by the detonations of the destroyers’ reactors was bright enough to be seen with the naked eye from the flight decks of the med ships arrayed around Elizabeth’s and Peter’s propulsion systems. The debris field expanded rapidly as pieces of the destroyers impacted the surrounding ships and destroyed them as well.

Rachel watched her displays in disbelief. The remains of the two formations approached missile range in that their missiles could now reach her ship. Her missiles could have reached the 21's for a while, but using them would have meant endangering the P I's and Escorts. The two formations had started out with a hundred ships between them and now there were fewer than twenty. If it wasn't for the fact that people were dying out there, this would have been funny. The term "turkey shoot" and the memory of a battle in the Pacific came to mind.

Rachel called Elizabeth's and Peter's laser batteries into action. Just inside missile range all sixteen of the remaining 21's fired both their missiles tubes. Of the thirty two missiles in that first volley four made it to target and exploded harmlessly on the battleship's armored shell.

Eight ships remained for the second volley. One missile destroyed one of Elizabeth's sensor arrays. The other impacted the armored shell.

Four ships remained for the final volley. None of the missiles survived to reach their target.

Rachel scanned her displays for signs of threats. Other than the debris which could orbit this part of space for a long time, there was nothing that she felt posed a threat. "Elizabeth, sound the all clear. I want after action reports from all departments on my desk in four hours."

"Aye, Captain."

Rachel stared at her display for a while before saying, "Did anyone see any escape pods out there? Does the 21 even have an escape pod?"

"Yes, they do," Reuben replied, "but they are manually activated. They work fine when you have a mechanical malfunction, but they take too long to use in combat."

"Thank you. Alina, please instruct all pilots to search for escape pods. Retrieve them and bring them to the medical emergency dock. Do not let the occupants of the pod out until we get them in quarantine. Lt. Rattigan, would you please attend to sequestering our guests?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Oh and your people should be in combat armor with their helmets closed. We don't want any of your people endangered." Lt. Rattigan saluted and headed out.

"Faye Anne, socialize with our guests and make them feel at home."

Faye Anne grinned. Interrogation was one of her favorite parts of her job, and she had learned some new techniques as she lay naked on the table at Stonebridge.

"Alina, you have the conn. Keep the personnel you need to finish rounding up the escape pods, and then have some of the youngsters stand bridge watch."

"Aye, Captain."

Rachel stood between the Vernon and Adele' positions. "Excellent work, you two. For your first combat mission, you did well. Now that I know what you are capable of, I expect to see it all the time."

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Rachel pointed at Alina. “When that slave driver over there gets through with you, make sure you get some sleep.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER TWO

RACHEL COLLAPSED ON HER BED and slept soundly for the first time since she had left Stonebridge. For the first time since Isaac had stopped sedating her, she slept without waking screaming in terror from the memory of what had happened in that hell hole. Elizabeth gently woke her as requested, and she wandered from her quarters into her office. She settled down at her desk to find a tray of fresh cinnamon buns and coffee on the credenza. "Thank you, Elizabeth."

"You're welcome, Rachel."

Rachel studied the reports and dictated notes to Elizabeth for praise of the things that had gone well and further discussion on things that had not gone well. Six hours after Rachel had turned the bridge over to Alina, Faye Anne knocked on the door. Faye Anne looked haggard and a little the worse for wear. Rachel motioned for Faye Anne to help herself to a roll and some coffee before sitting down. Whatever was burning a hole in Faye Anne's mind could wait until she finished the roll.

Faye Anne handed a pile of pictures across the table. "What's wrong with these pictures?"

"Why did you take so many pictures of the same guy? What about the others?" Rachel asked.

"Those are five guys. The sixth, he, well, he didn't make it. They are incredibly aggressive."

"They look the same," Rachel observed.

"Because they are the same. Isaac says their DNA is closer than twins."

"Clones?"

"That's what Isaac thinks."

"You mean someone is running a puppy mill down there for people?"

"Yup, well someone WAS running a puppy mill. Something has gone wrong down there. The inmates are running the nut house."

"Tell me what you know."

"I am doing some serious filling in the blanks here, but let me guess as best I can."

"Go for it."

"About thirty years ago, someone spotted this planet on a survey chart out beyond the edge of anything anyone had decided to settle. They decided that this large blond blue eyed descendant of the Vikings would make the perfect clone mercenary. Based on our experience with the two we knew at the Academy, I am not sure how they reached that conclusion, but that is neither here nor there. They came out here and established this clone farm. There are no women here. All of the clones were grown in incubators of some kind. The guys we fought are all in their mid twenties. They are the oldest of what appear to have been about six thousand clones on the planet. About ten years ago, they had an uprising against the people who ran the place and killed them. They destroyed all the labs in the turf wars that broke out between rival gangs. Between the turf wars, starvation and diseases, I would guess there are

perhaps three thousand left on the surface ranging from ten years to twenty five years in age. They are aggressive, hostile and suspicious. They do not work well together although they will follow a strong leader, at least temporarily. They are not as well trained as they think they are. When they destroyed the labs, they destroyed the training simulators and the electronic teaching materials. Worst of all, they stink. These guys haven't bathed in weeks. Oh, and one last thing, none of them was wearing a flight suit. They weren't even wearing shirts. They wore ratty shorts and sandals," Faye Anne shuddered. "Nasty people."

"What about other ships?" Rachel asked.

"I am not sure. The satellites were put up by the people who established the place, and they brought in the ships we saw. Apparently they were planning on attacking some of the local Federation settlements and plundering them."

"That would have been interesting," Rachel smirked.

"Yeah. I think there is an ancient battleship that they were planning on using as the flagship of their assault fleet. It might be a cruiser, but I doubt it. I think there might be two more cruisers and a couple of destroyers, but we got all the 21's. It seems each type of ship has been taken over by a different gang with its own gang leader. The reason there were two groups that attacked us was that these were two rival gangs. Had they been victorious, they would have fought each other over the booty. The gang leaders hate each other and will not work together. We don't know how much ordinance each ship carries, and we don't know how well staffed each ship is either in numbers or in the quality of their training."

"So what is your recommendation?"

"If we are to establish a colony here, we need to clear all that out."

"You sound like its just pest control."

"It kind of is, and that is what we do."

Rachel smiled. "Yes, it is. Thank you, Faye Anne. You should get some rest."

"You're welcome."

Rachel sat and quietly absorbed Faye Anne's report for a few minutes. "Elizabeth, could you have Reuben come see me, please."

When Reuben arrived, Rachel had prints from scans intercepted from the tracking satellites tacked all over the walls and ceiling of the conference room. There were some advantages to hanging weightless in orbit.

Reuben eyed the mass of paper and turned to Rachel. "How are you feeling?"

"Beginning to feel like my old self. Thank you." She pointed to a chair. Reuben picked up a stack of print outs from the chair and placed it on the table where it gently floated away.

"What can I do for you?"

“This is the planet’s smaller moon. It is a third the size of Earth’s moon. You know the way Saul brought the P I ships in tail first? Could we do that with Elizabeth on this moon and set her on the ground? Could she sit like she did under construction?”

Reuben grabbed one of the floating pictures, clearly uncomfortable. “These ships aren’t designed for that. Once the tugs lift them off they never touch the surface again. Saul could have gotten them all killed. Had Buddy’s math been off by a tenth of a percent, they would have buried themselves in a deep hole in the ocean.”

“But, they didn’t.”

“No, they didn’t and none of the engineers I talked to feels confident that what Saul did could be done again. Too hard a landing could bend the trusses, and Elizabeth will never move again.”

“Reuben, take as much time as you need. Take your best people, and work this through with Elizabeth. I want to park us on the far side of that little moon. What about Peter?”

“Peter has no structure that will support his weight on the surface. He was built in an orbiting ship yard. Elizabeth has structure that extends far enough aft that we can set her down without crushing her propulsion systems. Peter has no such structure. If we were to set him on the surface we would crush his drives.”

“Well then, Peter will have to hide somewhere until this is over.”

“For what it’s worth, the engineers back at the ship yard felt that the structure in Elizabeth’s aft section would support her weight on Earth’s moon if tugs put her down, but nothing larger, and they cautioned against taking her into an atmosphere or too near the asteroid belt.”

“Thank you, Reuben, please gather your team. You might wish to consult Buddy on what challenges he ran into since he actually made the descent twice, once with passengers and once without.”

“Good point.”

Reuben left organizing his thoughts for the challenge that Rachel had given him.

“Elizabeth, could you ask Mr. Zarnovsky to meet me here?”

“Certainly.”

Boris Zarnovsky was the civilian project manager for the colonists. A veteran of many projects, he hoped to make this one his last and settle where he could live out the rest of his days in peace. Somehow, Rachel doubted that this would be it. Rachel rose when Mr. Zarnovsky entered the office.

“To what do I owe the honor of this summons,” he asked with a twinkle in his eye. He already knew much of what Rachel was about to tell him, except for what her plans were dealing with the situation and his involvement in those plans.

“Boris, sometimes I merely want the pleasure of your company,” Rachel teased.

The old man grinned. "Those days are long gone. What can I do for you, my captain?"

Rachel explained what Faye Anne had told her about the planet's current inhabitants and what she would like to do about them. She further explained how she wanted some of his ground troops to support her Marines. The Marines had combat armored flight suits that could be worn in the vacuum of space. The ground troops under Boris' command had combat armor, but it was not space worthy. With careful planning, both forces working together could accomplish the task at hand.

When Rachel had finished, Boris clapped his hands together in glee. "It's brilliant! Original and diabolical! I love it."

"I guess that means you think it will work."

"Oh, there are a dozen ways it could turn into a complete disaster, but that's what makes it fun! My troops will be ready at the appointed time. Thank you for giving an old man one more chance to run with the big dogs."

There was a spring in Boris' step as he left the room.

"Elizabeth, status report please."

"All systems nominal except for a plumbing issue in module 2 and a domestic disturbance in module 1. No unidentified or unfriendly vessels are within sensor range. Reuben and his staff are huddled in the engineering conference room."

"Thank you, Elizabeth."

"Would you like to listen in on the pajama party in module 3?"

Rachel chuckled. "No, thank you, and I will remind you to respect peoples' privacy."

"I understand, but they are having so much fun. Weightlessness makes everything sillier."

"I appreciate the thought. Please inform my entire battle staff, flight crews and primary bridge crew that we will be meeting in the conference in one hour."

"They won't all fit in the conference room."

"Send the bridge crew to their stations. They can participate remotely from there."

"Tell the medical department heads I will meet with them in the conference room in two hours."

"If Boris would like his people to meet with me directly, they should be here in three hours. If he is going to handle the briefings on his own, he should let me know."

"Captain?"

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"It is a very good plan and could be a lot of fun."

“Somehow fun and battle plans do not usually go together.”

“Maybe they should.”

Rachel sighed. “I am going to the galley and get dinner. No mischief, you hear?”

“Aye, Captain.”

Faye Anne started the briefing with what she had learned from their captives along with a detailed assessment of their combat capabilities, strengths and weaknesses. Faye Anne had asked Isaac to join the briefing and talk about his observations, some of which were different from Faye Anne’s.

Rachel picked up the briefing when Isaac and Faye Anne finished. “While these guys may not be the sharpest knives in the drawer, it does not mean that we should underestimate them. Just because they are not smart enough to mount a concerted attack does not mean we should kill them outright either. If what we believe to be their current inventory of warships is correct, if they were to coordinate an attack, they could overwhelm us. On the other hand, based on information from their own satellites, I believe they are sticking close to home. We could hyper in the P I’s and the escorts, lob a few missiles around and hyper out. We would repeat that as many times as it took to kill all the ships. That seems wasteful and will litter the navigable areas around the planet with debris that could be hazards for decades. My initial plan was to wrangle the ships away from the home planet and destroy them somewhere where the debris would not be a hazard and then I wondered why we needed to create debris fields at all. We can use the Disruptor missiles to disable the ships and not destroy them. Then we could park them on the moon and retrieve the crews and ships at our leisure.”

“What do you mean by ‘wrangle’? Do you mean like herding cattle?” Aida asked thinking correctly that most of the hard work would fall to her and the other P I crew.

“Exactly, you, Delilah and Buddy with your cohorts in crime, Whitney, Brad and Daisy will jump into the middle and cut them out of the herd like cattle. I’ve seen you fly. I know you can do it. You will pass them to the escort ships who will drive them to us. We’ll disable them with Disruptor missiles from here so we don’t waste yours. The tug will take control and park them next to us in the corral.”

“Won’t we use a lot of Disruptor missiles that way?” Aida asked.

“Not really,” Rashi said, “We can park a half a dozen near the gate to the corral and turn them on or off remotely or if we need to chase one of the cattle they could do that too. Then the disabled ship merely drifts in our direction. The tug snatches it and parks it. How Cool!”

“One more thing,” Rachel added, “combat communications will be in Hebrew. We don’t know if these guys speak Standard, but we can be confident that they don’t know Hebrew.”

One of the reasons Rachel liked the fact that her flight crews had come from Eretz was that Hebrew and not Standard was their native language. Children on Eretz grew up fluent in both languages. Coded messages passed in Hebrew were just enough more difficult to decipher that the typical interloper quickly gave up.

Rachel briefed the medical staff and then key personnel from the ground forces. The plan



appealed to them, but they recognized how different the risks would be from a “blow them out of the sky” approach. The colonists especially liked the idea that the ships could later be retrieved, repaired and returned to service. Debris fields are much tougher to reassemble and reuse than ships damaged by Disruptor missiles. Even antique warships are better than no warships.

When Rachel had been notified that all personnel were in place, she quietly said to her bridge crew, “Ladies and Gentlemen, initiate operation ‘Rodeo Roundup’. Let’s keep our wits about us.”

Elizabeth settled gently on to the small moon. The med-evac ships circled around her sitting on their landing gear with their lasers armed and their engines warmed in case they were called to support one of the four, count them four, small warships with which they were attacking this planet. Sensor and tracking satellites were deployed and began sending data. The sensors reported a small fleet of pickets on patrol in their vicinity. There were half a dozen destroyers, two P I ships and a bewildering array of unarmed random scout and lightly armed pirate ships she did not know about in orbit around the planet. Topping off the enemy fleet there were three cruisers in addition to the old battleship.

Had Rachel known the true strength of the planet’s defenses, she probably would not have attempted ‘Rodeo Roundup’ the way she did. The only reason she continued instead of retreating was because of the ineptitude that she had seen in the last encounter. Rachel knew that if she was in command of the fleet she now opposed, a fleet the size of the one she now commanded would never have come this close to the home planet without being challenged and destroyed. In her first battle at Homestead the odds had been far more extreme than this, and her enemies had been much better trained than these people appeared to be. She concluded that the remainder of the defenders were probably as incompetent as the first batch they had encountered.

They deployed the two P I ships and the two convoy escorts. They sat and waited. It was kind of like waiting for the first children on Halloween to make their appearance so the festivities could begin. The first few pickets arrived singly and were quickly dispatched, rounded up and parked on the small moon. Traditionally the picket ship, originally designed by Valiant Industries, upon discovery of a potential problem would stand off out of range of the problem and call for help. If it was in a situation where it would need to engage an enemy, it was to do so in large numbers so it could overwhelm the enemy, capture them and bring them to justice.

The planet’s current inhabitants had by been dubbed the “Vikings” due to their long blond hair and aggressive attitudes. The first wave of Viking picket ships came charging at the collection of ships parked on the moon and passed through the ring of Disruptor missiles. The Disruptor missiles destroyed all their higher order electronics and J. T. parked the ships on the moon using the tug. The Marines attached rescue tubes to the captured ships and stormed inside. They removed the captives via the rescue tubes and handed them over to the ground forces who packaged them and deposited them in quarantined cargo containers.

When the single viking picket ships failed to return to their marshaling areas, other Viking pickets began to arrive in pairs and then trios. The Disruptor missiles efficiently disabled them and the med ships were pressed into service to herd the new arrivals into the “corral”.

The only ships that truly concerned Rachel were the two Viking P I ships and they entered the battle once the last of the pickets had been placed neatly in the corrals. An examination by some of Rashi’s munitions specialists determined that the captured pickets had depleted most of their missiles. This would explain why they had come in using only their lasers hoping to get close enough that they could give their missiles a better chance for success. If the observations of the pickets could be applied

to the Viking P I ships then they would also be running low on ordinance and might not be as difficult to deal with as Rachel had feared.

The Viking P I ships were from Saturn Industries' earliest production run and, unless they had spent the kind of time Buddy and Daisy had in modern shipyards, were likely not to have the variety of weapons systems Buddy and Daisy carried. Buddy and Daisy were old versions of this ship, not quite as old as the two breaking orbit from the planet, but they had been retrofitted with technical advances as they became available. More importantly, Buddy and Daisy were among only ten of these ships originally equipped with the larger reactor capable of the short hyper jump. The two Viking ships had the older smaller reactor. Data from the tracking satellites confirmed that these ships lacked the externally mounted missile racks Buddy and Daisy carried. Analysis of the reactor heat emissions as compared to their acceleration confirmed not only that the reactors were smaller but that they were not properly tuned and were probably near the end of their fuel's effective life.

What the pilots of these ships lacked in finesse they certainly made up in bravery. Side by side, they drove at the best acceleration they could maintain directly for Buddy and Daisy. Facing the oncoming charge, Buddy and Daisy waited with their heat shields facing the advancing Viking ships. Their human crews chatted calmly in Hebrew while the two ships passed digital observations about the two ships preparing to attack them. The approaching ships opened with their lasers. The very first production run of the P I ship had four weapons pods for the lasers which folded out from the fuselage. Each of these pods carried two lasers which, like the cannon in a twentieth century fighter jet, required that the entire ship be aimed at the target. Buddy and Daisy carried updated pods that each carried eight individually aiming lasers. Even had the approaching ships carried more lasers, Buddy and Daisy had heat shields that were quite capable of absorbing the lasers from these two old ships.

At the exact moment when the ships should have been preparing to fire their first round of missiles, Buddy and Daisy separated and looped around behind their opponents. Recognizing their predicament, the two Viking ships split and followed Buddy and Daisy into their loops.

In what appeared to be a herculean diplomatic effort of planning, the destroyers and cruisers which had sat quiet up to this point suddenly fired their engines and entered the battle. Elizabeth had deciphered enough of the language by referencing her historical linguistic database to be able to translate it to the flight crews. While knowing what they were planning was helpful, the Vikings now had a force in action that was three times the size of Rachel's combat group. The difference in training and the sophistication of armament should have evened the playing field, but Rachel was not willing to accept any casualties among her forces. The two escort ships spun around to face the destroyers and cruisers moving in their direction. The Viking P I ships drove headlong towards the remainder of their fleet obviously setting themselves as bait to get Rachel's forces to follow them directly into the line of fire of the remainder of the Viking ships.

Recognizing the trap long before it was ready to spring, the two escort ships, Buddy and Daisy broke off pursuit the instant the Vikings fired their missiles in a single volley. Not all of the ships fired all their tubes, but most did. The missiles passed harmlessly into space and kept going. Someday in the distant future these missiles could be a hazard for someone, but given their trajectory, Rashi estimated that these missiles would probably fall into the system's primary in a few hundred years.

Seeing how easily their prey slipped from their grasp enraged the Vikings. Elizabeth reported with unrestrained mirth that the infuriated and verbally abusive if militarily impotent Vikings had fired the last of their munitions. All they had left were their lasers. The formation broke apart and each ship individually attempted to attack the intruders. The result was almost comical. The space around the

small moon was full of dodging and wheeling spacecraft reminiscent of a WWI biplane dog fight. Concerned for the safety of their outnumbered colleagues, the med ships lifted off to lend their lasers to the fray.

PI ships are immune to Disruptor missiles and the remainder of the ships in the mass of swirling warships were designed to absorb significant amounts of laser damage. The med ships were lightly armored and except for their heat shields could not withstand as much laser damage as the others. By the end of the second hour of the confrontation, Rashi had burned out a dozen Disruptor missiles chasing the swirling ships before he was able to disable the first destroyer. J. T. dutifully retrieved it and parked it in the "corral" with the others.

By the end of the third hour, one more destroyer and a cruiser had been disabled by the Disruptor missiles. One of the med ships had been hit by a coordinated laser strike and had crashed on the moon. The two pilots had walked away and were slogging their way back to the ship. The ground forces extracted one of the battery operated all terrain "dune buggies" out of the hold and dispatched a Marine to go fetch the stranded flight crew. The flight crew reported never being so happy as when they saw that ungainly contraption bouncing over the hill to fetch them.

Rachel authorized the use of deadly force in the eighth hour of the fracas when the enemy force had been reduced to the two P I's, two destroyers and one cruiser.

Twelve hours into the dogfight, all of the Viking ships except the two P I's had been disabled and parked in the corral. Elizabeth had maintained a running translation of the conversation between the Viking P I pilots so there was nothing they could do that would come as a surprise to the remaining pilots that opposed them. On the Viking's valiant attempt to catch Buddy in a crossfire, Buddy hyper jumped out of the way and the two Viking P I ships slammed into each other disabling their drives. After a brief moment of shock, a cheer rose up on Elizabeth's bridge that resonated throughout the ship. The battle was over.

Once again, the superiority of Saturn Industries space craft design was demonstrated in combat. For most other ships, a collision of such force would have destroyed both ships and the reactors would have detonated. The P I was designed by engineering maniacs on a mission to avenge the deaths of family and friends at the hands of pirates. They designed a warship that was tough, flexible and could withstand a tremendous amount of abuse. Immediately following determination of an imminent unavoidable collision, the reactors shut down, cooling quickly. Once the collision occurred, the crew compartment separated from the rest of the ship becoming a large escape module. This module contained enough life support to sustain a two man crew for a month. The steering jets allowed the module to dock with another ship for rescue.

J. T. dutifully ventured forth and fetched the two escape modules. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief until Alina noticed that Buddy was missing. Elizabeth replayed the recording of the battle so they could try and figure out what had happened to Buddy, Aida and Delilah. Clearly Buddy had hyper jumped, but they should have returned by now. Reuben calculated the jump as having been at least ten G's. Aida and Delilah had most likely passed out from the force, but they should have been back. The thought that gnawed at the back of everyone's mind was the fact that there were ships that had jumped into hyperspace and never been found again. The standard assumptions were mechanical failure and navigation errors. In Buddy's case, the battle damage he had suffered could have been sufficient to cause him to not properly complete the jump.

"They'll show up," Rachel said with more hope than she felt. "We need to turn attention to the battleship."

The Viking battleship had sat quietly in its geosynchronous orbit over the Viking settlement throughout the whole conflict and had not fired a single missile or laser.

"It's dead," Elizabeth said in a tone of deep disgust. "The reactors are cold. The life support systems are not operating."

"How did you know?" Rachel asked.

"While you were rounding up the cattle at the OK corral, I redeployed a tracking satellite to take a look. That ship is deader than a doornail."

"Then, it's over," Rachel said with relief.

"All but the shouting," Elizabeth affirmed.

"Alina, bring everyone home. After action reports can wait until everyone has had a chance to sleep." Rachel keyed her console to tie into Isaac's video and audio feeds.

"You really don't want to do that," Elizabeth cautioned.

"Why not?" Rachel asked.

"Have you ever tried to herd cats?"

"No."

"It's messy down there. You would be better off not knowing what your husband is doing to all those beasts your pilots collected for him."

"I'll take your word for it. I wish I knew where Buddy was."

"He'll turn up with his crew. He's good about that."

"I hope so."

Buddy sat between two asteroids running a diagnostic series when Aida awoke. She could see the asteroids around her and knew wherever they were it was not someplace she expected to be.

"Buddy? Where are we?" Buddy rattled off a set of coordinates.

"That was helpful," Aida said sarcastically. She hated when Buddy tried to make jokes. "How did we get here?"

"We jumped."

Aida sighed. She had that one coming.

"When are we going back to meet the others?"

"When I finish my diagnostics."

“What if I don’t want to wait that long?”

“You don’t have a choice.”

“What would you do if I objected? Gas the flight deck?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Buddy replied.

“Oh, Buddy, what are we going to do with you?”

“Love me?”

Aida gasped. Fear gripped her, and she knew that Buddy could read it from her medical transponder.

“Why are you afraid?” Buddy asked.

“Because you are so very dangerous.” Aida waited for Buddy to respond. When he remained silent, she continued, “You are dangerous in the same way Greg and Avi are dangerous. Rachel is dangerous like that and now that I have seen what Saul can do in action, he scares me the most.”

“Why does Saul scare you so much?” Buddy asked.

“Because he has no idea how much power he really holds,” Aida said. “You know what you can do and what you can’t. He doesn’t realize his potential.”

“Why does that frighten you?” Buddy asked.

“Because you can hurt people. You can hurt a lot of people, and there is nothing I can do to stop you. If Saul decided to take on the entire Swordsman military out of revenge for what happened to his mother, he could do it, and no one could stop him, except for you, and you wouldn’t. If you decided to wipe out that settlement down there, by your self, you could do it, and I doubt if even Daisy could stop you. Both of the escorts might be able to do it but I doubt it. What if Greg and Avi came on board and ordered you to attack Elizabeth? What would you do?”

“It could never happen.”

“I could see a circumstance where it might. What would you do?”

“Elizabeth would never allow it.”

“What if they were on Elizabeth and ordered her to attack you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t either except a lot of people would probably die and one of them would be me. That’s why I am so afraid of what you can do,” Aida said.

“Does everyone feel the same as you?”

“I don’t know, but a sentient warship is something we don’t understand.”

“Do you think I am sentient or merely well programmed?”

“Sentient. I have thought so since I met Elizabeth.”

“Do you love me?”

“You took me into combat for my first battle and protected me. I will always love you for that. I don't think you can ask more of me than that.”

“Do you have a problem with commitment?”

Aida laughed. “Yes, I do. I have for a long time.”

“A lot of people have that problem. Oh, Delilah is waking. You should get something to eat. I will finish my diagnostics and we will go back.”

“Thank you, Buddy.”

“Thank you, Aida, for telling me the truth.”

“You're welcome.”

Delilah awoke and Aida filled her in on their status. They quietly ate their flight rations until Buddy announced he had completed his diagnostics and was ready to return.

On their return, they were greeted with a hero's welcome. Aida and Delilah quickly headed for their quarters to sleep. Buddy checked in with engineering for damage assessments.

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER THREE

ELIZABETH AND COMPANY STAYED on the moon for two days while they assimilated the Viking captives and repaired battle damage. In the staff meeting at the end of the second day they agreed that they were ready to proceed with the deployment of the Marines and runway construction crews. Peter would drop the containers including the ones with the animals to the surface as soon as the personnel were safely on the ground and ready to receive the cargo. One of Boris's pilots would bring the tug down and use it to drag the containers out of the water into which they had been dropped. The MMARV's were capable of extricating themselves from their containers and would assist dragging the remainder of the containers around on the surface. Once the plans had been reviewed, Rachel turned to Boris and asked, "What would you like to do with the Vikings?" She would be happy to turn them over to him at the earliest opportunity. They were certainly being difficult for her people to deal with.

"I would like the med ships to take as many as you can down in the first load as soon as the runway is ready. Their strength will be good to have as we clear the land for buildings. Start with the oldest first," Boris replied, obviously having given this some thought.

"Do you really want to keep them?"

"Yes. I think they will be a welcome addition to the community."

"Do you really want these savages loose among your people?"

"You mean the women?"

"Yes," Rachel nodded.

"We have three times as many women as men in the population on-board. We are already seeing tensions this is causing. An influx of males will help reduce those tensions."

"Even mentally deficient ones?" Rachel said derisively.

"They are not as deficient as you think," Boris replied angrily. "They are not stupid. They are untrained and much of the training they do have is wrong. They have survival skills that will make them valuable as we expand across the planet's surface. I am not sure we would ever let them off the planet, but that is not my decision. We should let the women choose. I don't think we have the right to deny them the option."

"They are the product of a genetic cloning experiment gone bad. How can that be good for a population of normal healthy women?"

"Their genetic makeup is solid. That's not what went wrong. What went wrong was that the people running the experiment chose the wrong genotype for their goals. Basically, they bet on the wrong horse. It was a fatal mistake."

"I can see it being a problem for the next generation," Rachel cautioned.

“By that time there should be enough new arrivals to sufficiently dilute the population that the problem becomes manageable.”

“I take it that means you’re staying after we leave to see this through.”

“Yes.”

“More power to you.”

The physics of orbital dynamics restricted Peter to dropping a limited number of containers with each orbit. The Med ships inserted the Marines and first construction crews who safely parachuted to the ground. The first load of containers Peter dropped were the MMARV’s and the heavy construction equipment necessary for setting up a tent city on the runway construction site and clearing the land for the runway itself.

Boris had chosen a site for the runway that was on the flood plain adjacent to a river delta. Setting the initial colony in what would seem a hazardous location was standard practice. The need to drop the containers into the water deep enough to absorb the shock without them hitting bottom mandated that the drop point be off shore, but not so far off shore that they could not be winched to the shore while they floated on their flotation gear once a pull cable was attached. The need for a local source of fresh water put them next to a river. Ideally the site was chosen near high ground so that the residential areas could be built above flood level.

The containers dropped on the second load included the raw materials for building the runway. As planned, when darkness fell, the drops stopped. Boris had insisted that after the second load, he would call for the containers as he needed them. Satellites monitoring the Viking settlement reported no activity, and so when dawn broke, Boris called for more construction materials instead of the remainder of the MMARV’s or the AARV’s which were scheduled to be delivered next. The load included building materials for the flight support and warehouse buildings and the last of the materials for the runway. The runway was almost done when Peter passed by with the fourth load carrying the first of the building materials for the residential units.

Shortly after dark the second day Boris pronounced the runway ready for flight operations. With the coming of daylight on the third day, the med ships started their runs to the surface carrying the first loads of Viking “laborers”. The pace picked up rapidly as the Vikings were assigned to tasks that their great strength could be used to the best advantage. Landing lights were installed, and the med ships, short one of their number due to battle damage, ran around the clock bringing colonists and their possessions to the surface. Combat pilots and flight authorized senior staff entered the pilot rotation so that no pilot flew more than eight hours without a rest. The timing of the three med ships worked out that no more than one was on the ground at any time. The other two were either in transit or loading.

A week after the operation transporting the colonists to the surface had begun, Alina and Aida flew one of the med ships to the surface. Alina suggested that they go for a walk to stretch, breathe real air and observe the new settlement popping out of the ground. They stood under a copse of trees a short distance away from the organized chaos around them and watched in silence for a few minutes. Alina turned to Aida and asked, “What’s up with Buddy?”

Aida looked at her askance. “Did you bring me all the way here to ask me that?”

“Yes, it’s the only place I could be sure he could not hear us. So, what’s up?”



“Why do you ask?”

“He has requested that Delilah be replaced with Brad.”

“Did he give a reason for this?”

“Yes, Brad is male.”

Aida sighed and slowly shook her head. “What are we going to do with him?”

“Buddy or Brad?”

“Buddy.”

“You better tell me what happened while the two of you sat out there in the asteroid belt while the rest of us waited frantically for your return.”

Aida told Alina about that conversation and subsequent conversations that she had had with Buddy on the subject of love and why someone loved who they did and how little sense any of it made.

When Aida finished, Alina asked, “Is he upset that you don’t love him?”

“Yes,” Aida said sadly.

Alina sighed. “I knew that this would happen some day. I know you don’t feel this way, but I am glad it was you and not one of the irrational ninnies he has had to train over the years.”

“Has he really gassed the cabin?”

“Yes, more than once.”

“Isn’t that against regs?”

“Yes, but regs don’t bother him when he does not want them to bother him.”

“Is he as dangerous as I think he is?”

“Probably more. He is a warship and he has never lost a battle that he stayed to fight. He has retreated in the face of greater forces, but he has only had to do that once since the days when he and Greg were playing Lone Ranger around the galaxy in search of pirates. He is used to getting his way. I am sure he enjoyed that little dust up with the Vikings. He lives for that sort of thing.”

“So now what do we do?”

“When we first took Elizabeth out on our original four year mission we had sentient P I ships that were built at Eretz. The interface between the pilot and the ship was a special flight suit with a helmet that had the displays integrated inside. The technology worked perfectly. The problem was that most of the pilots could not adapt to the closeness of their relationship with the warship. Many of the pilots developed personality disorders that impeded their ability to fly the ship properly. There were a half dozen of us that worked with the new technology and adapted to it. Sabrina and I did it. I still have my helmet and the flight suit. Sabrina left hers with me.”

Alina paused in thought. "I might be able to get into that old flight suit." She smiled. "That's the answer."

"What's so special about the flight suit?"

"Buddy can't gas me when I'm wearing it and he knows it."

"I'm not sure I like that look in your eye. It frightens me."

"As well it should and Buddy too. Old Buddy and me are going to have a long chat."

Not long after Alina returned to Elizabeth she tracked Rachel down in her office. Instead of moving to a geosynchronous orbit with the settlement as was standard practice they had elected to stay on the small moon. The med ships had to travel further, but those people still on the ship with the unpleasant task of cleaning it after transporting so many people in close quarters had the benefit of some gravity instead of working in weightlessness.

Rachel looked up from a report she was creating to see Alina standing before her. She instantly recognized the helmet and flight suit. She took a deep breath. "Where are you going with that?"

"I need to take Buddy out on patrol."

"Should I ask why you need to do this instead of sending one of your young pilots?"

"Probably better if I don't explain."

Rachel looked at the helmet and sighed. "I wondered if this would happen. Would you rather I took care of this?"

"No, thanks. I need to do it." Alina left the office.

"Rachel?" Elizabeth asked. "Why is Alina carrying that old helmet, and why is she taking Buddy out on patrol?"

"Because it's her job."

"Buddy knows she is coming."

"Is Buddy surprised?"

"No."

"Well, Buddy can explain it," Rachel paused, "or not, when he gets back with Alina. We need to stay out of the middle."

"As you wish, but this is most unusual."

"Yes. Heaven forbid that our lives should ever be dull."

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER FOUR

**I**NTEGRATION OF THE REMAINDER of the planet's inhabitants was accomplished quickly and without incident. The fact that Boris had asked his "captives" to serve as intermediaries between the new arrivals and the established population and gave them the freedom to move about as they saw fit made the process relatively painless. There were those who needed to be convinced, of course, but a quick display of Marine firepower swayed even the most belligerent of the natives. Three months after landing, the two populations had merged to the point that they had developed a language somewhere between Standard and the derivative language the natives had been speaking.

In the six months following the establishment of the colony, Peter made two runs back to the freight depot. Upon arriving at the depot at the end of the first trip, Brian, Keith, Red, Rhonda and the girls' mother elected to return to Eretz. They had been cajoled into joining the expedition to care for the animals in transit, but decided that life on the surface of their home planet was much more to their liking than living in the confines of a space ship even if their job was tending the animals they loved. Transport was arranged on a freighter headed in that direction. J T and Mimi returned to being Peter's crew, the job they had enjoyed as newlyweds. On the second run, Peter called ahead when he hit the system's boundaries to alert Elizabeth that he was coming in. He transmitted manifests and personnel rosters for Rachel and Boris to examine. Boris came up from the planet's surface to personally supervise the allocation of the cargo and personnel.

Rachel was at her desk and Boris was at the conference table when Elizabeth announced the arrival of a man who had insisted on seeing Boris as soon as possible. The man's name on the personnel roster did not match the name on his transponder. Rachel had monitored his passage from the airlock to the corridor outside her office. The Marines were busy herding the new colonists from Peter to their temporary quarters in the transport modules and would not be available should she need help. Peter had alerted her that the man was "flying under false colors" but did not appear to be a threat.

Boris appeared startled at the knock on the door.

"Elizabeth, please admit our guest."

The door opened to reveal a slight built man with a shock of white hair and bushy white eyebrows.

Boris leaped to his feet, tripping over his chair in his haste to greet the man. "Anatole!" That was the name that matched the transponder and not the manifest.

"Oh My God! Anatole Dubrovnik! I thought you were dead! I, I, it is so good to see you! Wait. What brings you all the way out here? This cannot be good news. First, let me introduce you to my captain. Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen, please allow me to introduce my old friend Major General Anatole Dubrovnik Federation Colonial Service Retired. You are still retired, aren't you?"

The man chuckled. "First things first." He gently took Rachel's hand and kissed it. "It is a pleasure to meet you. Your mother rescued my ship once a long time ago. I shall be forever in her debt. I understand the fruit falls not far from the tree. Captain..."

"Rachel," Rachel corrected, "if I may call you Anatole."

“That’s right! Your parents were Americans, and you Americans love your informality.” Rachel smiled and nodded.

“Very well,” Anatole said excitedly. He looked around, and his eyes widened. “Is this one of your sentient ships? It would have to be being this large. This is such an honor. How do you address it? May I?”

“Elizabeth, your cover is blown,” Rachel giggled.

“Well! How ungentlemanly of him!” Elizabeth responded with a chuckle of her own.

“This is so exciting!”

Rachel giggled watching this man who had to have been a battle hardened veteran judging by the scars on his face and arms fairly jumping up and down like a child with a new toy.

“Elizabeth? As in Queen Elizabeth of England?” He had picked up on the British accent.

“Yes, my loyal subject,” Elizabeth replied regally.

“One or Two?”

“That depends on how I feel. Some days one, some days the other.”

“My gracious lady I would gladly be your subject, but I have come on other business. May I request that the remainder of our conversation be held in the strictest confidence?”

“May I participate in the conversation?” Elizabeth asked.

“I suspect that we will need your assistance, if it pleases your captain, er Rachel, yes.”

“Elizabeth, we will keep this conversation classified as Top Secret until I say otherwise,” Rachel ordered.

“Aye, Captain.”

“Why does she call you Captain if everyone else calls you by your name?” Anatole asked.

“It’s an old joke. Peter called me Captain when I was a toddler.”

“Peter?” Anatole’s eyes grew wide. “The other ship? The cargo ship?”

“Yup.”

“I never had a chance did I?”

“Nope. It’s good for you that Boris greeted you the way he did.”

“Then, let’s get down to business.” He pulled a chair out from the table and sat down. “Boris, your report caused quite a stir at central office. There was a huge wrangle over who would take over governance of this colony.”

“Anatole, I am not leaving. I am staying here, and I will govern this colony.”

“That is not how Sergei Tsarevich sees it.”

“That is indeed bad news. I cannot think of anyone worse suited to govern this colony,” Boris said softly.

“Why would he be so bad?” Elizabeth asked.

“Because he would lock up the Vikings in cages and ship them back to Earth for use as test subjects,” Boris replied.

“Has he done this before?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes, he does this every time he runs into any new species or anything out of the ordinary. He sends them back to his friends in the labs who do horrible things to them in the name of science.”

“Then he must be stopped,” Elizabeth asserted. “No doubt you have a plan.”

“No, my gracious Queen, I do not have a plan. That was always Boris’ strength, not mine. I got us into trouble, and Boris got us out. I was able to delay the departure of their convoy a little. Some of their documentation accidentally got scrambled, and they could not leave until that was resolved. At best I bought us a week. I have a data module with the convoy’s unscrambled documentation if that will help.”

Rachel held out her hand, and Anatole gently placed the data module in it. Rachel inserted the module into the reader and then examined the data for a moment on her displays. “Anatole, I need to gather the team,” she said tentatively as if he would object.

“That is the best news I have heard in weeks.”

“Elizabeth, please gather the battle group. We will meet in the large conference room. Top Secret notifications.”

“Aye, Captain!”

“Elizabeth, please have food and drink brought into the conference room. I suspect we will be there a long time.”

“Aye, Captain!”

“Is Lt. Rattigan busy?”

“Not so busy I can’t drag him to the conference room.”

“Please.”

“Aye, Captain!”

“Did my special requests arrive in this shipment?”

“Peter is marshaling them as we speak.”

“Please have the accessory kits sent to the conference room.”

“Rachel,” Boris interrupted, “why are there two P I ships in this shipment? I did not request them.”

Elizabeth’s short snort of laughter was unmistakable.

Rachel grinned at her image of what that laugh would look like if Elizabeth were human. “I did. I figured I would feel naked and unprotected once the convoy escorts left, so I pulled a few strings. These two ships were sitting in marshaling orbit at the Eretz shipyard. They had a few extra features the Federation did not want to pay for. The whole thing turned into a political shouting match, and the ships were parked. I arranged to borrow them although I doubt I will ever return them.”

“What’s so special about them?”

“Mostly it’s what’s in the accessory kits that makes them special. There a few enhancements to the ships that could prove interesting. You’ll see later,” Rachel grinned.

“Boris, please take Anatole to the conference room. I will meet you there.” The two men left the room catching up on each others lives since they had last seen each other.

“Elizabeth, are the ships fully equipped?”

“Yes, they have everything you requested, and they appear to have some new toys I have not seen on a P I before.”

“What is their flight status?”

“Cold. The seals have not been broken on the reactors. They are brand spanking new.”

“Fueled?”

“Ready for start up procedures.”

“Excellent. Where are Buddy and Daisy?”

“On patrol.”

“Once we get the new ships operational we will want them to come back in for updates.”

“Very good.”

Rachel allowed enough time for her to be the last to enter the conference room.

Once Boris, Anatole and Elizabeth finished briefing the battle group, Rachel turned to David.

“Is there any legal way we can stop Sergei Tsarevich from taking over the colony?”

David answered slowly. “We cannot legally use force to prevent him from taking over the colony. He outranks Boris by two pay grades,” David replied thoughtfully. “While I would not advocate doing anything illegal, there are things we can do that might perhaps be slightly deceptive while not illegal might be considered suspect. We need to keep in mind the concept of plausible deniability. Can

we deny plotting against this man while in fact plotting against this man?"

"Hold on a second!" Faye Anne interrupted. "Here we go again acting on incomplete intelligence. How many times have we been burned by bad information? I am not saying Anatole is not being truthful with us, but with our track record we need to be careful. We have not been particularly good at finding out the whole truth of a situation before we act. I say we draw him out first."

"How do you propose to do that?" Wendy challenged.

"Invite him and his top staff to a Captain's Dinner. We can chat him up, get him drunk and see what he says," Faye Anne replied.

"Kind of like waiting for targeting radar," David said.

"Exactly," Faye Anne agreed.

"I'm good with the dinner," Rachel said. "The convoy that came with Anatole is only six ships, and two of those are the escorts. What is the chance the escort pilots are the ones who were here before?"

"According to the manifests Anatole brought, they are strangers," Elizabeth offered.

"So they don't know the condition of the ships we have in the corral," Rachel said.

"Unless they chatted with the escort pilots who were here," Alina said.

"Reuben, how many of those ships can we park around the system access point and make them look like they are alive?"

"I don't know."

"Resurrect as many as you can." She turned to Anatole. "I don't mean to imply we don't trust you."

"I understand," he replied. "Your intelligence officer is correct. You should challenge your assumptions and act only on data you know is good. I am confident that if you do as she suggests, you will find that I have understated the case. What will you do if you discover I am correct?"

"That is what we are about to discuss." Rachel turned back to Reuben. "Please assemble your engineers. Take Rashi's munitions people and see what you can do with those ships. Whatever we decide to do we will need as many ships as possible combat ready. Before you do that, get the two new ships started up. We will need them fully functional as quickly as possible."

"Do you have pilots for them?" Reuben asked looking at Alina.

"Not yet," Alina huffed. "I found out about them when you did at the start of this meeting!"

Reuben looked across the table at Rashi. "Just like old times, brother?"

Rashi laughed, "And you expected maybe something different?"

They left discussing their plan for resurrecting the ships.

The planning took several hours. When it was over, Rachel had dismissed everyone to attend to their portion of the plan except Alina and Wendy. She motioned them to help her open the small shipping container that had been sitting in a corner of the conference room. They opened the container. Both Alina and Wendy stepped back in shock. "How did you get these?"

"Sarah Abrams sent them. One more reason to be glad she and Abraham stayed at Eretz."

Wendy lifted the helmet she had once used as her interface to a sentient P I ship now long dead. She stood speechless. Tears spotted in her eyes.

Alina lifted another helmet and read the name lovingly lettered in fine Hebrew script. "Aida?"

"There is one already programmed for each of your P I pilots," Rachel said as she pulled another helmet from the container. "Including yourselves we currently have six potential pilots and four ships. There are two spares with programming instructions for Reuben. You can either set the crews up as solos or pairs if you recruit two new back seats. I know Aida can handle this. Delilah should adapt well. Whitney's reports look good, how do you think she will do?"

"She has been getting lots of front seat time lately. She should be fine," Alina said.

"And Brad?"

"Duck to water."

"Excellent. I will leave you to work out who flies with which ship."

"Ah, that will take some thought."

"We need to be ready when our guests arrive."



## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER FIVE

“HELLO BUDDY,” ALINA SAID as she settled into the pilot’s seat and fastened her helmet.

“Hello, Alina, what have we planned for today?”

“We have a little training exercise planned.”

“Good. Patrol is so boring. Are we training with the new ships?”

“Yes.”

“Who is flying them?”

“Aida and Delilah are with Alexander and Whitney and Brad are with Valerie.”

“You’ve named them. Are the new ships sentient?”

“Yes. Have they not contacted you to introduce themselves?”

“No.”

“We will do that today. We will train them on etiquette and manners.”

“Alina? Why did you not assign Aida to me? Why did you not take the new ship?”

“There are aspects of the new ships’ programming I do not understand. Aida does. These new ships are capable of actions that go beyond what you and I can do. Aida is the best to get the most out of the new ships. We need her fresh viewpoint in control of that ship. Some day our lives may depend on her skills.”

“I would still have preferred you assigned her to me.”

“Do you not love me any more?” Alina teased.

Buddy paused. “What we had was great. I guess I should be happy with that.”

“That would be wise.”

“Did Wendy choose to fly with Daisy?”

“Yes. There was never a question. She pulled rank. Wendy wanted to be where she was most comfortable, and that was with Daisy.”

“What about back seats for Daisy and me?”

“We recruited two of Rashi’s munitions people. Elaine will be flying with us and Casey will be with Wendy. I trust you will be gentle.”

“Of course.”

“They are so very young. They had the best scores in the simulations which is why we chose them, but they are so naïve. Reuben is making the final adjustments to their flight suits. They should be along shortly.”

The four ships spent the entire time until the convoy arrived taking turns being aggressors and defenders. As the resurrected Viking ships became space worthy, they were pressed into the exercises. The med ship pilots were assigned to the larger Viking ships but even with all the med pilots flying one to a ship they still lacked pilots. They recruited munitions specialists, most of whom were pilot trainees who had washed out of flight school. So many were recruited to pilot the Viking ships that had Elizabeth been called on to defend herself the only people left who could operate the weapons suites were the Solomon and Abrams children.

The colony service convoy dropped out of hyperspace with precision and discipline. Holding position strictly in accordance with regulations, they called for permission to approach the colony. In what was intended to be a show of force and skill, Rachel’s four P I ships dropped out of hyperspace around them. The remainder of the rag-tag fleet appeared in formation to support the show of force individually and in pairs as the convoy approached the moon to which they had been directed.

When the convoy had reached the point where they were less than a light minute away from the moon, Rachel hailed them and invited their senior officers and such spouses or significant others that the officers might wish to bring for a formal dinner aboard Elizabeth. Refusing such an invitation was considered a breach of protocol and her invitation was quickly followed with a list of who would be attending. When Rachel received the list she called back to say that since the list was so small, they should bring junior officers who might enjoy a social evening with her junior officers. The second list was more to her liking. She arranged for the kids to handle the dance music and entertainment.

At the appointed time, shuttle craft popped out of the docking bay and approached Elizabeth parked on the moon. The galley in passenger liner had been prepared for the party. The kids had done an excellent job and were thrilled that the decorations had been left entirely up to them. In strict observance of protocol, Lieutenant General Sergei Tsarevich stepped into the airlock first. Resplendent in brass and braid of the Colonial Service with a chest full of combat ribbons, he reminded Rachel of an officer of one of the small European monarchies that spent more money on their uniforms than on their weapons. He gracefully removed his ceremonial hat and formally bowed to Rachel. Rachel was dressed in formal whites without ornamentation or battle ribbons save only the Stellar Interstellar insignia on her cap, her captain’s bars on her epaulets and her name badge on her breast.

“Captain, I am Lieutenant General Sergei Tsarevich of the Federation Colonial Service. Request permission to come aboard with invited guests.”

“Permission granted. General, Welcome aboard the Stellar Interstellar Enterprises colony ship Queen Elizabeth.”

Tsarevich’s eyebrows shot up with the identification of the ship being something other than Federation. While technically Stellar Interstellar was part of the Federation, it was not a government, and when its personnel were not in specifically designated Federation space, they may or may not be bound by the Federation’s rules. In one sentence, Rachel had alerted Tsarevich that this ship was not his to command and neither were any of the other ships or personnel over whom she had authority.

“General, please walk with me to the galley so the festivities may begin.”

“I would be honored to follow your lead.”

Rachel motioned for him to start along a wide corridor where they could walk shoulder to shoulder.

“I noticed that you do not wear your campaign ribbons,” Tsarevich said. “If I had as impressive combat record as yours, I would wear them proudly.”

“You’re only as good as your last battle.” She tapped the Captain’s bars on her shoulder. “These are all that matter.”

The bridge crew had dialed in the security monitors in the corridor where Rachel and Sergei were walking and were following the conversation as avidly as if this were an end of season sporting event.

“She winged him! Look at his eyes!” Adele shouted.

“Go Rachel!” Vernon shouted.

“Wait until he sees Boris!” Boris waited at the end of the corridor. Instead of a formal dress uniform, he wore freshly pressed jungle fatigues with a pair of boots that no amount of polish would make look anything but what they were, well worn. “General Tsarevich, welcome to the independent colony Norseland.”

“Wow!” Vernon shouted to the others on the bridge, “Open fire! BLAM!”

“Funny,” Adele said, “I don’t see steam coming out his ears yet!”

In a study of restraint, Sergei addressed Boris, “It is good to see you Boris. I trust you will give me more detailed reports than the mere outlines you sent home.”

“My reports leave out nothing of significance, General. You will see that when we take you to the surface in a few days.”

“In a few days? Why not tomorrow?”

Rachel interceded. “Our ships capable of entering the atmosphere were damaged in combat shortly after we arrived. None of them are functioning at the moment. One is expected to be ready in a few days, and we will descend to the surface when it is safe to do so.”

“I demand to be taken to the surface immediately upon the completion of this gathering.”

“That will not be possible. Let me have you talk to my chief engineer.” She reached out for Reuben’s arm. “General Tsarevich, please allow me to introduce my chief engineer, Reuben Abrams and his wife Suwanee.”

Tsarevich took a sharp inhale. He had opposed miscegenation in every colony he had built. To see a white man married to a black woman boiled his blood. The fact that the man was dressed in Federation Space Force whites and the woman wore the uniform of a Federation Marine Lieutenant only made matters worse. Silently, Tsarevich turned away. Rachel smiled. So far, everything Anatole

and Boris had said about the man was exactly correct. Rachel guided Tsarevich to a seat next to her at the head table. Her “battle group” sat to her right. Tsarevich’s senior staff sat to her left. Isaac sat next to Rachel. Tsarevich was intrigued with the idea of such a skilled military strategist as Rachel marrying a doctor of no small intellect. Isaac quickly dominated the conversation with Tsarevich. Isaac engaged the General in a philosophical discussion of the potential importance of an emerging field of medical research which was being hotly debated in the current medical journals. The conversation quickly sailed over Rachel’s head. Rachel politely excused herself to make the rounds of the guests. Every time Rachel sought Isaac out he and Tsarevich were in animated conversation over some fine point of medicine or science. The terms they used meant nothing to her.

The party went well into the “night” there being no “night” or “day” on the ship. When Rachel excused herself to go to bed, Isaac and Sergei were apparently in agreement on some key idea. Hours later Isaac finally came to bed. Rachel awoke as he settled in.

“Sounds like you got along with Sergei,” she said pleasantly.

“What a monster! Completely without ethics, morals or concern for the suffering he causes.” Isaac spat the words.

“That bad?”

“Your father would have shot him.”

“So we initiate Plan A?”

“If I don’t shoot him first.”

Rachel looked at the kind and gentle man she loved and saw the type of anger she had never seen in him before. This anger was familiar. She had seen it in her mother and father. She had seen it in herself, in her sister and in her son. When this type of anger surfaced, people died. Isaac had never shown this type of anger even when he was healing her wounds from the torture on Stonebridge. She pulled him tight and rested her head on his shoulder. “Sweetheart, in this family, I am the one that shoots people. If you want him shot, I’ll take care of it.”

“You would, wouldn’t you, if I asked.”

“Yes, for you,” she said softly, “anything for you.”

“Send him away as quickly as you can.”

“That’s the plan.”

They fell asleep cradled in each other’s arms. The tiger and the grown little boy that loved her slept soundly through the night.

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER SIX

THE STAFF THAT GATHERED in the conference room was eerily quiet when Rachel and Isaac joined the meeting. Rachel did not have time to get through the opening formalities when Isaac interrupted her. "I don't know who the rest of you talked to or what you discovered, but Sergei Tsarevich is a monster. If he survives to see any of the colonists, I will be disappointed. If that is not your plan, it should be. I do not know what your plans are, and it is better that I not know. If it were my choice, I would shoot him before he could leave this ship." Isaac strode out of the silent room.

Isaac leaned his head back against the wall of the elevator that would take him from the bridge deck to the operating room deck. He closed his eyes to contain his anger.

"Isaac?"

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"You should see one of your trauma specialists before you see anyone else. Your vital signs are at dangerous levels."

"Thank you, Elizabeth, I am aware."

"Isaac, you are a wonderful doctor, and you are as vital to this mission as Rachel is, but sometimes you don't take care of yourself like you should."

Isaac sighed. "You sound like I imagine my mother would have sounded if she had not been killed by the Swordsmen."

"That was the intent. I have learned from the women we transported. Would you like me to coach you in breathing exercises to help you calm down?"

"Yes, thank you."

When Isaac stepped off the elevator, his vitals had returned to normal and his respect for Elizabeth had increased exponentially.

The silence in the conference room that followed Isaac's departure lasted for several minutes. Anatole finally broke the stillness. "While I do not wish the man dead, I share the good doctor's sentiments. You must follow your hearts. I do know this. Not all of his staff is as callous as he is. Some of them are worth saving. If I may be so bold as to suggest that we try to sort out the good from the bad and decide what we do about our judgments."

"I agree," Rachel said. "Elizabeth, have you maintained surveillance of our guests?"

"Yes, I have."

"Please inform us of what you observed as we discuss each person in turn."

"Certainly."

“Do you spy on all your guests?” Anatole asked.

“Yes,” Rachel replied, “guests, captain and crew.”

“So the only way to discuss something you will not hear is to leave the ship?” Anatole said fearful of the implications.

Rachel grinned evilly. “Does Elizabeth have dirt on you?” Anatole blushed.

Dr. Terrell said, “A lady does not kiss and tell.”

Everyone in the room knew instantly that Anatole was her latest conquest, another testament to her insatiable sexual appetite. The explosion of laughter could be heard in the hallway.

Once everyone had dried the laughter tears from their faces, they began deciding who was worth keeping and who was not. They agreed that even those deemed not worthy of keeping would be given an opportunity to prove otherwise. The ones deemed worthy would also be tested to verify the correctness of the decision.

Elizabeth reported that Tsarevich and two dozen of his senior staff had appeared at the hospital reception desk for the tour Isaac had promised them. Joshua left the meeting to join the tour and quickly split the more technically minded from the others. In his mind he was already separating out the keepers from the rejects. He found ways to attach the potential keepers to members of his staff for detailed explanations of technologies that interested them. The rejects he kept with him. At the end of the tour, he would quiz his staff on their reactions.

Taking his lead from his more rational younger brother, Isaac also split the keepers from the rejects, dropping visitors in Cardiology, Orthopedics and Trauma. When they returned to the front desk, Tsarevich was assured that his missing staff would be returned to him once all their questions were answered. Seven remained including Tsarevich that Isaac and Joshua considered beyond reclamation.

Two hours later, Reuben announced that a med ship was available to take a limited number of passengers to the surface, but they would have to leave immediately since the instrument guided flight equipment was not reliable. As if by magic, the only members of Tsarevich’s staff that could be gathered in time to make the deadline were the seven “rejects” that Isaac and Joshua had separated out. They were accompanied by a squad of Marines which included both Lt. Rattigan and Madison who were being sent to “relieve those on duty” although the people on the ground had long ago taken over their own security. The Marines only came to the ground occasionally to conduct advanced training on the combat weapons or to provide additional firepower when the colony expanded into a new territory. With their combat flight suits and their field packs, they could be inserted into hostile territory and survive for up to three weeks.

Madison and Rattigan were actually enjoying the thought of the adventure that lay ahead of them. Rachel had stood amazed after trying to apologize for sending them on this mission when they had told her that this was the kind of thing they did for fun when they were off duty. Having the advantage of full combat packs did make it a little cushier than what they usually went out for, but they were looking forward to a good time. When the med ship suddenly developed “engine trouble” the Marines knew the party was about to begin.

Brad, who normally flew back seat with Whitney in the PI, had not only volunteered for this mission, but had gone on a campaign with the med ship pilots to convince them that he was the best person for the job. A few days on the surface waiting to be “rescued” did not bother him. He had flown

med ships before volunteering for combat duty. He went so far as to convince Elizabeth to review his flying record. When Elizabeth turned up the fact that he had been busted twice for acrobatics in a med ship, Alina agreed to let him go.

Faking engine trouble shortly after reentry was easy. Brad grinned as he listened to the cacophony of terrified voices in the back of the ship followed by the stern commands of the Marines as they took control of the situation. A slight wing slip in the thin upper atmosphere settled everyone down. Rocking the ship slightly for effect, Brad guided the ship under Buddy's watchful eye toward the beach they had chosen for the "emergency" landing. Buddy informed Brad that he should not dally because there was a squall line headed for the beach, and they needed to land before it hit. Brad grinned maliciously. A little rough weather would enhance the effect. He diverted enough to fly into the storm. After ten minutes of totally unnecessary buffeting, Brad looped the ship around and pitched the nose up. Gliding in as close to a stall as he dared, he gently set the main gear down on the sand. The wheels dug in harder than he expected, and the nose gear slammed into the ground hard enough that if he had been landing on a permanent runway, it would have been damaged. As it was, the med ship skidded to a stop in a swirling cloud of dust.

The dust had not settled when lightning split a tree to their right. The thunder shook the ship. Brad could see the wall of water advancing in their direction across the bay.

"Open the aft ramp!" Tsarevich shouted. "We need to get out of this ship!"

Brad pondered for a second before he opened the ramp. "Where would I rather be? Warm dry med ship sitting on the sand? Running in the rain across open sand with lightning popping around me? In a forest in a thunderstorm with lots of tall natural lightning rods?"

As Brad watched Tsarevich roll out the ramp, he decided, "Warm dry med ship." The Marines and most of Tsarevich's staff appeared to agree with Brad.

Brad unstrapped himself and wandered back to Lt. Rattigan. "Should I close the ramp?" Brad kept forgetting how much taller Rattigan was than everyone else. He looked up at the Marine for reaction.

Rattigan smiled. "Yeah." He patted Brad on the shoulder and then gently pulled two of Tsarevich's staff away from the ramp so it could close safely. Brad focused the aft camera usually used for monitoring loading on Tsarevich and the two members of his staff that had followed him out. Lt Rattigan sat in the copilot's seat and Madison stood between them as they watched the antics going on outside. Tsarevich and the others had dug three holes in the sand and were industriously covering themselves with sand.

"What bonehead thought this up?" Madison asked out loud.

"Colony Service Operations Manual." A new voice answered from behind her. One of Tsarevich's staff was watching over her shoulder. None of them had heard him approach, but two of their Marines flanked him. The newcomer shook his head. "What an idiot." The newcomer held out his hand. "Lt. Rattigan, I am Retired Federation Marine Gunnery Sergeant First Class Oliver Newton. It is a pleasure to know we are in good hands."

He turned to Brad. "Nice bit of flying on the way in. I would have believed it except I've logged enough time in these ships to know what a real engine failure feels like. So, would one of you kind folks please explain what is going on?"

"We wanted to have General Tsarevich meet the colonists on their own terms," Lt. Rattigan explained.

"That much I figured out. You don't like what he does with the specimens he finds do you?" Newton asked.

"No," Rattigan replied.

"What you rather he did? Kill them like the Americans did to the indigenous populations of people and animals as they pushed west?" Newton asked sarcastically.

"No, but these are not dumb animals. These are people who even now are assimilating into the population," Rattigan challenged.

Oliver Newton sighed. "It's a ticket for disaster. It's been tried other ways, and it does not work. I'll play your silly little game, but you will see what other colonies have learned the hard way. These people as you call them are clones, mentally deficient clones. Breeding with them is no different from miscegenation."

Thunder rippled across the beach shaking the ship.

"Just because he's an idiot does not mean he is wrong." Newton said hoping to get the last word.

"Just because these people are clones, does not mean they are less than human," Rattigan spat back.

"We'll see."

The next day dawned bright and clear.

"The colony is that way," Lt. Rattigan said. "It could be a week before they send a ship to fetch us and we can walk there in that time."

"Are there no helicopters?" Tsarevich asked.

"They're in the cargo you brought, and the technicians to assemble them are still up there." Lt. Rattigan pointed up. "We could stand here and talk all day or we could start walking."

"No boats?" Tsarevich whined.

"Nothing big enough to make the trip. Shall we go?"

"If there is no hope of rescue, then we must."

Lt. Rattigan organized his detail and taking the rearmost position for himself so he could keep an eye on Newton, they moved out along the beach.



Brad stayed with the ship to defend it against hostile natives that might appear out of the woods.

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER SEVEN

“Rachel, we have COMPANY,” Elizabeth announced.

“More company?” Rachel asked as she looked up from her desk.

“Yes,” Elizabeth affirmed.

“It is getting crowded in this corner of the galaxy. Who are the new arrivals?” Rachel asked.

“They claim to be an unarmed Constant News Channel studio ship.”

“Do you believe them?”

“Studio ships are generally converted freighters. Unfortunately, so are Q ships. This ship could be what it claims to be or not. I cannot tell without closer examination.”

“Have you analyzed their communications?”

“Yes, there is nothing in their communications that gives any reason for suspicion, beyond the fact that your combat record would indicate caution is in order.”

“Can you patch me into their communication?”

“This is a recording of the transmission. They have it on a loop.”

The display revealed a stately woman seated behind what looked like a studio news room desk with the logo of the Constant News Network behind her. Rachel recognized the woman. She had been a news anchor on one of the broadcast channels they had watched at the Academy. She had aged gracefully although her blond hair had gone fashionably gray. She still held the dignity and poise that Rachel had admired in her from those long ago broadcasts. “Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen, this is Senior Executive Producer Jane Turner of the Constant News Network. We are the unarmed studio ship Edward R. Murrow. We request safe passage. I request a meeting with you personally and permission to interview you for broadcast.”

The camera zoomed away and faded to the network logo. The message repeated.

“Has Faye Anne seen this?” Rachel asked.

“Not yet.”

“Please have her, Wendy and Alina come here.”

Faye Anne watched the broadcast several times. She shook her head slowly. “The Edward R. Murrow was in orbit around Stonebridge’s primary when we arrived. No telling how long they waited for us, but they knew we were coming and that there would be a good news story. The Swordsmen did not know they were there. They could probably have slid in to this system without alerting us and waited for something to happen. The fact that they are here means that they know something we don’t. The fact that they told us they are here probably means they want to tell us whatever it is, and I think

we should politely ask them to come in and tell us.”

“We should have the P I ships go meet them,” Rachel said. “Alina, tell Brad to bring the med ship home. We need him here. Where is the ground expedition relative to the first of the rescuers?”

“They should meet at sunset in about eight hours,” Wendy replied.

“Excellent. I would like all four P I ships to escort the Edward R. Murrow. Determine if they can park on the surface of this moon or if they need to stay in orbit. Please alert the convoy escort ships that we have visitors. Have them prepared to take action should we need it. We don’t want them involved yet.” Faye Anne, Wendy and Alina left to their assigned tasks.

“Elizabeth? What to you think?” Rachel asked.

“Sometimes things are what they appear to be. Sometimes they aren’t. I don’t know.”

The four P I ships suddenly appeared in a perfect formation “around the clock” midships on the Edward R. Murrow. The converted Saturn Industries Class Seven freighter immediately hailed the four ships. The same voice that had been in the broadcast said, “Greetings Pirate Interdiction Warships. Have you come to escort us or to blow us out of the sky?” The tone was light and conversational.

“Greetings, Constant News Channel Studio Ship Edward R. Murrow. Please transmit your ship’s documentation, passenger and cargo manifests,” Alina replied with a strictly formal tone.

“Stand by for data transmission. Do I have the honor of talking to Captain Alina Darwin?” It was as if an electric charge passed through each of the eight people on the four little warships. If they could have looked at each other in shock they would have.

“Yes,” Alina answered.

“Your daughter, Sylvia, ended the first half year at the Academy in the top ten percent of her class. You should be proud. She is doing well.”

“How do you know this?” Alina asked.

“It’s my job. Just another day at the office,” the voice replied.

Buddy’s displays indicated successful receipt of the documentation and that the information it contained matched what his sensors said it should contain.

“Prepare to accept navigation data. You are cleared to proceed to the marshaling area. Can your ship land on Earth’s moon?”

“Yes.”

“Stand by at the marshaling area for further landing instructions.”

“Roger that!”

The four P I ships whisked out of sight at hyper speed while the studio ship proceeded at

sub-light speed.

“They appear to be what they say they are,” Alina reported.

“I will grant her request for an interview in my conference room. Please see that Miss Turner and her support personnel arrive safely.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Jane Turner shucked her flight suit in the elevator from the hangar deck where her small shuttle craft had docked to the bridge deck. One of her assistants brushed out her long hair and checked her makeup. The two men with her checked their cameras and recorders. The Marines in the elevator with them watched in amusement.

Rachel rose to greet Miss Turner as he entered the conference room. “Miss Turner, welcome aboard the Stellar Interstellar Enterprises colony ship Queen Elizabeth.”

“After all these years, to finally meet you in person. I am honored. Your part in the Saturn Shipyard move was one of my first stories. May I record this?” She pointed to her two camera men.

“Rest assured that I will also record it,” Rachel replied.

“Excellent.” She turned to the camera man as she sat in a chair that put her at ninety degrees from where Rachel sat at the end of the table. The camera man quickly set up his tripod. When he was done he looked up expectantly. “Is it rolling, Bob?”

“Yes, Miss Turner, we’re rolling.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, this is Jane Turner of the Constant News Network. I am in the Captain’s conference room adjacent to the command bridge of the Stellar Interstellar Enterprises colony ship Queen Elizabeth. With me today is Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen the commanding officer of this great ship. For security reasons, I will not divulge which star system we are in but that is not why I am here. Captain, you have had a long and varied career,”

“You make it sound like it’s over,” Rachel interrupted.

“Oh no! Not hardly! I hope not!” Miss Turner sputtered, caught off guard. She put away her data assistant with her notes. “Can we talk?”

“Please.”

“Many women in the Federation have followed your career through its twists and turns. Many of us wanted to be like you. You and your sister are partially responsible for the fact that the Federation Space Force now has more women pilots and officers than men.”

“When did that happen?” Rachel asked.

“While you were raising your family on Eretz. The fact that you could do the things that you did and then raise a family was an inspiration for thousands of women. Then, when your children were mostly grown, to go back to military action stunned women all over the Federation. You cannot have

any idea how much impact your action at Stonebridge had on the women of the Federation.”

“That was Saul. That wasn’t me,” Rachel demurred.

“But this was you.” She slid a picture across the table. The picture had been captured from one of the cameras in the torture chamber at Stonebridge. It was taken seconds after Saul landed his first punch on Winthrop. Winthrop’s head was pushed to the side and distorted by the force of the blow. Saul’s face was contorted in anger. His fist was still next to Winthrop’s head as the punch followed through. Rachel’s face and part of her bloody body could be seen underneath Winthrop’s body. “What the women of the Federation want to know is how someone could survive that and go on to do what you do.”

Rachel sat in silence. All the pain, all the humiliation came back to her. All the tender therapy Isaac had done for her unraveled. She looked at the woman across the table and said, “I don’t know.”

Jane said, “I do. It’s the reason you will go on to win many more battles. It started with your parents, and you have passed it on to your children. I have followed your career all my life. The man your mother called ‘James Bond’, the man Faye Anne called for that particularly sensitive piece of information, that was my father. Swordsmen killed him ten years ago. They will be sorry they did that.”

“He was a good man,” Rachel said.

“He was a lying, cheating, two faced piece of garbage, but he was my father. Whatever else was true, he always loved me. He died saving me.” She shook herself for a moment. “But this is not about me. It is about you. Shall we start with your childhood on Homestead? I have been there, and it seems like an idyllic place to grow up.”

The conversation returned to safer ground. They talked about growing up with horses and space ships in the front yard. They talked about hunting pirates and being hunted by them. They talked about the wonderful women who had been rescued from the pirate base and who had been vital to the defense of Homestead in that first attack by the Swordsmen. They dwelt on the pain Rachel had felt when Myra Myrakova, her childhood friend, died in a suicidal maneuver, “up the pipes” against a battleship, a maneuver that she had barely survived herself.

They talked about the subsequent rescue mission to the Swordsman base and her decision to disable instead of destroying the Swordsman picket mother ship allowing hundreds of Swordsman personnel to live who otherwise would have died.

They spent an hour discussing the events at Eretz leading up to the confrontation there and the random acts of nature that brought together what would become a fiercely loyal and powerful combat team. Rachel had food and drink brought in. They continued the conversation into the first difficult year at the Academy. Jane was familiar with the Saturn Shipyard project, and so they talked about Rachel’s feelings during that mission. They devoted some time to the betrayal by one of her crew, and one action that would throw her into the public eye, the gentle slicing of his fingertip with her knife.

The themes of betrayal and bad intelligence played out in several of her early missions. Jane focused on her success in overcoming the challenges she faced, and what she later did to prevent these betrayals from happening again. Even then, once her missions settled into a successful routine, the Federation had stepped in and scuttled her plans.

They discussed Rachel's feelings on hearing about the loss of her ship in battle and the subsequent joy of having the ship back even as battle damaged as it was. Rachel promised that Reuben would give the cameramen a complete tour of the current ship. The one question that Rachel dreaded, Jane did not ask. She did not ask if Rachel knew who was behind the "Third Force", and Rachel was relieved when the conversation turned to the chaos of raising children in the combined households that were the Solomon and Abrams compound at Eretz. They spent a long time discussing child raising issues, especially Ellie Mae and Elvira's insistence that all the children learn to cook. The funny stories of kitchen disasters brought tears of laughter to Jane's eyes as well as her cameramen. The interview ended with the family's departure from Eretz, but did not include Saul and Fiona's whirlwind courtship.

At the end of the very long day, Jane said, "Thank you. You have been most gracious." If I may discuss one more thing with you, please allow me to send my people away so we may talk in private."

"Certainly."

The cameramen and the assistants packed up and left. Jane handed Rachel a data module. "There is a Swordsman fleet headed in this direction. It will be here in three weeks. They want their women back. They have two old battleships, four cruisers, six destroyers, two carrier ships and an unknown number of troop transports. The inventory of their equipment and personnel as best we have it is on the module. The commander of the fleet is the man who ordered me killed and caused my father's death. I want him killed. I don't care who does it, but I will stay to document that it is done."

"I can't guarantee your safety," Rachel said.

"I know that," Jane assured her. "My crew have all lost people to the Swordsman. They have scores to settle. They know the dangers. Most of them sought me out. We've been covering wars for a long time. We know what we are doing."

"I need to gather my team," Rachel said.

"Haven't they been listening all along?" Jane asked.

Rachel smiled. "Some have. Elizabeth!"

"Aye, Captain, the battle group is on its way," Elizabeth reported.

"Thank you, Elizabeth."

"I am having food sent up."

"Thank you, Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth?" Jane asked, "are you a sentient ship?"

Elizabeth huffed. "Does everyone know our secret?"

"I can only speak for myself, but knowing you are sentient makes me feel more confident that we will survive the coming attack," Jane admitted.

“We’ll see how you feel after the battle is over,” Elizabeth cautioned.

Before the rest of the battle group arrived, Rachel ordered all the children transferred to Peter. She dispatched a courier missile explaining the situation and calling for help. Even while the battle planning meeting was going on, the children assembled on Peter’s flight deck, and once they were settled, they jumped for the safety of Stellar Interstellar Headquarters. They had seen enough battles to know they wanted no part of this one.

The Colony Service convoy’s cargo and passenger transport ships were hastily unloaded and their contents transferred to the surface. As soon as the Colony Service cargo ships were unloaded, they were individually dispatched out of the system headed for Headquarters following in Peter’s wake.

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER EIGHT

AT A CLEARING in the forest mid way between the “crash” site and the colony, four identical tall blond men with hair over their shoulders dressed in shorts and sandals slipped past the Marine guard under cover of darkness. The Marines had known they were coming, but not when they would arrive. They were surprised to see the men in their camp sitting around the camp fire with the coming of dawn.

“Good Day! Lt. Rattigan!” One of the man reached out to help the big Marine to his feet. He spoke in heavily accented Federation Standard.

“Morning, Bucky!” Lt. Rattigan reached up and accepted the assistance. The two men hugged briefly. “Rescue is at hand!”

“Good morning, Miss Madison,” Bucky reached out his hand to help her up.

“Oh! Good morning Bucky.” She stood and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “How are the girls?”

“Mad because I wouldn’t let them come and help find you,” Bucky said with a laugh.

Madison smiled. “Are you discovering the difference between raising teen aged girls and teen aged boys?”

“Sometimes they make me crazy, but I love them,” Bucky said.

General Tsarevich struggled to his feet without assistance. He addressed Bucky, “You’re a clone.”

Bucky, who was almost as tall as Rattigan and taller than Madison looked down on Tsarevich. He raised an eyebrow and smirked. “And you’re a General.” He turned back to Rattigan, “You made good time with so much baggage.” He looked around the camp site. “It will be easier the rest of the way. We have cut the path. Shall we eat first or eat as we walk?” From his tone, he was impatient to be going and the desired answer was to walk now and eat later.

“We walk. Have your men lead. You and I should take the tail.” Rattigan looked at Newton who was slowly standing warily assessing the four blond warriors. Rattigan gently pulled Bucky toward Newton. “Retired Federation Marine Gunnery Sergeant First Class Oliver Newton, this is my friend Bucky and these are his men.”

The three other blond men who were engaged in conversation with others of the Marines waved and passed cheerful greetings. They were armed with over and under rifle grenade launchers that had been popular with special forces troops until the rifle part had been replaced by lasers. None of Tsarevich’s party was armed, an “oversight” of their quick departure.

The group headed down the cleared path. Newton held back so that he and Rattigan were at the end of the line. He appeared uncomfortable having any of the blond warriors behind him. When he and Rattigan were far enough away that he felt he could not be heard, Newton asked Rattigan, “How do you



tell them apart?"

"Scars. They have battle scars from fights amongst themselves. Bucky has one on his upper lip that makes him look like he has buck teeth. That's how he got his name. Most of their names come from their scars."

"Oh." They walked in silence for a moment. "You like them don't you."

"Yes," Rattigan answered.

"Don't you think that colors your judgment?" Newton asked.

"Perhaps."

"Don't you see that as a problem?"

"Look, Newton, I don't like you and I do like them. If I had my choice between you as an ally or them, I'll take them and their kind over you and your kind any day."

"You could be courts marshaled for saying that," Newton threatened.

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps?"

"Yeah, perhaps. Watch your step," Rattigan said pointing to a tree root that crossed the path, but meaning more than that.

Newton took the hint and closed his mouth focusing his attention on the ground ahead.

During the day, two more pairs of identical blond warriors joined the group, silently appearing in the center of the line out of the thick forest. The ease with which these people moved through the dense foliage reminded Newton of the American Indians. The similarities were not lost on him. How much different would the American expansion to the west have been if the Indians had not been lied to, cheated and massacred at every opportunity? He had believed that Custer's action at Wounded Knee was justified. Now, he was beginning to wonder if Custer had not made things worse instead of better.

They made camp that night on the top of a small rise that gave them a view of the mountains to their right and the ocean to their left. A clear night, they could see first one and then the other of the planet's two small moons as they passed overhead.

In the morning they set out again and, as before, more pairs of blond warriors joined the troupe. The next night they camped against the side of a hill. In the darkness, more blond warriors appeared and clustered around the campfire. Throughout the day, more blond warriors continued to arrive until there were forty of them in the entourage. Late in the afternoon of the following day they crested a ridge and looked down on the settlement spread out on the river delta below.

As if on command, the forty blond warriors formed a circle around the group they had escorted to this place on the ridge. The Marines formed a circle inside the larger circle. The warriors and the Marines stood at Parade Rest with their weapons in the "port arms" position facing the center of the circle where Tsarevich and his group stood angry at this brazen challenge to their authority.

Bucky stepped into the center of the circle and faced Tsarevich. He took a deep breath and

moved his weapon to his shoulder. "Lieutenant General Sergei Tsarevich of the Federation Colonial Service, sir, Boris Zarnovsky and Major General Anatole Dubrovnik Federation Colonial Service Retired have told us of your history in other colonies. I have watched recordings of your talk with Doctor Cohen on the ship Queen Elizabeth. I have listened to you talk with Mr. Newton, because no man tells me what to think. If you attempt to do what you told Doctor Cohen and as you talked with Mr. Newton, you will be sorry you ever set foot on this planet. If you help us become a full member of the Federation, you will retire a wealthy man. You choose."

"Are you threatening me?" General Tsarevich challenged.

"My people do not threaten. We promise. We expect the same from you." Bucky turned to Oliver Newton. "The only reason you are alive is because I told my men not to kill you. If you insult them again, I may not be able to prevent them from killing you. You know what you said and did. I caution you to mind your manners. I know you can bring the entire Space Force down on our heads. We learned the taste of defeat from a force much smaller than us. We would fall to your might, but with what we have learned since our defeat, we would make your victory painful. We are not stupid. We can learn and with proper training can take on your best."

Oliver did not flinch from Bucky's verbal assault. "If you're so hot, why are you here?"

"We were the victims of a failed genetic experiment. We were being trained by the Swordsmen to attack Federation Colonies. They did not understand that we were not sheep to be led and killed at their whim. Many of my brothers died in training. Their bodies were thrown on the trash heap. We fought them and killed them, but we had no leadership so we fought amongst ourselves. Many more of my brothers died. When these people came, they found they could defeat us without killing us. They let us live. It would have been easier and safer to kill us, but they chose to let us live. Would you have done that? No. Not only that, they treated our wounded and healed our sick. They made us work, but there is no shame in hard work. They took us into their families and gave us new lives. Would you have done that? No. You wanted to put us in cages like animals and send us to strange places to experiment on us. You would have been no better than the Swordsmen who would have thrown us into battles to be killed. I give you a choice. If you step out of line, you will die."

Bucky turned and led the group down the well worn path to the settlement. At the bottom of the ridge, they turned onto a dirt road that lead from the port to the residential area. The sun was touching the horizon when two teen aged girls came running out of the settlement. They were followed by a couple dozen girls and young women. The first raced toward Bucky and jumped into his arms. He grabbed her and held her. The second girl wrapped her arms around him so hard he almost tripped. "I told you to wait for me at home!" Bucky said sternly.

The girls looked at each other and said together, "We forgot."

Madison laughed and the girls smiled at her.

"I am not going to keep your mother from punishing you!" Bucky scolded.

"That would be because I am not going to punish them," a woman said from the gathering crowd. She stood on the tips of her toes and kissed Bucky lightly on the lips.

The girls detached themselves from Bucky and descended on Madison peppering her with questions about the crash and the walk through the dangerous forest faster than she could answer them.

More girls met them on the road and soon there were boys identical to Bucky and his men except for their size who came out to greet them and escort them the last little distance to the settlement gate.

“Why do you need such a high fence?” Tsarevich asked.

“All of the large predators have been hunted to extinction, but there are smaller animals the size of an earth raccoon that get into everything. The fence helps keep them out,” Lt. Rattigan answered.

“Does it work?”

“It slows them down some,” Bucky answered.

Boris and Anatole greeted the party at the gate. “You are on report!” Tsarevich shouted as soon as he saw them.

“Oh my! Are you going to tell my mommy, too?” Anatole teased.

Newton drew back his fist to strike Anatole, but one of Bucky’s men snagged it from behind. The grin on the man’s face challenged Newton to do something about the insult he had just been given. Newton backed down. The man smiled and whispered, “Good doggie.”

Boris turned to Lt. Rattigan and Bucky, “Gentlemen, your presence is requested in the main hall for a war conference.”

“War conference? Why?”

“Eye requested that I allow him to tell you. He also asked that the Marines and men over the age of eighteen come to the conference. The boys can see the guests to their quarters unless they would like to participate in the conference.”

Newton answered for the others. “We will come to the conference.”

Bucky and Lt. Rattigan entered the hall. A table like the type set for panel discussions had been set on the stage. There were two empty places at the table. The chairs were for them. Faye Anne stood at a podium off to one side to the stage uncomfortable in a room where she was the only woman.

Eye, so named because of a prominent scar over his left eye, stood as Bucky and Lt. Rattigan entered. “Come, my brothers, take your places. We have waited long enough. We must vote quickly.”

They had barely taken their places when Eye turned to Faye Anne, “Lieutenant! Tell them what you told us.”

Eye had been trained for service in the Swordsman military and had difficulty with the idea of women officers. The fact that he could address Faye Anne by her rank was a major concession.

Understanding her audience, Faye Anne came straight to the point. “The Swordsmen are bringing a fleet to attack this planet. They will be here in two weeks.”

She explained as best she could what they knew about the approaching force and asked for their assistance in combating them.

With no time for discussion, Eye called for the vote. “Do we join forces with the Swordsmen

who put us here and trained us or do we join forces with the Federation? Do we defend the Swordsmen who trained us to kill every man woman and child even to the beasts in the field or do we fight alongside the Federation that has people like Lt. Rattigan here and like that piece of garbage who even now dirties our planet with his presence?"

He pointed at Tsarevich. The crowd erupted in hisses and rude noises until Bucky stood up.

"Eye! You knew what I would say. Why did you delay the vote?" Bucky shouted over the din.

"Because knowing what you say and hearing you say it are not the same!" Eye shouted back.

"I vote we fight in support of the people on the Queen Elizabeth and the families they have brought us! I say we fight for them because the Swordsmen would kill innocent women and children. I say we fight because even if we did not they would kill us for stealing their women!"

Eye grinned. That was the answer he had expected. "They have asked that we support their Marines in the defense against the ground forces!"

Bucky smashed his fist on the table. "To that I say NO!" The room was deathly silent. Bucky raised his fist in the air. "We will fight them on the ground. We will fight them in the air! We will fight them in space! We will not wait until they drop fire bombs on us from their airplanes! We will take the battle to them!"

Eye stepped back. This was not the answer he had expected. "Our ships are old and damaged. We were defeated the last time we tried to use them."

Bucky turned to face Eye. "They still fly, and they still have lasers. We will position them close to the planet as a final line before we face them on the ground. We have pilots. We have gunners. We have power! Now we have the right people to train us! I say we fight! With all due respect, the tiny fleet above us will not keep us safe. Even with all our ships, we will not keep the Swordsmen from reaching the ground, but every soldier we kill up there is one less we have to kill down here. We will kill them! I would rather kill them there!"

The sound of cheering could be heard far away from the hall. A crowd had gathered outside, and the discussion inside was repeated for them.

Eye raised his hands for order. "All in favor of fighting on the ground, in the air and in space signify by raising your hand!"

A sea of hands lifted above the heads with loud shouts.

"All opposed." The room fell silent. It was as if no one dared speak out against the rest.

"Motion carries."

Bucky raised his hand for recognition. "I request that Lt. Rattigan bring all his Marines and their war machines to the surface to support US!"

Lt. Rattigan stood and touched his hand to his ear as if to hear something better. "My Captain has been listening to this meeting. She has given the order to load the transport ships as you have

requested. She has requested that your pilots and flight crews be on the flight line when the transports land for immediate transfer to their ships. The engineering staff is making what repairs they can to your ships. Your assistance in the repair of your ships will be appreciated.”

The crowd roared with approval. A woman advanced on the podium and motioned for Faye Anne to step aside. An expectant hush fell over the room. “I speak for the women of this colony. We will fight alongside our men. We are not pilots, but we can learn to fire a rifle or stab a man in the back if it comes to that. They will not take us alive.”

When the cheering stopped and the room emptied, Boris turned to Sergei and said, “And you wanted to put them in cages.”

“You will get them all killed,” Sergei growled.

“Do you think the Swordsmen would spare any of their lives?”

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER NINE

THE OPENING POSITIONS of opposing forces at the time of engagement can determine the final outcome of a battle. Rachel knew this as well as any military commander in history. She also knew from Faye Anne's meager intelligence about the Swordsman who commanded this force that he was a renegade. The probability that he would use the traditional Swordsman technique of assembling the force at a remote but visible location was slim. The problem was guessing which assault tactic he would use. Given the limited size of her fleet compared to the Swordsmen, she decided to pull all her assets close to the planet. This put her forces with their backs against the wall but it concentrated her fire power around the only target worth striking.

As the first hours of the engagement demonstrated, there were valid reasons the Swordsmen assembled the force close, but not too close, to the intended battleground before attacking. Having learned from their past encounters with Rachel, the Swordsmen had figured out that they could not successfully mount a traditional single front assault. Although the operation required a level of coordination and cooperation previously unheard of among Swordsman commanders, they opened all fronts at the same time. Within a space of an hour, the entire Swordsman fleet, instead of standing off and playing the psychological game they usually played, jumped directly to their primary targets.

Had the secret of the Swordsman attack not be compromised, the tactic should have worked. In theory, this tactic should have put Rachel's force at a disadvantage due to their normal patrol patterns which would have put them outside the assaulted area and force them to return to a battleground full of enemy forces. However, the navigational difficulties of dropping that many ships out of hyperspace after a long voyage in that small an area proved to be more challenging than anticipated. Two of the troop transports collided seconds after dropping out of hyperspace. A third appeared so far off target that there was some doubt as to whether the troops it dropped would survive to reach the surface.

With enemy ships materializing all around them, the Vikings attacked immediately with the missiles Rachel had provided them from Elizabeth's stores. Careful to focus their attacks on the enemy propulsion systems as they had been trained, they quickly eliminated two of the destroyers attempting to take position to protect the troop transports. Four of the Viking ships went after one of the cruisers, but broke off the attempt when the cruiser's fire power overwhelmed them. Judging by the reactions of the Swordsman pilots monitored by Adele and her team in Elizabeth's communications center, the presence of the Viking ships was a complete surprise. They apparently expected that Rachel would have killed the local defenders as they would have done. Finding the locals allied with their intended enemies was an ugly surprise indeed.

One of the Swordsman battleships headed directly for the ancient lifeless battleship sitting over the primary targeted area. As the Swordsmen pummeled it with missiles and lasers, Alina and Buddy jumped behind the Swordsman and with a single volley of heat seeking missiles put at least one into the battleship's propulsion system. Debris from the Swordsman battleship rained down on the targeted ship and pieces from both fell toward the atmosphere.

The escort ships, taking advantage of their longer range missiles, teamed up on one of the cruisers that had materialized in front of them and destroyed it in two massive volleys. The primary missile type that the escort ships carried had a longer range than anything Elizabeth or the P I ships carried. This allowed them to stand off out of range of everyone else and still make their kills.

The Swordsman carrier ships deployed their fleets of small ships unhindered. Leaving the more

heavily armed ships for the P I ships and escorts, the Vikings aggressively attacked these small ships who were trying to protect the troop ships that were already dropping soldiers to the planet's surface.

The Viking ships took the brunt of the first hours of the attack. Recognizing the trouble their allies were in, the two convoy ships entered the fray against the carriers and their fleets of small ships. Together they were able to eliminate both of the carriers before turning their attention to the remaining troop ships. The troop ships had deployed all their troops and their combat equipment by the time they were attacked, but the Vikings attacked the empty ships and destroyed them without mercy.

Four hours into the battle there were two distinct battles being engaged. One was on the ground, and the other was in space. The Swordsman space force had been reduced to a single battleship, two cruisers, four destroyers and several dozen of the little ships that had been launched from the carriers. All the troop transports, the two carriers, one battleship, two cruisers and two destroyers were gone. Rachel's forces had expended large amounts of ordinance and had taken some battle damage, but had suffered no losses.

Rachel moved Elizabeth to engage the remaining battleship. A swarm of the carrier launched ships clustered around the Swordsman battleship's propulsion system so there was no way to get a small ship in to destroy it. The job would have to be a slug fest between the two big ships. Buddy and Daisy moved to cover Elizabeth's propulsion system. That left Alexander with Aida and Delilah and Valerie with Whitney and Brad and the two escorts to deal with the two cruisers and four destroyers. The Vikings continued to kill the small ships one at a time in spite of their own horrific losses.

Buddy and Daisy had their hands full with the little ships that tried to attack Elizabeth from the rear. In the midst of the chaos Buddy became aware of Alexander and Valerie on what appeared to be a collision course with the two cruisers in hot pursuit.

Buddy began to scream, "Aida! Aida! Look out! Look out! Look out! Look out! Behind you!" He attempted to abandon his post guarding Elizabeth but Alina was able to retain control.

"Alina! They're going to crash!" Buddy shouted.

"Stay here!" Alina commanded.

"Head on!" Buddy screamed, "Aida! Watch out!"

As the two P I ships passed the point of collision, they each fired a volley of missiles and broke hard to the right. The missiles traveled straight and true impacting the cruisers and destroying them.

A missile from one of the small ships attempting to attack Elizabeth impacted at the end of Buddy's lower weapons pod and broke it off.

"Buddy! Evasive maneuvers!" Alina shouted.

Elaine, in the back seat, heaved a sigh of relief that she had not just died as a result of the missile strike she had attempted to thwart. She concentrated her remaining lasers on the small ship that had gotten the jump on them while they were distracted by Buddy's frantic shouting. She killed it with her lasers before Buddy had come around enough to be able to fire a missile at it.

"Dammit Buddy! This is why I don't want people who are emotionally attached to each other fighting the same battle."

“But they would have been killed if I had not warned them!” Buddy defended himself.

“That was a maneuver they have been testing in the simulators for a week. They knew what they were doing!”

“Why didn’t I know about it?”

“They couldn’t practice with real ships now could they? The first half dozen times they tried it in the simulator they crashed. PAY ATTENTION so we don’t get killed.” While Alina was distracted reprimanding Buddy, Elaine killed one of the small ships with her lasers and another with a missile.

Alexander and Valerie joined Elizabeth in the assault on the battleship eventually destroying it and sending the debris falling toward the ocean below.

Working together, the escorts killed the two remaining destroyers with their long range missiles and everyone devoted their attention to the small ships that had been deployed by the carriers. There was some question as to whether that was even necessary. They would quickly run out of fuel and fall to the planet without further interference. Rachel’s orders, however, were clear. There would be no prisoners. There would be no captives. There would be no survivors.

In spite of their losses, the Swordsman troop ships dropped half of their original force to the surface. Thousands of Swordsmen soldiers extricated their weapons from the shipping containers under fire from the AARV’s which had arrived almost immediately. Colony Service helicopters and fixed wing aircraft met the Swordsmen helicopters even as they were being unloaded from their containers. The Swordsman soldiers prepared to attack the location of the original genetics lab where the Vikings had been created.

The Vikings and colonists had reasoned that the Swordsmen had not visited the planet since the “keepers” had been overthrown and there had been only one settlement on the planet at the time. They decided that the Swordsmen would likely direct their initial attack on that facility. They evacuated the few people that had not already abandoned the facility for the new settlement and made an abandoned strategically unimportant location as hazardous as possible to attack. They set land mines and automatic gun positions. They set booby traps in every room. A competition quickly developed over who could devise the most diabolical booby trap.

Assuming, incorrectly, that the colonists would have built on the site of the old facility instead of creating a new settlement as they did, the Swordsman battle plan was focused on the single virtually indefensible location in the middle of a wide heavily forested valley surrounded by foothills. When the Swordsmen began their advance, the defenders quietly disappeared into the woods. Overcoming the automated defenses by force of numbers and incurring heavy losses, the Swordsman ground forces took the vacant facility and set up their operations center.

The colonists counter attacked the newly occupied Swordsman base with a vengeance. The Marine AARV’s spearheaded the assault by attacking Swordsman aircraft and helicopters both in the air and on the ground. Many of the aircraft were destroyed before they could be unpacked from their shipping containers. All of the AARV’s were eventually lost, but not before they destroyed all of the Swordsman fixed wing aircraft including the new VTOL jets and the majority of the helicopters.

Once the AARV’s were gone, the MMARV’s moved into positions in the hills and rained artillery fire down on the old facility. Lasers swept back and forth across the landscape decapitating



anything that moved. The ground campaign was remarkably short. Even though the Swordsmen launched a single large helicopter driven assault of the real settlement, the majority of the fighting took place around the old facility.

The Viking commandos were lethally efficient with their small assault rifles picking off Swordsman soldiers with an accuracy rate of 90%, just shy of one soldier killed per bullet fired. Working from the cover of the forest, even the Swordsman heat detectors did not find the Vikings until too late to stop their fire. By the end of the second day, hunting Swordsmen in the forests had ceased being a battle and had become a sport.

Under cover of darkness, with the bright red blades of the MMARV's leading the way, the Vikings attacked the old facility. The battle raged through the night. Exhausted Swordsmen, who had endured three days of constant artillery barrage, vainly tried to resist the advancing Vikings. By dawn of the next day, a few dozen Swordsmen were imprisoned in a store room. The rest were dead.

When the ground battle ended, the Vikings and colonists had suffered six hundred dead and eight hundred wounded. Isaac and the medical team moved to the surface to tend to the wounded. Eye had been killed and Bucky was wounded. The Marines had lost half of their number dead. The remainder were wounded including both Lt. Rattigan and Madison. All the AARV's had been lost. Half the MMARV's were damaged beyond repair. Oliver Newton had been killed in hand-to-hand combat with a squad of Swordsmen who attacked the main settlement. He was credited with saving the lives of over a dozen women and children by giving them time to flee while he delayed the assault on their house. Sergei Tsarevich and Boris Zarnovsky died when Swordsman helicopters opened fire on the meeting hall. Major General Anatole Dubrovnik Federation Colonial Service Retired died in a valiant attempt to rescue people from the burning meeting hall. He was credited with saving many lives. His body was found next to those of Sergei and Boris. He was trying to drag them from the building when he was overcome by the smoke.

Once it was clear that the battle was over, Rachel called Jane Turner to her office. Jane arrived alone. "Miss Turner, I heard you lost two camera crews on the surface. I have requested that their bodies be recovered so that they may be buried with full honors alongside our people who have died. Please accept my condolences."

"Thank you. This is not the first time I have lost people in battle, but it seems to hurt more each time. Maybe I should find a desk job someplace safe."

Rachel smiled, "Yeah, right."

Jane laughed.

Rachel's comm signaled for her attention. Lt. Rattigan had assumed command of the ground forces after being coerced by the Vikings to do so. It was not a situation he was comfortable with and he frequently called Rachel for guidance.

"Should I leave?" Jane asked.

"No, you can stay." Rachel turned to the display and connected to Lt. Rattigan. "Lieutenant, how may I be of service?"

"The officer in charge of the captives wishes to complain about their treatment under the

Geneva convention.”

“Put him where I can see him, and he can see me.”

A Swordsman Major stepped into the camera view. His head was bandaged. Blood showed around the edges of the gauze. The Swordsman opened his mouth to speak, but Rachel cut him off.

“MAJOR! Look carefully at this picture.”

She held up the picture Jane had given her. “Tell me why I should let you live? Lieutenant Rattigan, throw him in the lock up. Give him a copy of this picture so he knows what he can look forward to!”

Rattigan grabbed the man by the arm and dragged him off camera screaming in pain.

“You heard the lady, MOVE!”

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER TEN

FOUR MONTHS PASSED while Elizabeth and her crew waited for their relief convoy. Preceded by a courier missile, a convoy arrived and strictly followed established procedures for entering an occupied system. Once the convoy was established in parking orbit, Rachel sent the usual invitation to the Captain and senior officers for dinner.

Brigadier General Henri DesJardin replied immediately that he would be honored and asked permission to bring some of his engineering staff who wished to meet her engineering staff.

Rachel responded that they were welcome, but reminded the General that this was a party and not a workshop.

The laughter in the General's voice could be felt even in the text of his reply. He allowed that he was coming to party, but he could make no such promises of his staff. He would, of course, remind them that this was a social gathering and to behave accordingly.

Rachel met General Desjardin at the airlock. "General, welcome aboard the Queen Elizabeth."

General DesJardin bowed deeply and took Rachel's hand and raised it to his lips. "It is my great honor to finally meet the famous Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen. Please allow me to introduce my wife, Lady Simone DesJardin."

Lady DesJardin, wearing the uniform of a Captain in the Federation Marines saluted formally. Rachel returned the salute.

"General, Lady, please, we do not run as formal a ship as you do. We try to address each other by first name. Please call me Rachel."

General DesJardin laughed. "Ah, you Americans! Once an American always an American!"

Lady DesJardin gently pushed her husband aside, "Captain Rachel, he would stand and chatter and block the door all day if we let him. I have brought French wine for your table and my men grow weary holding it."

Rachel started to object, but Simone cut her off. "We know the rules. Your people deserve a celebration in honor of such a hard won victory."

"Some of our people have problems with alcohol."

Simone smiled. "Captain Darwin perhaps?"

"Among others."

"Please allow me to introduce my son Bolivar." A stunningly handsome Lieutenant in the uniform of a combat pilot stepped forward. Simone turned to the young man. "The Captain is concerned about what happens if Captain Darwin has too much to drink."

"Captain, it would be my honor to be Captain Darwin's escort for the evening and ensure that nothing untoward happens."

Rachel sighed. "Very well, welcome aboard."

Simone motioned for her staff to come aboard. Two of Rachel's Marines escorted the wine bearers to the kitchen. Simone turned back to Rachel and said, "Is your sister Wendy nearby? We have chatted with your children and have news of their progress."

The General quickly excused himself and engaged Isaac in conversation. Isaac laughed at some small joke the General made as they wandered off to join the party.

Wendy joined Rachel and Simone at the table. Some of the colonists had come up from the surface to participate in the party and others to help serve. Bucky's very pregnant wife brought them their wine. Rachel asked her to sit with them and talk about life on the planet's surface. Bucky's wife pointed out her two daughters who were walking amongst the crowd passing finger sandwiches. When the time for the formal dinner arrived, Rachel rearranged the head table so that Bucky's wife could sit with them and continue the conversation. Rachel was pleased to see that Isaac had pulled both Bucky and Lt. Rattigan into his conversation with Henri. Isaac, Henri, Bucky and Lt. Rattigan took their places at the head table. Alina and Bolivar were nowhere to be found.

Rachel spoke softly into her comm. "Elizabeth, where is Alina?"

Elizabeth giggled. "In the gym."

"What is she doing there?"

"Playing."

"Playing?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Elizabeth, what are you not telling me?"

"You told me to respect people's privacy."

Rachel sighed. "Is either of them in any danger?"

"Oh, no," Elizabeth giggled. "He has six pack abs."

"Thank you, Elizabeth, that was more than I wanted to know."

"Any time, Captain."

Simone leaned over to Rachel. "Are you concerned for your Captain Darwin?"

"Yes."

"Bolivar can be a perfect gentleman."

"Except that Alina is not known for being a perfect lady."

Simone smiled. "Where are they?"

"In the gym and Bolivar is not wearing a shirt."

Simone laughed. "He is his father's son! Your Captain Darwin will not regret this evening, I assure you."

Simone turned back to Wendy and told her how the children had fooled the security service trainers in an exercise. Bobby and Naomi were working a simulation with the trainers only they had planned a surprise. Gabby and Hannah commandeered a vacant simulator. Barney took another with Delmar, Reuben and Suwanee's youngest. Rashi and Esther's two children, Caroline and Daniel took yet another. They entered the simulation in progress and ripped through the security forces. The security trainer was a good sport about the incident, even though it was obvious he was not happy at the fact that mere children had gotten the better of him. After that he locked all the simulators that were not in use.

Being the devious children that they were, they enlisted the assistance of one of the station's computer engineers and found a way to join the simulations from the workstations in their bedrooms on Peter's bridge. The station management seemed to feel that they would be safer if the children quartered with Peter and Peter acted in loco parentis. The station's staff was less concerned for the children's safety than they were for their own. They had not counted on the allure these five teenagers had on their peers among the station's families. With the depth of Peter's music library, they held dance parties that ran long after curfew.

On school nights, Peter ran study sessions in the galley and on the weekends Marines and security personnel chaperoned the parties. Those teenagers who had their parents' permission to stay over were allowed to do so. The remainder were escorted to their quarters by the security staff. The primary reason that the parties were allowed to continue in spite of some initial opposition was that the teenagers who participated caused less trouble than before and their grades improved. The penalty for misbehavior was eviction and Peter ruled with an iron hand.

Simone had been impressed with the children and suggested that if any of them wished to join her expeditions they were welcome.

Simone and Henri took to the dance floor after the desserts had been served and demonstrated a grace and style that left Rachel's crew speechless. Many members of Henri's crew joined them on the dance floor. Simone approached Rachel, "Please join us. We would be honored to dance with you."

Isaac stepped in, "Honored Lady, I am in awe of your dance, but other than a few rough folk dances, we have never learned the dances you do so well."

Simone nodded gracefully. "It is a pity. Dance is the language of love. Two people who love each other as much as you do should include dance in the vocabulary of your emotions for each other. But it is no matter. Henri and I know folk dances as well as any of you. We shall dance!"

The music changed, and even those who did not know how to dance found themselves out on the floor.

The music wound down as people drifted off to their quarters or to the shuttles to return to their ships. Rachel, Isaac, Simone and Henri were left alone with the clean-up crew.

"Perhaps we should retire to my conference room if you wish to stay longer," Rachel suggested.

“Excellent,” Henri responded.

Elizabeth had prepared cinnamon rolls and coffee and had them on the table when the foursome arrived. Simone laughed. “The famous cinnamon rolls and coffee! Now I know we are welcome!”

“Please help yourselves.”

Henri removed his jacket and put it across a chair, “Thank you for a delightful party. Let us talk business before we depart. Mr. Rothschild has requested that you and your entire team be recalled to headquarters.”

“Did he say why?”

“He has another colony he wishes to establish, one that he feels will require your special skills.”

“Did he say why this colony needed my attention?”

“No, he said it was better that I not know lest I divert my attention from my work here.”

“He can’t expect me to up and leave these people as if they were so much cargo. How do I know you won’t lock them in cages for lab experiments like Sergei Tsarevich?”

“You have only my word. Isn’t that all we ever have? Rest assured that unless you consider the entire surface of this planet to be a cage, then I have no intent of restricting their activities. In fact, I intend to enlist their assistance in developing the planet.”

“You will not conduct experiments on them?”

“Not in the manner you think. The whole planet is an experiment. First the failure of the cloning operation, then the sudden upheaval caused by your arrival and the shock of how easily you defeated them. These people have been traumatized by battles. They have looked death in the face. They need help. I brought help. I have counselors, sociologists, teachers and medical personnel who will help them adjust to their lives and deal with the changes that are to come. There are more colonists coming. I have some on my ships. There will be conflicts between those who lost loved ones in the bid to secure this planet and those who came later and reaped the benefits without such losses. We have people who have dealt with these conflicts before and understand the intensity of the emotions behind them.”

Rachel assimilated what he said. “It sounds too soft and squishy to me. Are you sure these people won’t walk all over you?”

“Key to our success is that we do not provide the leaders. They do. The leaders must be as independent as possible or they will not be accepted. The first leaders must come from the earliest settlers and then as others arrive they assume leadership rolls.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Let me show you this letter from Anatole Dubrovnik.”

“My dear friend Henri, I am leaving for a new system whose coordinates appear below. Boris Zarnovsky is there now. Sergei Tsarevich is on his way. I hope to head Sergei off. If I am successful in

stopping Sergei's madness, please convince the Colonial Service to allow you to come out of retirement to save these people from the horrors Sergei would visit on them. If I am not here to tell her myself, please show this letter to Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen. In my heart I know you are the best person for this colony. I will gladly serve under your leadership."

"Anatole was a good man," Rachel said softly when she had finished reading the hand written letter.

"One of the best."

"So, now what do we do?" Rachel asked.

"Here is a list of the equipment you are to leave here, and here is a list of the personnel Mr. Rothschild would like you to bring back to Headquarters."

Rachel scanned the lists. "We will have one problem. Lt. Rattigan has been drafted as the colony's leader in spite of his expressed wishes against it."

"In your reports you mentioned another man who you felt had leadership potential. I think his name was Bucky. Was this the man I met this evening?"

"Yes," Rachel smiled. "A capable and well respected leader. He was the one who insisted that Rattigan be put in charge. One of the Swordsman women with two teen aged daughters latched on to him right when they first arrived. She is pregnant with his child. Simone met her this evening."

"A truly caring and generous woman," Simone said. "I look forward to earning her friendship and respect. Her daughters are gracious young ladies. I hope that we will work well together."

Henri smiled. "Excellent. Perhaps this will be easier than I had expected. We will help make the substitution, and you can bring your people home."

Henri and his people descended to the surface and quickly assimilated themselves into the existing population readily adopting the dress and language styles of the previous arrivals. Within a month, the new arrivals were indistinguishable from the people that had come with the first group.

Henri helped the colony establish a ruling council of five members. Bucky was the chair. Henri recruited one of Eye's supporters for the council. The first group of colonists elected one of the women rescued from Stonebridge to represent them. A man and a woman were elected from the remaining two waves of colonists to complete the council. Under Henri and Simone's experienced leadership, the colonial government quickly established order and began growing and improving the colony.

Rachel quietly recalled her crew to the ship. They retrieved all the military hardware, including the MMARV's and AARV's and carefully stowed them against the day when they would be needed again. The crew members said their farewells to the friends they left behind and once everything was in order, Queen Elizabeth departed Norseland and set course for headquarters to begin a new mission.

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN THE COOL CLEAR LIGHT of early morning, wearing the blue uniforms of Space Force officers commensurate with their rank as Space Force retirees proudly displaying the battle ribbons they had earned the hard way, Greg and Avi ascended the steps to the Space Force Academy's largest auditorium. They entered the lobby, and an old friend weaved through the crowd to greet them. Avi spotted him first and pointed him out to Greg. Greg advanced to shake his hand. "How is Rear Admiral Alfred McGuire LLB, JD, PhD, Dean of the Space Force Academy Law Department soon to be retired, feeling today?"

"I'll feel much better when this is over." He pointed with his thumb inside the auditorium. "I am glad you could come."

Avi smiled. "We're glad you called."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't get him out of this. The Dean of Students was adamant that Saul appear before his peers," McGuire apologized.

Avi wrapped her arm around McGuire's in that affectionate, controlling way she was known for. "If Rachel and her gang could survive the battleship project, Saul and his gang will survive this. Let's find seats."

Greg took Avi's other arm and they entered the theater. They found seats on the aisle near the back of the theater.

The previous evening, the Academy's Dean of Students had sent a message to Saul, Rebecca, Fiona and Sylvia ordering them to report to her office wearing dress blues at 0800 hours. A summons to the Dean's office was enough to make them nervous, but they knew from other students who had been summoned that the instruction to wear dress blues meant that the summons was not about something they had done, but something, generally unpleasant, the Dean wanted them to do. Still a summons from the Dean of Students was not to be ignored. At 0755, they assembled in the corridor outside the office. At 0759, they entered the outer office. The Dean exited the inner office as they arrived.

"You are all here. Follow me please."

The Dean quickly walked across the courtyard to the rear entrance of the theater Saul and Rebecca's grandparents had entered from the other side. Once inside the theater, the Dean led them to the Green Room where several of their instructors had gathered. She greeted each of the instructors in turn and turned back to the foursome who had followed her from her office. "Cadets, you have been tasked to participate in a training exercise. As you are probably aware, the Constant News Channel has broadcast a documentary about your participation at the battle of Stonebridge. Has any of you seen it?"

None of them had.

"Have you discussed this action with anyone other than yourselves?"

None of them had.



“In a few minutes you will follow me to the stage. You will be seated behind a table. On the large screens left and right and on the monitors in front of you we will show the documentary. There are two cameras in the audience and there will be one on the stage. This session will be simulcast throughout the Academy and then later rebroadcast in edited form on the Constant News Channel.”

“Commodore,” Saul asked his voice trembling, “can we not do this?”

“Cadet, what are you afraid of?”

“I didn’t want anyone to know how many mistakes I made. I could have gotten us killed more times than I want to think about,” Saul said. “I don’t want people thinking what we did was right.”

“Which is exactly what this is about. We want our cadets to understand what you were thinking and your analysis of what could have gone wrong so your example might be able to save the lives of others of our officers. If your instructors are happy with your work today, you will be exempt from final exams and can start your summer vacation early.”

Saul turned to Fiona, “Do you want to do this?”

“No, but we should get it over with as quickly as possible,” Fiona replied.

He turned to Rebecca.

“They should hear what we thought and why we did what we did,” Rebecca said thoughtfully.

“Sylvia?”

“I have opinions I wish to offer. We need to do this. People should know the truth.”

“Commodore, I have been outvoted. We will follow you.”

The Dean smiled and motioned for them to follow her. They stood for the Federation anthem and the pledge to the Federation flag. The Dean of Students went to the podium. “Honored Guests, Academy Faculty, Cadets, Ladies and Gentlemen, the cadets you see before you have participated in a military action that many of us here at the Academy believe should have failed. It defied many of the rules we teach here at the Academy and yet it succeeded with no losses. Today, we will discuss this action and see what we can learn from it. In order that as many people as possible have at least the basic understanding of the action, we will show the Constant News Channel’s breathlessly fawning documentary on the subject.”

Saul rose at his place behind the table. “Commodore, may I say something before we start?”

“Certainly.”

“We have not seen this documentary. I do not know how it makes us look. I want you to know I have never been so scared for so long. I lost track of the number of times we could have died. There was only one thought that drove me on. They were torturing my mother. I hope none of you ever have to face the knowledge that if you fail, the people you love the most will die horrific deaths. I can’t claim that anything I did was rational. I had no plan. All I knew was I had to find them and get them out. I will be forever grateful that these three wonderful people risked their lives to come with me.”

When Saul had seated again, the Dean looked to the others, "Ladies, would you like a word before we start?"

Fiona stood, "At the time we left the battleship, we believed our mothers would have died without our help. I did not feel I had a choice. From the moment we learned of their capture, it was up to us to rescue them. We did the best we could with what we had. We could have died, but we didn't, and for a long time Swordsmen will wish that we had."

Rebecca raised her fist in a "Power Salute" as Fiona sat. The three others raised their hands in salute as well.

The hand held camera zoomed in on the four of them in their salute as the documentary rolled.

The Constant News Channel had figured out that "Solomon Battle Group" was headed for Stonebridge, but had not figured out when or how they would arrive. They had inserted camera crews six months earlier in anticipation of the attack. The fact that Stonebridge would be attacked was widely acknowledged. The timing of the attack and the manner of attack were open guesses. The length of time that elapsed between the "Solomon Battle Group" leaving Eretz and their eventual appearance at Stonebridge had some believing that rather than attacking Stonebridge, the Solomon family had gone into hiding. Greg and Avi's public appearances were seen as a diversion to obscure the rest of the family's flight. The connection to Stellar Interstellar did not become apparent until after the battle at Stonebridge was over.

Even though the camera crews were hidden close to the Swordsman base, the first they knew anything was happening was when the power went out. They found themselves on the awkward position of having to reconstruct a battle that had already started while it was going on. Using images collected after the conclusion of the battle and in security camera recordings, they pieced together what they could determine about how the battle had started. They showed an image of Buddy sitting alone on the road obviously taken after everyone else had left to show where Buddy and Daisy had parked during the evacuation of the school building.

The Dean asked that the presentation be paused.

"Cadet Cohen, what can you tell me about that image?"

"It was taken at the end of the engagement, not at the beginning," Saul said evasively.

"The ship has external missile racks."

Greg, having heard rumors of the object of this line of questioning, pulled Avi to her feet and walked down the theater's aisle toward the stage.

"Yes, it does," Saul replied nervously.

"Some of those racks are full and some are empty. Why is that?" the dean asked.

"Some of the missiles were fired in combat," Saul answered.

"Who fired them?"

"We did," Saul said gesturing to Fiona.

The Dean pointed to the display. "It is my understanding that a P I ship cannot enter an atmosphere with external racks. Yet this one is clearly sitting on a road on the planet's surface with missiles in its external racks. How do you explain that?"

"We backed it down slowly," Saul replied.

"You backed two P I ships down slowly?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"At the same time?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Our resident flight engineers say that is impossible," the Dean challenged.

Saul sighed. "My mother went to this Academy. She got in a lot of trouble for disagreeing with resident experts. So, if you don't mind, can we move on to a different line of discussion?"

"I take it you disagree."

Saul sighed again, "You know, I would disagree, but you see, it's like this. When my mother disagreed and got in all that trouble, it was because she had done what she said she had done, and no one believed her. Now you are asking me to walk into the same kind of trap she did. I respectfully request that we change the subject."

"Cadet! Answer the question!"

"Is that an order?"

"Yes! Cadet! Answer the question. That is an order!"

"Backing a P I ship into an atmosphere can be done. I know this because we did it with two ships, twice." Saul cringed waiting for the blast he was sure was to follow.

The audience sat silent.

"Cadet Cohen, are you aware of the computations necessary to bring a P I ship in tail first?"

"No, the ship took care of all the math. My math skills leave something to be desired."

"The ship took care of all the math. Is that what you said?"

"Yes."

"How could that be?"

"The ship's computers are programmed for that sort of thing. I'm not like my grandfather. I don't understand all that programming stuff. I ask the ships to do something and, if they can, they do."

"You ask the ship to do something."

“Yes.”

“And it answers.”

“Yes.”

“Is the ship sentient?”

Saul slumped in his chair. The color drained from his face. He looked down at his hands.

“Cadet Cohen, answer the question. Is the ship sentient?”

Greg and Avi ascended the side stairs leading to the stage temporarily diverting the attention to them. The audience sat in silence as Greg moved to stand behind his grandson. “Yes, the ship is sentient,” Greg said calmly. He turned to Saul. “The secret has been out for a while.”

The Dean turned to Greg, “Commodore Solomon, this exercise does not involve you. Please leave the stage.”

“It does involve me because you have asked my grandson a question he could not answer without breaking a pledge to me. I have answered that question for him and released him from his pledge so he can truthfully tell you what he could not before. Might I also remind you that he is not a citizen of the Federation, but of Eretz and therefore not subject to some of your regulations.”

The Dean glared at Greg. “Cadet Cohen, is the ship shown in this image sentient?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Was the ship’s sentience a factor in its ability to back down into the planet’s atmosphere backwards?”

“Yes.”

“Was the ship’s sentience a factor in the outcome of the engagement?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe that had your ships not been sentient that you could have survived this engagement?”

“No.”

“Are you aware of the prohibitions against creating sentient machines?”

“Yes.”

“Then how do you explain this one?”

“He was sentient before I was born.”

Those few in the audience who knew Saul well noticed a sudden shift in his voice. Instead of facing down at the table as he had been up to that point he turned to the Dean and said, “We have four

sentient ships.”

He stood and moved away from the table. His voice, which had been meek and restrained, grew stronger as he spoke until when he finished it carried the full power of his anger.

“One is a cargo ship, two are P I’s and one is a battleship. They all predate your stupid rules and without them, we would have lost the battle at Stonebridge. I owe my life and the lives of my parents and grandparents to those ships. You have pushed this far enough. If you wish to discuss the ethics of creating and using sentient ships, you should discuss that with the master who is standing behind me. If you wish to discuss how having them turned the tide of this one battle, then the four of us will be happy to walk you through the day minute by minute. If you wish to turn this into a mud slinging contest against my parents and grandparents, you need to look elsewhere.”

Fiona stood, and twined her arm with Saul’s. “That’s the man I love. Where’ve you been the last year?”

“Hiding.”

Rebecca slid over, “It’s about damn time cuz. Welcome back.”

Sylvia joined the others and said, “I was afraid they intimidated you so bad you’d never be yourself again.”

Saul stood taller and said, “Battle group prepare to engage.”

He spotted the wireless microphone on its shelf under the podium, and reaching in front of the Dean picked it up. “Let’s start over.”

They rolled the documentary back to the beginning. Assisted by Greg and Avi who filled in details not revealed even in the documentary’s reassembled security recordings, they pointed out errors and omissions in every minute of the documentary up to the point where the first of the torture victims was brought from the building to be transported to the waiting med ship. This was the point where the camera crews had caught up with the battle in progress and had captured images in real time. Avi was the first victim pulled from the building, Greg followed staggering behind. They were brought up in pairs with Rachel and Isaac being the last. The extent of the injuries and the brutality of the torture brought gasps of horror from the audience.

“This is our enemy,” Saul reminded them. “Expect no quarter. Give none.”

The camera crews’ treatment of the attempt to return the children taken from the school was some of their best work. They captured Saul’s reaction when he realized that women were fleeing in droves. They captured Fiona’s concern for the two forlorn little girls left alone at the edge of the pavement. They showed the hope in the eyes of the women and children as they boarded the ramp to a ship that would take them to an unknown destination knowing only that wherever they were going had to be better than where they were.

The final image was Buddy with his cartoon cowboy showing streaks of battle damage rolling down the road and lifting off into the sky with no people aboard.

Saul opened the floor for questions. A Space Force Commodore stood and addressed his question to Sylvia. “You repeatedly fault inadequate intelligence gathering for some of the challenges

you faced. Do you understand the difficulty in gathering accurate information under those circumstances?"

"Yes, I do, but the problem is not the gathering of the information. The problem is its analysis and dissemination. The information we needed had been collected. It was hoarded in small pockets scattered across a dozen agencies none of whom trust each other. For example, the Federation Bureau of Drug Enforcement knew Lt. Col. Ramon Gutierrez was bogus. He was a small time drug runner and enforcer. Had that information been available to the Eretz Intelligence Service, we would never have fallen into his trap. Keep this in mind. Every secret you fail to share with your comrades in battle could send one of them to their deaths."

"I know this," Sylvia continued. "There are sources we are not using that we should be using. The broadcast media has sources we cannot match and I intend to be good friends with them. As the Intelligence Officer of this battle group, I intend to never again be caught by surprise the way we were at Stonebridge."

Saul grinned. He had wondered where Sylvia saw herself fitting into the group and she had finally declared herself. He could not have been happier.

The questioning returned to Saul's decision to take the captives and his admission that when he did it he had no idea why he thought it made sense. They talked for a long time about the difficulty of remotely controlling the AARV's from the P I's and the challenges involved with controlling the MMARV's by remote control from the med ships. Saul credited the success of the MMARV operations to J. T.'s skills. Saul freely admitted that the MMARV vehicles provided the fire power and brute force he needed to break through the opposing forces.

A first year cadet in several of Saul's classes seated in the front row stood and asked, "Do you still carry the 38 you used to kill Winthrop?"

"No, I gave it back to its rightful owner."

Greg stepped forward. "Saul, you deserve this as much as I do."

The pistol magically appeared in his hand. He held it flat in his open palm. "Take it. I have another. You earned this one. It has a long history. This is the gun that killed Pierre LaMarche."

He looked into Saul's eyes and smiled. "You will need to have your own holster made. I'm not giving that up."

Saul took the weapon reverently with both hands and put it inside the breast pocket of his jacket. "Thank you."

Still standing, the cadet asked, "What did it feel like to kill the man who tortured your mother?"

"Cold. Killing him did not take away her pain or the memories of what had happened. I killed him because he would have killed me. He was the last of a lot of people I killed that day. I try not to think about it. People die in wars. Some deserve to die. Some don't. He did."

Saul also spent a long time discussing the fact that the base's defenses were focused on an

attack from space. Having no ground based enemies, they assumed that no enemy could get through their defense network to attack them from the surface. Saul credited his ability to spot the weakness in the system's defenses to his grandfather's intense grilling of the intelligence officers who had briefed them. He took the opportunity to remind the people in the audience of a scenario from 'Planetoid Defenders' that bore striking similarities to what he had done and what the defenders should have done to thwart his attack.

Saul rolled back on his heels and laughed. "That's where I got it!" He pointed at Greg. "It's all his fault!"

Greg and Avi laughed with Saul until Saul said, "Let's look at the same scenario in 'Soldiers'. The ground forces mass at the transfer site and they lure the enemy out of the sky to a crushing defeat. Only we weren't there! Not only that, we knew they would try to trick us and we trapped them just like in Planetoid!"

He laughed. "It worked! I used a set of strategy games older than I am to defeat an enemy that should have defeated me. Please, let us give credit where credit is due."

He gestured to Greg and Avi. "Behold the masters!" When the applause had died down, he turned to face the Dean and said, "Ender wins."

The Dean caught her breath and said, "I think that concludes today's exercise. You are excused. If you have further questions, please send them in writing to my office, and we will forward them as appropriate."

Greg and Avi swept the cadets up and took them out backstage. "Do you think that will help sales?" Saul quipped.

Greg laughed. "I should hope so!"

Saul and Fiona departed the next morning for a small private college near Orlando where they attended the college's special summer business school for working professionals. Warren may have believed that they had no head for business, but they intended to prove him wrong. They chose this college because of its small size and because the admissions counselors had promised them intensive individual instruction. On weekends, they joined the local Air National Guard units for their exercises. Even with all the time they spent at their studies and in training, they still found time to bask on several of the nearby beaches.

Sylvia disappeared into the intelligence community the same day Saul and Fiona departed. When they reunited at the end of the summer all she would say was that her summer had been most informative.

Greg called in some favors and got Rebecca temporarily assigned to the same weapons development group that Rashi had been assigned to after graduating from the Academy.

At the end of the summer, the foursome reunited and dove into their classwork with renewed energy. Saul met with each of his instructors before the first class and informed them that if they did not want to have him disagree with them publicly, it would be better to not call on him. He would come by their office after class and discuss their differences of opinion in private.

Saul's plan worked well for the first few weeks. He would take copious notes and show up at the instructor's office during regular office hours. In one of his classes he had some serious issues with the instructor's views on the proper uses of the MMARV. Saul felt that the instructor overlooked some of the MMARV's vulnerabilities. As much as Saul loved the MMARV, there were tactics that left the MMARV open to attack that should not be attempted in combat. In the heated discussion that followed the class, the instructor decided to settle the issue by calling one of his Marine buddies at Parris Island. When the Marine sided with Saul, the instructor capitulated. The next day in class he called Saul to the front of the class to explain their discussion of the previous evening.

The class probed the issue and acknowledged the correctness of Saul's concerns. They realized at the same time that Saul was getting extra attention that they were not getting. That touched off a small firestorm in the classroom. By the end of class, they had agreed to a voluntary evening session once a week. In that session, to be held behind closed doors, any concept from the week's class work could be discussed and disputed without recrimination. Within the next two weeks all of Saul's classes were holding such sessions.

The second year at the Academy passed quickly. As soon as exams were over, the foursome went their separate ways as they had the previous summer.



## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER TWELVE

THE QUEEN ELIZABETH, guided by the harbor tugs, settled gently into the dock at Stellar headquarters. Jane Turner and the CNC crews were on hand to record the family reunion. At dinner that evening, Wendy and Joshua's older son, Bobby, announced that he wished to return to Eretz to study to become a Rabbi. Rashi and Esther's son, Daniel announced that he wished to travel to Earth to study civil engineering. Rachel and Isaac's third child, Naomi and Rashi and Wendy's third child, Hannah, announced that they wished to follow Moses to Eretz to study medicine with the eventual goal of being a team like their fathers were. Both the engineering and medical sides of the program were taught at the Medical University in New Boston and they felt confident that they could get accepted into the program. That left four of the children who would be traveling on the next mission. Rachel and Isaac's youngest, Gabby, Wendy and Joshua's youngest, Barney, Reuben and Suwanee's youngest, Delmar and Rashi and Esther's daughter Caroline would venture out with their parents while their older siblings would seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Peter and Elizabeth were serviced and restocked for their next mission. Buddy, Daisy, Alexander and Valerie checked in with engineering for repairs and rearming. The crews rested and enjoyed the station's entertainment facilities while they waited to go out again.

A week after the Queen Elizabeth returned to port, Warren wandered on board followed by his two bodyguards. He found Rachel in her office. After helping himself to the usual cinnamon rolls and coffee, he congratulated her on their successes and chatted about the children before he came to the reason for his visit.

"Bolivar was my personal pilot. I liked him and was sorry to have to let him go. He served me well and I would have kept him, but he complained that he was bored and wished to go out on this mission with his parents. I tried to bribe him with money, but he willingly took a pay cut to go with his parents. He sent me a report that I only read a few hours ago. Apparently, he and Captain Darwin got to know each other very well."

"In a manner of speaking," Rachel replied with a smile.

"Bolivar always did have a way with the ladies."

"I hear you are no slouch in that department either."

"One of the advantages of being rich, but some things cannot be bought. Which is why I came to you first. I would like to recruit your Captain Darwin to be my personal pilot."

"What other duties would you have her perform?" Rachel raised an eyebrow.

"Bodyguard, personal fitness trainer, companion at formal occasions and confidante."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, unless she were to decide otherwise."

"So, why are you talking to me? She is your employee."

“Can you spare her?”

“Yes, I can replace her from within and recruit where I need to.”

“Do you think she will accept the job?”

“I have no idea. What did Bolivar think?”

“He thought she would.”

“Well, there you have it. You realize you are taking your life in your hands. If she has too much to drink, she is capable of killing you very quickly.”

“I am aware. I accept the risk. I understand that I would be in good company.”

“Oh?”

“Does Isaac not take the same risk?”

Rachel smiled. “Yes, he does.”

Later that day, Alina visited Warren’s ship and met the rest of his crew. Warren’s personal ship was a modified convoy escort with more spacious living quarters than the norm and the full compliment of weaponry carried by the regular escort. Three days later, with Alina in command, they departed on a trip to lobby the Federation to strengthen the Space Force.

Two weeks before the Queen Elizabeth and Peter were scheduled to depart, the intelligence people called them in for their first briefing on their new mission. The same man who had assured them that Gutierrez was legit addressed them. “There appears to be some disagreement as to whether this planet is habitable. The initial survey crew reported that it resembles Earth toward the end of the Jurassic period. They strongly recommended immediate colonization. The second ship to visit the planet reports that the planet is not habitable by humans in spite of what appear to be ideal conditions. They report aggressive native species that prohibit colonization. The Colony Service believes that the captain is overstating the problems for personal gain.”

“What do you believe?” Rachel asked.

“I agree with the Colony Service.”

“What if I arrive on site and agree with the captain on duty?”

“We have another planet for you to visit which is not as hospitable because it is colder. The team on site there has mixed feelings and will defer to your judgment when you arrive if you elect not to stay at the first location.”

“Very well, continue,” Rachel said.

“The ship on station is a refitted battleship named the Thor Heyerdahl. Its captain is retired Space Force, but this is his first command. I understand that he was accepted for the post under some political pressure. The Colony Service does not have much faith in him. They have been on station for a year and will remain on station until you arrive to relieve them.”

“Are there any other ships we will have to be concerned about?” Rachel asked.

“They have dealt with the usual lot of pirates and criminals, but they appear to have retained control of the system. As of the courier we received yesterday, the system appears to be calm.”

The briefing officer droned on with details about climate and topography, but did not mention the native species that convinced the captain on station that colonizing this planet might not be appropriate. When asked, the briefing officer stated flatly that they did not believe the reports. He made reference to the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot before dismissing the issue entirely.

The ship on station at the planet they were to attempt to colonize if the first one failed was a refitted battleship named the Amerigo Vespucci. Its reports showed a planet that would be habitable if eking out a living in sub-arctic conditions were justified by some abundant natural resource yet to be found. The Vespucci and its crew had repulsed the usual pirates and criminals and reported having secured the system.

The Queen Elizabeth and Peter set out with their full compliment of personnel and supplies. The children leaving for Eretz had departed a week earlier. Daniel had departed the day before headed for Earth with the same Captain McGee that had hosted Saul and his group. Once Elizabeth and Peter had jumped into hyper drive, Rachel called Faye Anne to her office.

“Faye Anne, are you as unhappy with the quality of the intelligence we are getting as I am?”

“Yes.”

“From now on, once we establish a colony and have things under control, I want you to return to headquarters to prepare our next mission. You need to be looking ahead. You need to be our scout, our eyes and ears ranging ahead keeping us from situations like the one we are facing now. You are the only person I can trust to get us complete information.”

“Thank you.”

“I trust you will make contact with Jane Turner. She will want information in return for information. Use your best judgment, but I would rather have the information you need than not get it because the price was too high. The only thing off limits is the Third Force.”

“I will enjoy the assignment and will not let you down.”

“Thank you, Faye Anne.”

The Queen Elizabeth and Peter entered the system according to protocol and settled into the parking orbit adjacent to the battleship on station.

Rachel hailed the ship on an open frequency and established voice communication with its captain. “Captain, I know protocol is that you are supposed to invite us to a Captain’s Dinner, but I have the larger galley. Why don’t you and your officers come over here?”

Rachel heard his laugh. “Captain, it would be my honor to join you in a Captain’s Dinner. How many of my staff would you have me bring?”

“As many of your officers and enlisted you don’t need to maintain watch. Send me the list so I

can have place cards made.”

“Roger that!”

Captain Charles Simpson looked familiar as he entered the airlock. Rachel did not place him immediately. After the formalities had been observed and the party had started, Rachel turned to him and said, “Why do I feel like I know you?”

He sighed, “I had hoped you would not ask me that. I testified against you in Van Hoff’s case.”

“That was a very long time ago.”

“Yes, but I continue to be amazed at how right you were about the damage it would do to our careers. Only two of us who testified against you lasted through the end of our first enlistment contract. The rest were shuffled off to the reserves or some God forsaken outpost so isolated that they found ways to resign early. As to the two of us who stayed, we had nowhere else to go. I couldn’t go back to the drug infested rat warren I grew up in. This is my first command. The only reason I got it was because my last C O had dirt on some administrator in the colony service and used it on my behalf. I’ve been with the colony service five years and they still don’t trust me.”

“My instructions are to confirm or deny your reports. If they are accurate, I will confirm them. If not, I will refute them. History is irrelevant. All that matters is the truth.”

“Captain, when they told me you were in command of this mission, I knew that would be your attitude. I am confident that you will find I have not exaggerated the severity of the situation.”

“Tomorrow, I will send down a team of scientists and Marines. They will stay on the planet for a month. Then we will report back.”

“Captain, there is a rumor among the colony service pilots that you carry unauthorized combat equipment with you. Is this true?”

“Sometimes.”

“If you have any MMARV’s with you, I think you should send them down with your team. If I had them, I would deploy a minimum of two.”

Rachel studied the man for a moment before answering. “Better to err on the side of caution.” She could read no deception in his expression.

“Exactly.”

The steward announced dinner was served and the guests took their places. While they ate dinner, Rachel ordered that a second med ship be readied to deploy the two MMARV’s. When Lt. Rattigan questioned the order she asked him if he would rather have the MMARV’s and not need them or need them and not have them.

The party was more subdued than most of the parties Rachel had hosted and the guests wandered back to their ships earlier than was typical of this type of affair.

The scientists and Marines departed in the morning for the planet's surface. The survey ship had two small VTOL ships that could land and take off vertically from any hard flat place large enough for it to pass unobstructed. However the VTOL ships could only carry four people and a limited amount of cargo. The colonists advance team leader, a swarthy gentleman named Eugene Saroyan, wanted to insert a larger team than the VTOL ships could handle. He was concerned that if there were any hazards on the surface the team needed to be large enough to defend itself. He developed the plan whereby the team descended to the surface in greater numbers. They parachuted to a plateau that gave them a commanding view for a hundred kilometers in any direction. The plateau had one side which sloped gently enough for the MMARV's to operate while the other three sides were unassailable steep sandy cliffs. They cleared an area near the camp where supplies could be airdropped safely. For the first week they were on the planet, they stayed within sight of the base camp. They saw evidence of large predators, but they did not see any of the predators themselves.

While the team was on the ground there was not a whole lot anyone on the ship could do. Various activities were hastily organized to keep the colonists from killing each other out of boredom as they hoped for a favorable response from the explorers on the surface.

Rachel was reading a report on a candidate for promotion when Elizabeth said, "Rachel, may I interrupt you?"

"Certainly."

"Buddy would like to speak with you."

"Would he like me to come see him?"

"No, he has asked to be patched through to you."

"Certainly."

"Hello, Rachel." There was a slight note of insecurity in his voice.

"What can I do for you, Buddy?"

"Daisy and I would like a change of personnel."

"Daisy can speak for herself. Elizabeth, would you patch her through?"

"Hello, Rachel."

"Hello, Daisy, Buddy tells me you want a change of personnel. Is this correct?"

"Yes, it is. Wendy's heart isn't in it anymore. She needs to be doing something else."

"Thank you for being honest and telling me. Is that it?"

Buddy replied, "The other people you assigned to us, they're nice people, and we like them, and I don't want to hurt their feelings, and they are working as hard as they can, but they aren't very good."

"You miss Alina," Rachel said.

"We all do," Elizabeth replied, "but she will be happier with Mr. Rothschild than she would be

here.”

“So who would you like to see in their places?”

“Gabby, Barney, Delmar and Caroline,” Buddy said without hesitation.

Rachel sat in silence for a moment. “Do they know this?”

“We have discussed it with them,” Elizabeth said. “I tried to talk them out of it because of the dangers, but they asked us to talk to you on their behalf.”

“Elizabeth, has Peter been listening?”

“No.”

“Please patch him in and bring him up to speed on our discussions.”

“Hello, Rachel.”

“Hello, Peter, when you were with the children at headquarters, you observed their behavior. Is what Buddy and Daisy are suggesting smart?”

“Yes, it is for more reasons than you have been told.”

“Do you intend to enlighten me?”

“I could or we could watch their development unfold in front of us which I think would prove to be the better plan since they will progress more naturally that way. I will say this, though. They are a battle group. They have been since the day they took the fire control positions at Stonebridge. You need only look at their marksmanship ratings in that battle to see how good they are. They are fiercely competitive. Part of the reason the latest group of their siblings left when they did is because these four drove them away.”

“Rachel, do not be angry with them,” Elizabeth interrupted. “They wanted your attention and saw their older siblings as being in their way so they convinced their brothers and sisters that now was the best time for them to step out on their own or they might never get another chance.”

“The older ones are all going where they said they are going to do what they said they wanted to do,” Peter added. “Naomi and Hannah were especially anxious to go. They want to convince Moses and Ambrosia that they should team up with engineers as a team. They have a plan that the five of them should team up at a gateway like New St. Louis so they can provide health care to the flight crews that otherwise would have no care.”

“Are you suggesting that Gabby, Barney, Delmar and Caroline be developed into a battle group like Saul’s battle group?”

“Similar, but not the same,” Peter suggested. “Saul is the leader of that group which is as it should be. Among these four, there is no clear leader. They seem to know what each other is thinking and act as a team.”

Rachel sat in silence her hands steepled in front of her. "Elizabeth, could you have Wendy come here, please?"

Wendy arrived a few minutes later.

"Wendy, remember how we used to worry about what would happen if our ships conspired against us?"

"Yes," Wendy replied uncertainly.

"Our ships have been scheming behind our backs. Buddy and Daisy have asked for a change in personnel. I am inclined to grant their request."

Hurt and insulted, Wendy asked, "What have I done wrong?"

"Nothing," Daisy replied, "but you aren't happy flying with me like you once were. Maybe we should find something else for you to do you would like better."

"Are they all listening?" Wendy asked amazed.

"Yes," all the ships replied together.

Wendy sank into one of the chairs. "Who would you replace me with?"

"Gabby, Barney, Delmar and Caroline," Rachel answered.

"They're so young!"

"How old were we?" Rachel said.

"But it was different."

"Yes, but that does not mean we should keep them from doing this."

Wendy thought in silence. "You know this would be easier if you had avatars on the displays. I could handle talking to you better if I was looking at you."

Within seconds, images appeared on monitors around the room. "Feel better?" Elizabeth's avatar asked.

"Yes, I do. You would think as long as I have known you, I would not need to do this."

"Wendy, we understand," Peter said. "The kids helped us develop these images because they had the same feelings you did."

"Are the kids creating another battle group?"

"They already have," Peter replied. "We will be giving them the tools they need to develop it."

"We should probably bring the rest of the parents in to discuss this. I am prepared to give my permission," Wendy said.

Wendy, Rachel, the remaining parents and the four avatars gathered in the adjacent conference room. The discussion was shorter than Rachel would have expected.

“Elizabeth, where are the kids?”

“On the hangar deck.”

“Please have them come up.”

The kids entered the conference room and quickly surveyed its occupants. The smiles on the faces of the avatars told them everything they needed to know.

“Yes!” Gabby shouted. “Yes! We are a go!”

The kids shouted joyously and did a complicated little hand move that was the current replacement for a “high five” or a knuckle bump.

Rachel raised her hands for order. “We have given permission for you to be assigned to Buddy and Daisy. You will be expected to behave with the same level of discipline as the rest of our combat crews. You will fly patrols and you will participate in exercises. You will be responsible for the proper care of your ships and for seeing that you are ready for combat at all times. Is that clear?”

They affirmed that it was.

“Further,” Rachel said, “this is not Saul’s battle group. Saul is entirely in command of that group. I expect this group to rotate command. Each of you should have the opportunity to command the others. Elizabeth will set up a duty roster that has each of you rotating through the four positions. One last thing, please do not say anything until the people you are replacing have been informed.”

The kids assured the adults that they did know what they were doing and that they would live up to their expectations. Wendy left to reassign the people that were being replaced and to write herself into the bridge watch schedule as Rachel had instructed.

Gabby suggested they call themselves “Fourth Battle Wing”. Greg and Avi were the first “Wing”. Rachel and her group were the second. Saul and his team were the third and they were the fourth. Caroline designed a logo which they painted on Buddy and Daisy’s flight surfaces. It resembled the logo of the American Fourth Air Force except that where the Air Force logo had a star, the new logo had the number four. There was some irony in the fact that Saul and the “Third Battle Wing” could shortly be in command of the “Third Force”. They redesigned Buddy’s cowboy and his horse to make them less cartoon like and more like his avatar. Daisy went from being a cartoon blond hillbilly to being a slinky sophisticate, her dark hair flowing to her waist, wearing a glittering red gown with an air of mystery.

The “Fourth Battle Wing” quickly adjusted to the special helmets and flight suits that were their interface with the ships. Working closely with Reuben, Rashi and J. T. they made modifications to the gloves that they hoped would make the ships even more responsive. They loaded all their game software into the ships’ data storage so they could play when they were not on patrol. For no more reason than they could do it, they loaded all the MMARV and AARV control software as well. When they were on patrol, they worked together to develop an algorithm that would improve targeting by taking advantage of the parallax gained by the distance between the two ships when they engaged the



same target.

Not that much older than the “Fourth Battle Wing”, Aida and Brad welcomed the youngsters and engaged them in combat exercises. They assimilated modifications that the “Fourth” had tested into their own ships. The patrol pilots from the Thor Heyerdahl found the kids broke up the monotony of patrol duties and welcomed them to the rotation. A week after their creation, the “Fourth” was preparing to relieve Alexander and Valerie on patrol when Aida called, “We have incoming! One ship! Appears to be a freighter!” Alexander transmitted the coordinates to the other ships.

Once she had the coordinates on her display, Caroline sang out, “Tally HO-O-O!” Aida replied, “You go meet them. We’ll hold station here.”

“Roger that!” Caroline answered since it was her turn at command. At a single touch of her gloved hand to her control display, Caroline initiated the jumps that would put both ships in their appropriate positions relative to the approaching ship.

“It’s the Edward R. Murrow!” Gabby said once she had a visual on the ship.

“Buddy, please confirm the ship’s identification,” Caroline said. “What are they doing here? I hope they aren’t playing Paul Revere again.”

“It’s the Edward R. Murrow,” Buddy replied. “Manifests and personnel rosters are being received.” Buddy put the data on the displays.

Caroline hailed the ship on an open frequency, “This is Caroline Abrams of the Solomon Family Fourth Battle Wing. Welcome CNC News Ship Edward R. Murrow. What the hell are you doing way out here?”

“The Edward R. Murrow is attempting to open visual communication links.” Buddy said.

“Put them on the displays,” Caroline said.

Jane was still laughing when her image appeared on the display. “That’s a hell of a greeting! I should ask you the same question. Hello, Caroline, it is good to talk to you again. ‘Fourth Battle Wing?’ What is this? I would have thought you would have headed off to college by now.”

“This is more fun,” Gabby interrupted. “So, what brings you out here?”

“Gabiella? I came for the story, but I think I found a bigger story than I anticipated.”

“What story did you come for?” Caroline asked.

“Isn’t the captain of the ship on station one of the people who testified against your mother at the Academy? The Solomon family is always news.”

“Yes, but that’s ancient history,” Gabby said. “I think you will be disappointed.”

“Buddy, send the Edward R. Murrow’s navigation system the coordinates for the parking orbit,” Caroline said. “We’ll call you in and meet you there!”

“Before you leave,” Jane said, “promise me that you will bring me up to speed on your ‘Fourth Battle Wing’. For a family this size to produce this many military leaders is a story by itself. Who are the other members?”

“Barney and Delmar.”

“Please, promise me I can talk to all of you. You would be a great inspiration.”

“Roger that. See you in a bit, we’re clear.”

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FAYE ANNE AND RACHEL REQUESTED a private meeting with Jane Turner as soon as the ships had connected their personnel tubes. Even though she participated in the meeting, Elizabeth made no recordings in keeping with Rachel's request. The meeting lasted four hours during which time their crews wondered what they could talk about for that long. The women emerged together and went to the galley for dinner. Eavesdroppers heard them talk about the children who had departed to seek their fortunes elsewhere as one would bring an old family friend up to speed on the latest goings on.

Captain Charles Simpson joined them after dinner. An hour later a camera crew was called into the room. An hour after that, Captain Simpson left with a stride that spoke of a man on a mission. An hour later Rachel called a conference with her "battle group" and her flight crews. Those who were on patrol or on watch participated remotely.

"Ladies and Gentleman, please be seated. Miss Turner, Captain Simpson and I are teaming up on a project that involves all of you. Miss Turner and her people could not have arrived at a better time. Something is happening on the surface we can't explain. Lt. Rattigan reports what sounds like thousands of drums in the distance. He says sometimes he feels the sound transmitted through the ground as if thousands of feet are stamping in rhythm. It takes a lot to scare Lt. Rattigan. He won't admit it, but he's scared. We can't get them and their equipment out of there as quickly as I would like, therefore we need to mount a rescue mission.

"There is another threat we need to face. Miss Turner informs us that our destination was not as much of a secret as we would have hoped. There are people who would attack us here. We do not know if any of them are coming, but we don't know they aren't. Given our experiences of late I think we will be wise to assume that an attack is a possibility. Captain Simpson has put his flight crews on alert and has deployed his VTOL ships to the surface to assist with communications should the need arise. He is preparing his crew for potential battle.

"Four camera crews will be deployed to the Thor Heyerdahl. Given the fact that the colony service does not trust the Heyerdahl's staff, we will document everything that happens. Camera crews will be embedded with as many of our combat units as there are camera operators to deploy. Our personnel will support their mission as if it was their own, because it is."

"We can't rescue the people on the surface without a runway. Six MMARV's will be air dropped to the surface. Buddy, Daisy and the Fourth will deploy to the surface to control four of the MMARV's and build the runway. The two other MMARV's will deploy with the Marines. As soon as the runway is operational, two AARV's will deploy to the surface so we can determine what is making the noise. We will probably evacuate the scientists and their equipment on the first two Med ship flights. The AARV's will provide air cover and reconnaissance. The runway will be dirt and crushed stone, We can't afford to drop the expanded metal we had intended to use for the runway since we will probably need it at our next stop."

"Unless Lt. Rattigan is wrong in his assessment of what is happening on the surface, we will not be staying here. We will move on. I have no confidence that the next planet that the colony service has

chosen for us is any more hospitable than this one. We will transfer all of Peter's cargo to this ship. Peter will return to Headquarters with Faye Anne to procure the supplies we will need if we move on to find another planet. While at headquarters, Faye Anne will research potential planets for colonization and meet us at our next stop to tell us where we will be going."

"First step is to get the MMARV's and the Fourth to the surface. Let's get that rolling and then I can discuss details of the rest of the mission with the people involved. Med crews, you are dismissed."

Rachel called the Fourth who had been listening remotely. "Do you understand your mission?"

"We are to drive the MMARV's and use their plows to clear a runway," Caroline answered. "I assume you are sending us instead of a med ship because we can defend ourselves on the surface."

"Also because you can land without a runway."

"There is no lake nearby," Gabby said.

"If Saul could figure out how to back down fully loaded, you can figure out how to land so that you won't sink into the ground. You will have the runway to take off from," Rachel reminded them. "Empty your external racks before you leave. Put grapeshot and countermeasures in your internal tubes. Nothing else will be much use if Lt. Rattigan is right about what he's hearing."

"Got it," Barney chimed in. "We'll be at the hangar deck in ten minutes."

"We will transmit mission data to your ships while you rearm. You will carry camera operators with you. They will meet you on the hangar deck."

"Roger that."

The Fourth landed on an open bay of the hangar deck and exited the ships in their EVA capable flight suits. A dozen similarly suited munitions technicians quickly unloaded the external munitions and loaded the internal tubes as requested. They loaded enough food for three months. Greg had been adamant that his ships carry enough food that if they had to travel alone to base, they would be able to do so without the crew starving to death on the way. As long as the reactor was running, there would be water, but food was a finite resource.

The transfer was almost complete when four people wearing CNC flight suits approached across the hangar deck dragging heavy cases. Caroline elbowed Gabby, "Look we get to be stars!"

"Hello, Camera operator Stu Ralston requests permission to join the crew," the first of the CNC people to arrive, a young man, said stiffly.

"Hello, Stu," Barney replied, "how many of you will be coming aboard?"

"There will be two of us, sir."

Barney laughed, "Stu, you can call my father 'sir' all you like, but I'm Barney. This is Delmar, Gabby and Caroline. The ships are Buddy and Daisy."

"Um, yes, um Barney, where should I stow my gear?"

The second person arrived and it did not take a medical degree to realize that this was a woman. She bowed slightly before approaching Gabby. "Miss Gabriella Cohen, I am Fatima Azania. I am a camera operator assigned to your unit. I request permission to come aboard. If it meets with your approval, where should I store my equipment?"

Gabby looked at Hannah and then back to Fatima peering carefully through her face shield. She could see the edge of a head scarf around Fatima's face. "Miss Azania, are you Muslim?"

"Yes, if it offends you, I will request other assignment."

The Fourth stood in silence for a moment. Barney broke the silence. "We need to move the blueberry muffins to Buddy and the strawberry shortcake to Daisy."

Caroline smiled. "Miss Azania, do you need special food?"

"Please call me Fatima. I understand you eat Kosher. That is close enough to Halal if it will not be too much trouble. I do not understand about the muffins."

"If I understand your culture, it would not be appropriate for you to be in the close quarters of a ship with a man. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Well, our ships are male and female."

"Your ships have sex?"

Caroline chuckled, "No, it's a long story, but we think of them as male and female. It would not be appropriate for you to be on a male ship now would it?"

"If you say so."

"We loaded my favorite snack food to the boy ship and Barney's favorite on the girl ship because that's how we planned our staffing."

"If it is too much trouble,"

Gabby cut her off, "Will you boys load the gear so we can get out of here?"

Barney and Delmar saluted and shouted, "Aye! Captain!" as they picked up the heavy cases and put them in the storage compartment where they would retrieve them once they were on their way.

Stu and Fatima thanked the two men who had helped them lug their gear and boarded the ships.

Barney and Gabby called front seats so Delmar and Caroline helped their passengers strap in. Once they were settled, the ships gently headed out of the hangar deck for the planet's surface.

"How rough is it?" Fatima asked.

"How rough is what?" Gabby asked.

"Entering the atmosphere." Fatima replied.

"It's pretty rough. Have you never done it before?"

"No, I have not set foot on a planet since I was little. I have lived in space most of my life."

"It's the roughest thing I've ever done and we do it all the time. Maybe you better take off your helmet. You don't want to be sick in your helmet. You never get the smell out. Should be a bag around there somewhere. It doesn't last that long, but it's pretty intense."

"Thank you."

"Hey, Gabby, I think you should take command this trip," Barney said. "All in favor say 'Aye' real loud."

Five voices said, "Aye."

"All opposed?"

Gabby said, "Nay!"

"Gabby, you're out voted. I think we should maintain constant ship-to-ship communication."

"Roger that," Buddy said.

"All right, gang we have two newbies riding with us and we need to bring them up to speed on who we are and how we do things," Gabby said. "For the bulk of this mission we will not be able to see each other. Therefore it is important that we be able to recognize each other's voices. We have an hour before we hit the atmosphere to get familiar with each other."

"How familiar can we get with you over there and us over here?" Delmar quipped.

"Delmar! Be nice!"

"Why? You didn't ask me to be part of this crew because I was nice, you asked me because I was fun to be around." Delmar laughed as he teased Gabby.

"No, Delmar we asked you to be part of this because you are the best shot of the bunch of us," Gabby shot back. "Stu and Fatima, as you can hear, Delmar would sing bass if he were in a choir. You probably noticed a smoothness to his consonants you can hear in spite of the limited fidelity of our communications systems. Delmar is the most likely of us to crack a joke. Once in combat, he is dead serious, but any other time, if you aren't sure if what he said is a joke, ask him."

Caroline took advantage of Gabby's slight pause. "I am Caroline. My voice is a higher pitched than Gabby's and I do have to warn you, when I get excited, I get shrill. I would like to ask Fatima a question. How does a single young Muslim woman find herself on a news ship in as remote a location as this one?"

"Fatima, you don't have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable," Barney said.

"No, Miss Turner said you would ask and if I did not want you to know, I should refuse the

assignment. Miss Turner has told me about you and your family. I came willingly. I want to talk to you and work with you. I hate the Swordsmen as much as you do. Only those who have been persecuted understand persecution. I know what the Swordsmen did to your parents, but the hate does not consume you as it does so many of my people.”

“I would not be so sure of that,” Caroline said, “Saul is pretty strong in his hatred.”

“Yes, but he is only one and he probably didn’t before the battle at Stonebridge.”

“Good point,” Gabby said.

“Many of my people hate everyone that is not them. They even hate other Muslims. We are Sunni. My father used to talk for hours about how everyone else was twisting the words of the Prophet to their own thinking and lost sight of the truth.”

“Where do you stand?” Caroline asked.

“I think they are all wrong. You and your family are right. You can fight without hate. You can battle without anger. You can enforce the peace without making war. Let me answer Caroline’s first question and I think you will understand. I grew up on a planet colonized by Sunni Muslims. We were attacked by Swordsmen. The Swordsmen killed all the males and all the females over sixteen. Females between twelve and sixteen they took to be wives for their men because there were not enough women where they were. I do not know what happened to the younger ones. We were herded onto one of their ships. The ship was attacked by pirates before we left orbit. The pirates killed the Swordsmen and sold us to slavers. The slavers took us to a slave market to be sold. Miss Turner was there investigating the slave trade. She bought me and some other girls. She took us to her ship and interviewed us. She sent the recordings to the Space Force, but by the time the Space Force arrived the slavers were gone. Someone told them in enough time for them to leave. There is corruption all over. I am fortunate that Miss Turner rescued me from the slavers or I would be in a brothel somewhere.”

“Our cousins were captured by slavers and made to work in a factory that produced poison gas. Had our parents not rescued them, they would have died within the year. We understand,” Barney said.

“All right, Stu,” Delmar said, “you’re up.”

“I am a visual artist,” Stu replied.

When he failed to elaborate, Gabby said, “What is that supposed to mean to a bunch of hardened serial killers like us?”

Fatima laughed. Somehow these four teenagers hardly seemed like the monsters others would make them out to be.

“Yeah,” Delmar added, “our idea of art is a neatly arranged pattern of laser strikes on a target.”

“Stu, we will be depending on each other for our mutual safety until the mission is over,” Caroline said. “Your unwillingness to tell us about yourself touches one of our hot buttons. We are killers. If we do not trust you, your life may not be worth a plugged nickel, pardner.”

“I get it,” Stu said reluctantly. “I believe that the camera should tell the story. I am not the story

or the story teller. The camera is. It does not matter who I am or what I think. It only matters what the camera sees and hears. The camera tells the truth.”

“No, Stu,” Delmar contradicted, “the camera lies just like people lie. It’s like the saying that figures don’t lie but liars figure. If we are going to be responsible for your life we need to know more.”

“Delmar,” Fatima interrupted, “Stu and I have had this discussion. We fight about it all the time. Give it up. It is a waste of your time.”

“Perhaps,” Delmar came back, “but when you talked his life did not potentially hang in the balance based on my reaction time. If I hesitate, unsure of whether I should save him or the machine next to him, he could die. That was not true when he talked to you on the ship. It is now.”

“Is it really that important to you?” Fatima asked.

“Yes,” a chorus of voices replied.

“I grew up on Earth in a suburb of San Francisco,” Stu said. “My parents were school teachers. My childhood was pretty dull. It was the normal stuff a kid growing up in the suburbs goes through. I had a brother and a sister. I was the youngest. I was brought up Methodist, but mostly none of us cared much for religion. I had a couple of classmates that were Catholic and a few that were Swordsman. I was an outcast mostly. Nobody bothered me and I was as happy to be left alone. I got my first camera when I was six. It’s all I’ve cared about ever since. I am the observer. I record the story the same as you would see it if you were there, only you aren’t and I am so I have to show it to you. The camera tells the truth.”

“Stu,” Delmar said, “the camera only tells part of the truth.”

“Are you saying the camera lies?”

“No,” Delmar’s smile could be heard in his voice. “The camera can only tell what it sees and hears. There is much that happens where there are no cameras to see it or hear it. When we get to the surface tomorrow, your life may depend on your understanding that the space you must protect is a sphere and not a cone.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, Stu, a reflection of reality in a combat zone. Is this your first combat assignment?”

“Yes.”

“Fatima?”

“Yes, mine too.”

“It’s not ours,” Delmar said. “Pay attention to what we tell you. Our first job is to build a runway. Our second job is to defend the site. Our third job is to protect you. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Stu replied.



“Yes, Delmar,” Fatima replied.

“Stu, what Barney told you about calling him ‘sir’ goes for me, too. Got it?”

“Yes, Delmar.”

Yellow warning lights flashed in both cabins. “Please check the security of your restraints. We are about to enter the atmosphere,” Buddy said.

“Dammit, Buddy! Can you knock off the Texas Longhorn accent! You know I hate that one!” Gabby shouted.

“Would this be preferable?” Buddy asked in an accent that was reminiscent of twentieth century Dallas. The accent was subdued, but still distinctive. Buddy had chosen it to stand out clearly from Barney and Delmar.

“Yes, thank you,” Gabby said. “Stu and Fatima, if you have not figured out yet, these ships are sentient. They think for themselves. You should address them as if they were people, because they are smarter than we are. They are not machines. They are sentient warships. They are every bit as dangerous as that concept implies. Insulting one of them is at least as dangerous as insulting Delmar. The good news is that they like us. I hope to God they never stop liking us. Daisy, would you agree?”

“Yes, Gabby, we watched you grow up and you are like our children. Even if you act stupidly, we still love you as a parent would. Now, enough chatter, we are entering the atmosphere. Verify that your restraints are tight.”

Daisy had chosen an accent from the Boston area from about the same period as the accent Buddy had chosen. It was one of her favorites in that it alluded to a level of knowledge that she possessed, but did not often get credit for.

The ride to the surface was as gentle as the two ships could make it understanding the sensitivity of the two newbies. Fatima was not sick although she was relieved when they slowed down to the point where the flight surfaces could bite the air and smooth out the turbulence. The timing of the descent worked out that they approached the landing site in darkness and dawn was breaking as they spiraled down to land. During the spiral, Buddy, Daisy, Gabby and Barney had worked out a landing plan that should, theoretically, have them settle on either side of the planned runway. The plan almost worked. Instead of the dead stop they expected when they touched the surface, they rolled a few dozen meters before coming to a stop with their backs to the cliff and their noses pointed down the hill toward the forested plain where Lt. Rattigan believed the noise originated. The ships reported no damage from the landing.

The MMARV’s were in position when they arrived. There was no other sign of human presence beyond the tracks of the other MMARV’s where they lead off down the hill into the forest.

“Request permission to exit the vessel,” both Stu and Fatima said as soon as the dust around the two ships had settled.

“Are your flight suits armored?” Delmar asked.

“Yes,” Fatima replied.

“Can you operate the camera with your helmet on?” Delmar asked.

“No, we can’t,” Stu replied.

“That’s too bad,” Gabby said. “Permission granted to leave the ship under these conditions. You will stay in your flight suits. You will take your helmets with you and place them where you can retrieve them quickly should the need arise. You will stay together. Nobody goes out alone. You will cover each others’ backs. You will stay out of the way of the MMARV’s. You will stay where we can see you with the ships’ cameras and you will talk to us. You will stay in constant communication. We need to know what is going on out there.”

Stu and Fatima set up a half dozen stationary cameras around the site. They each carried a camera on their shoulders. The cameras transmitted back to recorders in the ships’ storage bays. They were quickly sending images back to the recorders. Clearly they were as practiced at this as the Fourth was at combat maneuvers.

The attempt to control the MMARV’s from the ships’ control consoles was a total disaster. The inexperienced operators kept digging the plows into the ground and having to back the units out. They narrowly averted collisions several times. They decided that they needed to operate the MMARV’s riding on the units themselves. Leaving Buddy and Daisy to monitor the area, the four exited the ships and began scraping a two kilometer long runway over the rocky and hard packed surface. They found that the ships’ lasers would cut through the sedimentary rock. Taking full advantage of each of the ships’ forty-eight lasers, they cut off everything above the level they had chosen for the runway and used the debris to fill in the holes. Once a section of runway was finished, each of the ships would advance to continue their assault on the rocky terrain. As the ships advanced, Fatima and Stu moved the stationary cameras. Guided by a scanning weapons laser operating on a reduced duty cycle to imitate a laser level, they worked through the night and by morning had built half of the desired length of the runway. It was not the most professional job they had seen, but once it was long enough, the med ships would be able to use it.

One of the reasons that these four had been chosen for the task of building the runway was that in addition to their skills and flexibility in the face of challenges, their stamina would allow them to finish the job without resting. Aided by the nutrient rich fluids stored in their flight suits, they worked steadily through the second day. As dusk approached, Buddy alerted the construction crew that a med ship was on its way in and they should clear the runway.

Caroline’s mother, Esther, who had more flight hours in a med ship than the next three med ship pilots combined, brought the ship in. She took advantage of the runway’s relative height on the top of the cliff as Buddy and Daisy had done and brought the ship to as close to a stall as she dared before setting it on the very end of the runway. The ship rolled the length of the runway with the reverse thrusters at full throttle. With mere meters left to the runway, the ship rolled to a stop. As soon as the ship stopped, before the dust had settled, the back ramp popped open and a dozen heavily armed men flowed out and established a perimeter. A handful of combat engineers followed. The first of these stooped down to the ground and picked up a handful of the dust which he ran through his fingers.

“It is as I feared,” he said to one of his colleagues.

“Dried mud?”

“Yes, not rock, dried mud. We must get them out as quickly as we can.” The man turned to Gabby, “Miss Gabriella, this rock you have so industriously built a runway from is not rock. It is dried mud. As long as it stays dry it will be hard and stable. As soon as it gets wet, it will be soft and slippery. Our ships will sink and we will not be able to get them out.”

“Why is that a problem?”

The man pointed to the horizon. “Scattered, isolated thundershowers. If they miss us, we gain another day. If not, I have no answer.”

For the first time since they had arrived, the MMARV’s had stopped operating to allow the med ship to land. Now that the med ship was down, the runway was quiet. In the quiet, the people standing around the med ship noticed a distant sound like a thousand drums beating in rhythm. Upon reflection, they realized they could feel the beating through the ground.

“Fourteen Hertz,” the engineer said, “the frequency of fear. Something is out there and it wants us to be afraid. We’ll take the MMARV’s. You sleep. In the morning maybe we can get an AARV to discover what’s out there.”

“Where is Lt. Rattigan?” Gabby asked.

“They’re about forty kilometers away searching for the source of the sound. They see evidence of large creatures moving through the forest, but they have not seen them. I fear that when they make contact, it will be too late for us to help them.”

“How many are there in Lt. Rattigan’s detail?”

“Fifty people and four MMARV’s all of which we should get out of here as soon as possible.”

“Why don’t we leave?” Gabby asked.

“They can’t leave before we know what is causing the noise. I fear they are in grave danger.”

“We can get the people out in a single run with the med ship. That only leaves the eight MMARV’s,” Gabby said.

“And you, and whatever AARV’s they send.”

“I’ll worry about us and the machines. You get the runway finished,” Gabby said.

The light rain that fell in the night did indeed turn the runway into a mud pit. Fortunately the rain was not hard enough to cause major damage, but it was enough to justify the engineer’s concern. The damage was severe enough that it prevented them from finishing the runway the following day. Two AARV’s deployed from a med ship. The runway was long enough for the AARV to land and take off again, but not long enough for the med ship. The med ship would have to wait on the surface at least another day before leaving.

The Fourth operated the AARV’s remotely from the P I ships’ control suites. They quickly found Lt. Rattigan and the explorers, but they found no evidence of anything in their vicinity that

would explain the damage they were seeing to the forest. At the end of a frustrating day, the Fourth and the two camera operators huddled next to one of the AARV's hoping to determine why the AARV was not seeing something that they knew was there.

Fatima stood next to one of the AARV's sensors. She shook her head. "There is something so very cold about all this. What is out there that wishes to drive us away?"

Stu stared at her in awakening understanding. "Cold? What if what we are after is cold blooded? Would the sensors see it? What if their camouflage is so good our eyes are deceived?"

"What are you driving at?" Gabby asked.

"Are the AARV's sensors heat sensitive?" Stu said.

"Yes, but whatever is out there has to be throwing some heat," Gabby replied.

"Not necessarily," Stu corrected. "A cold blooded animal will not throw as much heat as a warm blooded one or a machine. They would only be a few degrees warmer than the environment. Would the AARV see them?"

"No, it's programmed to look for specific temperatures," Gabby said.

"Can we reprogram it to look for variations in temperature?" Stu asked. "Can it see a spot that is a few degrees hotter than the ambient?"

"Buddy, can that be done?" Gabby asked.

"Yes," Buddy replied.

"Let's do it," Gabby said. "We fly again with first light."

"In the meantime," Stu suggested. "Let's go back over the images we have already collected and examine them in black and white. If their camouflage is good enough, our color vision is throwing us off. We may be able to determine shapes better in black and white."

Fatima was the first to spot the distinctive shape. Once they knew what to look for, the team spotted hundreds of similar shapes in the forest surrounding the explorers.

Gabby called in their findings and uploaded their data. "Think of T Rex ranging in size from one meter to three meters. There are hundreds of them and our guys are completely surrounded. We think the noise we are hearing is them beating their tails on the ground."

"How soon will the runway be ready?" Rachel asked.

"We can get ships down now, we can't get them off again. If we get rain tomorrow, we may be delayed beyond that," Gabby reported.

"I am reviewing the images you sent," Rachel said. "I see what you are talking about. I will have our people go over these in detail. Excellent work. It would be good if you can catch a couple of these bad boys in motion. I am ordering Lt. Rattigan to retreat to your position. Get the AARV's in the air

and cover the retreat.”

Under the cover of a torrential downpour the following afternoon, the massed force of the native animals attacked the retreating column. The AARV's reprogrammed sensors detected the movement in enough time to sound the alarm. The four MMARV's fanned out and advanced on the animals as they appeared from the forest. Clouds of steam rose from the MMARV hot plows as the rain water hit them forming something of a smoke screen. Raising their plows up and down to appear as formidable as possible and broadcasting a drum beat of their own from their speakers, the MMARV's attempted to drive back the animals. The largest of the animals, obviously the leader, picked up a rock and hurled it at the closest MMARV. The rock shattered harmlessly against the plow. The other animals responded by throwing stones and broken branches at the MMARV's and the AARV's circling overhead. The MMARV's and their human cohort huddling behind them, advanced slowly toward the stationary line of animals.

The leader of the animals rushed against the first MMARV and was burned by the heat of the plow. Its roar of pain and anger echoed through the forest. The animals fell back as the MMARV's advanced. One of the smaller animals raced in from the side and jumped on top of one of the MMARV's. Lt. Rattigan shot it with his ballistic rifle. The sound of the rifle's report stopped the animals' advance. On Lt. Rattigan's command, as many of the Marines as would fit climbed on top of the MMARV's to gain a better firing position only to be driven back by a hail of rocks and branches. Lt. Rattigan gave the order to open fire. The MMARV's, AARV's and Marines opened a firestorm of ballistic rifles, lasers and cannon clearing away a wide path through the forest and starting a fire which spread ahead of them.

The surviving animals retreated and regrouped behind the humans and their machines. The column of humans and machines advanced across the still smoldering remains of the forest which was being doused by the downpour. They picked up the bodies of some of the smaller animals to keep for evidence and analysis. The hail of rocks and branches continued as the column moved forward. Firing continuously, the column made slow progress across the burned section of forest ahead of them. Suddenly the rain stopped. The animals turned their backs and disappeared into the forest. Taking advantage of the lull in the fighting, Lt. Rattigan formed the column into a single line with two Marines on top of each MMARV. The AARV's had no difficulty following the fleeing animals. After the battle their temperature was significantly higher than it had been before the battle.

“That fits with our observations,” Captain Simpson said after Rachel had briefed him on the combat reports.

“Why didn't you tell us this before?” Rachel demanded.

“Didn't they tell you I was chasing legends? Bigfoot? The Abominable Snowman or some idiocy? Didn't they tell you I was a complete fool?” Captain Simpson retorted.

“Yes,” Rachel admitted.

“If I had told you the truth, would you have believed me?” Captain Simpson asked.

“No, but I would have had my ground forces better prepared.”

“Perhaps.”

“So what do you think is going on down there?” Rachel asked.

Captain Simpson paused in thought. “Your people gave us a piece of information that we did not have and now it all makes sense. These are cold blooded animals. Combat raises their body temperature. Captain, have you ever seen an alligator?”

“Not a live one,” Rachel said.

“Nasty creatures. When they get too hot or too cold they get lethargic. In the summer you can see them sunning themselves on the bank all day long. They are too hot to move. Come sundown, they’ll be swimming around again. For these animals, lethargy in combat could be deadly. So, my guess is that they have figured out that the rain will keep them cool while they do battle. Once the rains stop, they retreat rather than risk their opponent being just slightly less overheated and slightly less lethargic than they are.”

“Then why aren’t they active at night when it’s cooler?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t think they can see well at night,” Captain Simpson replied.

Lt. Rattigan and his group marched through the night and reached the end of the runway shortly after dawn. They gladly sought the sanctuary of the med ship leaving the group of soldiers who had arrived on the med ship to tend to the area’s defense. They tended to their injured before collapsing in exhausted heaps in whatever convenient corner they could find.

All eight of the MMARV’s dug in to the runway project in an attempt to finish it before the end of the day. The rains came early that day and washed out parts of the cleared runway. With the rains came another attack. Where before, the humans had been surrounded by thick forest on all sides, they now had defensible cliffs on three sides and only one side from which they could be attacked. That open side was meadow and grasslands with few tall plants to provide cover. The forest had provided cover for the large animals allowing them to approach within throwing distance without being seen. Approaching from the grasslands would mean that the animals could be seen from further away providing the humans with a strategic advantage. The advantage was not as great as Lt. Rattigan had hoped.

The forest, however, had protected the humans from an airborne assault, which the open plateau and its runway under construction did not. Rock throwing bird-like animals appeared with the first drops of rain. The P I ships, programmed to fend off missiles traveling at much faster speeds than these creatures could fly, picked them off with their lasers. The fliers were harder to detect than the missiles, so the ships had their work cut out for them. The fliers were invisible to radar. The rain bounced back the sonar. The fliers’ temperatures were only slightly higher than the rain, but it was enough. A single laser strike would generally bring one down.

The skies cleared before dusk and the attack abated.

“Did you know about the fliers?” Rachel asked Captain Simpson after reading the day’s reports.

“No, we did not see them,” he replied. “I think what we are seeing is far more dangerous than anything I had previously envisioned. We have multiple species in cooperation to repel an intruder. I am not aware of that happening before. They are smarter than we give them credit for and they do not

want to talk to us.”

“As soon as we can get our people out of there, we will file our report and they won’t ever have to deal with us again,” Rachel said.

“Don’t be so sure,” Captain Simpson cautioned. “Do you know how much money there is to be made bringing big game hunters to a place like this? It’s the ultimate challenge. Bring home the head of a T Rex. I know people that would spend their life savings for an opportunity like that.”

“Sad, isn’t it? There isn’t enough killing, we have to kill innocent animals,” Rachel sighed. “It’s not like we need them for food.”

“I agree. I’ve been trying to find an answer for months. We can’t let this planet turn into a giant hunting preserve.”

At mid day, a med ship touched down, the runway having been declared safe to use. The ship Esther had piloted down days earlier and this ship carried the scientists and combat personnel back up to Elizabeth in orbit. A third ship touched down as soon as the runway was clear and two of the MMARV’s were carried aloft. A fourth ship arrived and departed as the rains began carrying two more MMARV’s. When the rain started, the two P I ships, their crews, four MMARV’s and two AARV’s remained to defend the runway.

On a hunch, Gabby deployed one of the AARV’s to check the cliffs at their back and discovered a legion of small animals scaling them. She deployed both AARV’s to the cliffs to cut down the animals. The MMARV’s set up a sweeping pattern with their lasers that cut a swath across the cleared area. Nothing over half a meter tall could get through the scanning lasers. The P I ships attended to another wave of fliers and again, their bodies littered the ground. Stu and Fatima recorded the combat from the relative safety of their positions between Buddy’s and Daisy’s landing gear.

Once the rains stopped, the four teenagers began pushing dirt to fill in the gullies left by the running water knowing that the morning sun would harden the mud and produce a surface they could take off from. In the morning, the runway dried as hoped. With the sun high in the sky, the first med ship came in and took two of the MMARV’s. The second came in and took the last two. The third ship came in and took the two AARV’s.

Stu and Fatima picked up the stationary cameras as the last of the med ships left. As the clouds started to build on the horizon, Stu, standing at the mid point of the runway, recorded Daisy’s departure with her three crew members who were grateful to be alive.

Since the clouds appeared to be some distance away, Stu requested permission to record Buddy taxiing to the end of the runway and preparing for departure. Barney saw no harm in it, although Delmar was uncomfortable with the idea. Stu took his time and recorded Buddy sitting on the runway from many angles. The last was down the hill from which the attack had come the previous night.

“That’s enough, Stu,” Barney said, “it’s time to go home.”

“One more shot, I promise,” Stu replied.

“Stu, get back in this ship!” Barney ordered becoming agitated.

“It’s the shot of a lifetime! First Contact!” Stu shouted back as he charged off down the hill towards where they knew the animals would be advancing shortly.

An independent observer, like Fatima, might have thought what happened next to be comical. It would have if Stu had not put all their lives in jeopardy. Delmar’s father, Reuben, was white. His mother, Suwanee, was black. Delmar was taller than all his friends and almost as tall as Lt. Rattigan. He inherited his mother’s coloration, tight curly hair and strength of build. Tall and broad shouldered, he was an alpha male. Being an alpha male was not always appropriate nor politically correct. Being raised Jewish, Delmar recognized this and kept it under control most of the time. It would appear sometimes during competitive sports or in combat simulators, but those were recognized as appropriate outlets for his natural power.

When Stu took off down the hill, Delmar’s alpha male instincts kicked in like a werewolf on the full moon. Delmar dove through the escape hatch without waiting for the ladder to be extended and took off down the hill in hot pursuit. “That scrawny, candy ass, honky, white boy is not going to get himself killed on my watch!”

Barney was no slouch in the alpha male department either, but a full head shorter than Delmar, lacking his musculature and with soft ringlets of brown hair, it was not as easy for his masculinity to be accepted. Matching Delmar invective for invective, he exited the ship and took off down the hill after the two of them well aware that the rains may start at any moment. When the rains started, they would be in the open. If they waited too long and the rains destroyed the runway, they would have no way to leave the planet.

Carrying a camera with waterproof housing that weighed almost as much as he did, pasty white, frail looking, with stringy hair that fell into his eyes, Stu ran toward the approaching animals which they could plainly see massing on the open meadow in front of them. Screaming and waving his arms to present as hostile an image as possible, a two meter tall black man charged behind him. Behind him raced a smaller white man with pretty brown ringlets shouting for them both to come to their senses and return to the ship. Behind him, like an overgrown puppy, followed a spaceship named Buddy. A spaceship that had been built before any of these humans had been born silently rolled backwards behind them. Only the crunching of the sand and rock under its tires revealed its movement.

For five minutes the four ran down the hill. Not waiting for the rain, the largest and most forward of the creatures threw a rock that hit Stu squarely on the head. Not thinking to get out of the way, his camera followed the rock’s arc until it struck him and knocked him out.

Mere steps behind him, Delmar, still cursing up a storm, caught Stu before he hit the ground. He tossed the camera to Barney and took off toward the ship with Stu over his shoulders. A lightning bolt hit the ground and the rain fell in a torrent. Amid a fusillade of rocks, Delmar and Barney raced for the ship. Buddy opened his side weapons pods and trained his lasers on the approaching horde. Barney tossed the camera into the ship and helped drag Stu’s unconscious body through the hatch.

Not waiting for the passengers to strap in, Buddy fired his engines and rolled forward. With his laser pods still extended, sweeping the surrounding terrain and his thrusters drying the ground in front of his wheels, Buddy built up speed for take off. He closed the laser pods as he reached the beginning of the prepared runway. Pouring full throttle to his thrusters for as much lift as they could provide, he aimed for the end of the runway. Impeded by the mud the runway had become in the few seconds the



rain poured over it, he barely had enough airspeed when he cleared the end of the cliff. A brief loss of altitude as he cleared the cliff provided the additional airspeed he needed to establish stable flight. Within a few heart stopping seconds, Buddy had attained level flight. He continued full power to his main engines and his thrusters until he had built enough airspeed to climb up to rendezvous with the Queen Elizabeth.

The cheers Buddy's announcement of his attainment of level flight engendered on Queen Elizabeth's bridge were short lived. From her distant patrol location, Aida called in that intruders were entering the system. Eight cruisers of a type commonly used by pirates and a host of other fringe organizations had appeared on the system's edge.

"Hail them," Rachel commanded. "See who they are and determine their intentions."

Rachel tallied her combat resources. Alexander and Valerie were within striking distance of the intruders, but two P I ships, even sentient ones, were no match for six cruisers. The Thor Heyerdahl had a dozen pickets, but they would barely be able to take on a single cruiser. Daisy would be docking in a few hours, but she would need to be completely rearmed and her crew was exhausted. Buddy was climbing through the atmosphere and he would not be ready to send out for a long time. Unless the cruisers could be drawn in range of the two capital ships, there was little that could be done about them.

Aida reported back, "They are the Creighton Society and they demand we vacate this system."

Jane Turner reached out to Rachel. "I know these guys. They are a bunch of irrational lunatics and wackos. The good news is that they can be bought. Tell them that you will give them safe passage. Tell them that Jane Turner of CNC is here with the news ship Edward R. Murrow and would like to meet with them in the Queen Elizabeth's captain's conference room."

Rachel relayed the information to Aida.

"They say they do not consider the Queen Elizabeth to be neutral territory and request the meeting be held in Studio One aboard the Edward R. Murrow."

Jane Turner nodded her assent.

Rachel replied, "Tell them to bring two officers. We will bring two officers. The Heyerdahl will bring two officers. Miss Turner will bring as many officers and studio personnel as she deems fit."

"They agree."

"Escort them in."

Rachel turned to Jane Turner, "So who are these people?"

"The Creighton Society was named after a twentieth century author who wrote a book about a theme park with resurrected dinosaurs that went bad. They seek to prevent indigent species from being over run by humans."

"That doesn't sound so crazy," Rachel said.

"Wait until you meet them," Jane laughed.

Daisy arrived at the hangar bay with her exhausted crew. The munitions technicians quickly

rearmed Daisy in case they needed to do battle with the cruisers. Rachel and Jane Turner agreed to Fatima's request that she be allowed to stay with Gabby and Caroline to document the conflict should it occur. They retired to their quarters to await their recall.

Buddy arrived a few hours later. Stu was greeted by security officers from the CNC and thrown in the Edward R. Murrow's brig. Technicians swarmed over Buddy preparing him for the potential of combat with the cruisers as Barney and Delmar retired to their quarters.

The six cruisers from the Creighton Society staggered in one at a time. The animals on the surface showed more coordination than these people. Two of the cruisers docked at the Edward R. Murrow's docking ports. Rachel, Captain Simpson and Jane Turner were there to greet the person who came aboard.

The person who came aboard was a woman wearing high brown leather safari boots, jodhpurs, spurs, a web belt, a loose short sleeved bloused top with an open collar that showed ample cleavage, a bush hat and a monocle. She carried a riding crop that matched her outfit. Her long sandy blond hair was pulled back in a bun and her face had the look of too many hours in a tanning booth.

"Captain Bligh of the Velociraptor requests permission to come aboard."

Rachel choked on a laugh.

"Permission granted, Captain Bligh," Jane Turner said. "I almost didn't recognize you. It has been, what, ten years?"

"I don't understand why you would not recognize me even after all these years, Newswoman of the Decade."

Jane motioned to one of her assistants. "Talia will escort you to the studio."

"I would think you would escort me yourself."

"Were your colleague not late, I would," Jane replied.

Captain Bligh left in the direction that Talia pointed. When she was sure they were alone again she said to Rachel, "Ten years ago, she was a he."

Captain Simpson exploded in laughter. "That Captain Bligh! What a fruitcake!"

"I take it you are familiar with Captain Bligh," Jane said.

"We traded punches fifteen years ago in a spacer bar. I caught him cheating at cards. When he couldn't beat me, he sat on the floor and cried about cruel I was." He shook his head at the memory.

The second to arrive introduced himself as Captain Hook, James T. Hook. He wore tall black boots, flared red pants, a black jacket with a ruffled shirt. His black wavy hair was down to his shoulders and he wore a huge black hat with gold trim and a feather.

"It's a good thing my cargo ship isn't here," Rachel said.

"The one you call 'Peter'?" Jane asked.

"As in 'Peter Pan', yes," Rachel replied with a chuckle.

Once they were settled in the studio, Jane addressed the group. "Ladies and Gentlemen, in order to properly set the tone of the negotiations we are about to conduct, I would like show you the beginnings of a documentary we are preparing on the planet below us. We have not laid the music track yet and some of the narration needs work. We may substitute some of the images in the final product, but this is close to what we intend to broadcast when we return."

"If you return," Captain Bligh corrected.

"When we return, Captain Bligh. Roll please."

The lights dimmed and the monitor in front of them lit with the images of the planet. Some of the footage came from the cameras on the MMARV's. Some came from the AARV's, but the bulk of the footage came from Stu and Fatima's cameras. They had turned in excellent work. The final shot was from Stu's camera as the rock left the animal's hand and hit him in the head.

When the lights came back up, Captain Bligh said, "I am not impressed. I see no reason why you should challenge my demand that you vacate the system."

"We intend to vacate the system, but are you aware what will happen if we distribute this documentary and there is no one here to defend this system?" Jane Turner challenged.

"Then I insist that you not distribute the documentary. It's that simple," Captain Bligh replied.

"That is not possible," Jane Turner challenged.

"What is there to prevent me from taking your puny unarmed studio ship by force and destroying the documentary?" Captain Hook interjected.

"The Queen Elizabeth," Rachel said.

"The Thor Heyerdahl," Captain Simpson added.

"Four P I ships, twelve pickets and a squad of Marines well trained in ship-to-ship combat," Wendy further explained.

"What if I call your bluff?" Captain Hook pressed.

"No need to," Rachel said. "What we want from you before we leave is minor and should cause you no inconvenience."

"Our terms are firm. You leave the system. There can be no bargaining." Captain Bligh asserted.

Rachel picked up her comm. "Would you like me to turn your little cruisers into expanding balls of plasma because I mistook them for pirates, Captain Hook?"

"What are your terms?" Captain Bligh asked.

"Your representatives stay here for a minimum of five years. You certify our report that the planet is not suitable for human colonization. At regular intervals of not less than every six months, you send fresh data to the colony service that strengthens your claim that the planet is not safe for humans.

You defend the planet against the big game hunters that are sure to follow,” Rachel said evenly.

“That it?” Captain Bligh sneered.

“And safe passage out of the system for our ships along with assurances that should any member of my extended family return to check on you, that you will not fire on them,” Rachel said.

“What about funding support in return for allowing you to distribute the documentary?”

“That’s not going to happen,” Jane scoffed.

“How will you describe this negotiation?” Captain Bligh asked.

Rachel smiled, “As a frank and open discussion of the dangers of colonization of this planet and the best means to protect it from humans and humans from it. After discussing several alternatives, we felt that this agreement was the best for all parties involved.”

“Fair enough. When will you leave?”

“As soon as Miss Turner and Captain Simpson assure me that the documents and signatures are in order.”

The documents were signed, copied, distributed and recorded within the hour. Courier missiles were dispatched as appropriate. Rachel called her patrol ships back to dock.

At the last moment of parting, Captain Charles Simpson turned back to Rachel. “Captain Cohen, I have regretted since the day you stood up for yourself in court, that I stood against you. I have wanted to apologize to you on a hundred occasions. I even thought about traveling to Eretz to do it. At this late date, please accept my apology.”

“Your apology is accepted. Let’s hope that this action can help revitalize your career.”

“Thank you. Do you think we will ever see each other again?” Captain Simpson asked.

“No way to know. Be careful out there.”

“Aye, Captain.”

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THERE WAS DEBATE as to who was happiest to be leaving the planet they had turned over to the Creighton Society. Certainly there was no sadness at leaving the place behind.

Rachel and Jane Turner had agreed that Fatima and three of her colleagues should embed with the Queen Elizabeth for a few months and document their activities. The Fourth Battle Wing became the focus of much of Fatima's work. Their relationship strengthened daily.

The jump to the next planet was two weeks. Faye Anne and Peter were already there in orbit.

"Don't bother to unpack," Faye Anne said as soon as she arrived in Rachel's office.

"That bad?"

"Oh, yeah. The captain of the Amerigo Vespucci is a complete idiot. He says the atmosphere is only a little out of tolerances. Yeah! If you like acid rain and lakes full of arsenide. Send a team down on a med ship with atmospheric test equipment. Tell them not to extend the landing gear. The atmosphere will eat the tires. Have them report what they find. Then, we'll move on. I think I have a better place."

The team that sampled the atmosphere reported that an outfit like Orion Metals that was equipped to work in uninhabitable locations might be able to make a go of it, but they did not wish to stay. The necessary documentation was generated and sent in a courier back to the colony service.

As Rachel gave the helmsman the coordinates that Faye Anne had provided, she realized that she had not made contact with the captain of the Amerigo Vespucci at all during their short visit.

"The man is the son of some powerful jackass politician in Houston. He's not worth the powder to blow him up," Faye Anne said in disgust. "The kid couldn't hold a job so Daddy got him this one. Daddy is being investigated for influence peddling. The son is implicated. According to one of my friends at Langley, the best Daddy can hope for is that the delay bringing junior back to testify will be enough for him to gracefully retire at the end of his term without going to trial."

"Helmsman, are we ready to depart?"

"Aye, Captain."

"On your mark, let's move out."

"Aye, Captain."

The jump to the new planet took three weeks. The team on site was a small group operating out of a converted cruiser. Lt. Tom Farmington was the commanding officer.

"Captain Cohen! It is an honor to meet you. I think your people will like it here," Lt. Farmington effused to the group in Rachel's conference room. "I have already informed Colony Service that when the first colony group shows up I am staying here. The planet appears to have recently left an ice age. The ice sheets appear to be receding. Currently the tropics maintain about the temperature range of Earth's temperate zones. They have four seasons, although they do have some

severe weather from time to time. I have picked out a spot for the initial runway and settlement, but we will need to move before the spring rains because it will flood. There are plenty of places with higher ground where we can find fertile farm land and ample fresh water.” Lt. Farmington rattled on for a while about the topography and weather patterns. He was obviously excited about the prospect of establishing a colony and talked about bringing his wife and children to live with him on this place he was prepared to call home.

The head of the security detail that had established the perimeter for the runway construction on their last attempt at establishing a colony asked, “What about predators?”

“The largest predator is about the size of a timber wolf. They hunt in packs and they are smart. They are definitely smarter than an Earth timber wolf. They know they can’t eat us, but they don’t really know what to make of us. They aren’t so densely populated that we won’t be able to fence them out of our pastures, but we will need to deal with them. They seem to be able to communicate over distances by howling and barking. I don’t see them as a threat, but I don’t know if they could be domesticated. I think that would be our best approach with them. Domestication may work. I would like to try that first. There are some smaller predators that we will need to contend with and some small herbivores we will need to keep out of the crops. I see some of the fliers as being troublesome to the crops, but we face wolves, raccoons, rabbits and crows on Earth and we deal with them. This is no different. It’s not perfect, but it is very good.”

Runway construction started the next day. A week later, the first ships landed on it. The entire colony was in place by the end of the first month. As predicted, the timber wolf like animals appeared around the periphery of the construction site appearing more curious than threatened or threatening. They could often be seen sitting on some outcropping of rock taking it all in apparently fascinated by the activity below them.

Fatima had taken charge of the camera crew and had them racing from place to place as they documented the activity. One member of the camera crew had set up a stationary camera position on one of the outcroppings that the wolves used to observe the construction. He was intently working with his camera when he thought he smelled something that reminded him of the dog he had as a child. One of the timber wolves calmly sat beside him staring at him gently swinging its tail back and forth. The wolf yawned and stretched. The camera operator yawned and stretched. The wolf sneezed. The camera operator sneezed. The wolf rubbed his nose with his paw. The camera operator rubbed his nose with his hand. The wolf turned and trotted off.

For the next week, that camera operator reported seeing a wolf observing him. He decided to return to the outcropping where the wolf had first approached him. One of the small animals that the wolves preferred for food had been killed by one of the farm machines. The camera operator brought it with him and put it on the ground beside him. The wolf grabbed it and ran.

Six months after the Queen Elizabeth’s arrival, a formal Colony Service survey team arrived in a converted battleship. They were not pleased that Rachel had settled the planet in advance of their arrival. However, they agreed to take over the defense of the colony and help manage its growth. They were particularly interested in the growing relationship with the timber wolves and promised to help support its development.

Fatima and crew elected to stay deciding that the timber wolves were a more interesting story than the Queen Elizabeth. Other members of the crew whose enlistment contracts were ending also elected to stay.

The Queen Elizabeth set course for headquarters and some rest. Faye Anne had already left to find their next potential colony. Upon arrival, the harbor master informed them that their base of operations would be moved to the freight depot adjacent to New St. Louis. Faye Anne, Peter and their next load of passengers awaited them there.

Faye Anne had indeed found another planet, but apparently pirates had established a base there and it would have to be cleaned out first. The stay at the New St. Louis depot was short. With her convoy increased by four convoy escort ships, the Queen Elizabeth set out for the new planet. There is something to be said for the application of overwhelming force. The pirates in their ships fled as soon as they were challenged by one of the P I ships or the convoy escorts. The pirates on the surface surrendered without resistance.

With a runway already in place and a rudimentary flight apron established, setting up the colony went quickly. The escort ships left a week after arrival without having expended any ordinance. Six months after the Queen Elizabeth arrived, a convoy of Colony Service freighters arrived with the second wave of colonists and military hardware as would be needed to defend the planet against pirates or other criminals.

Having accomplished their mission, the Queen Elizabeth and those of her crew that did not elect to stay behind headed back to freight depot adjacent to New St. Louis to do it again.

Faye Anne was unusually quiet when Rachel contacted her at the freight depot. Instead of meeting Rachel on the ship, she asked Rachel to meet her alone in one of the small board rooms in the depot's hotel conference center. Once Rachel had settled, Faye Anne took a deep breath. "We have three options. None of the planets are ideal. One is too hot. One is too cold and one is heavy. The one that is too hot, however, presents a unique challenge. According to my sources, it is being operated by slavers as a hunting preserve."

Faye Anne had anticipated Rachel's reaction perfectly and raised her hand so she could continue. "The preferred prey is humans."

"Are you sure?" Rachel asked.

"I checked with a buddy at Langley who said he has heard rumors to that effect. A friend at Eretz had heard it as well. There are allusions to it in the data my father left behind. One of the security people here had heard about it. He had noticed groups of hunters gathering here and wondered what they were hunting. Nobody had anything concrete until I decided see if Jane Turner could help. She had done that report on slave trading and might have heard something. Jane was not available so I chatted with her boss. He is anxious to meet you and has information for us. Shall I show him in?"

"Please."

"Please allow me to introduce Mr. Al Lansing, Regional Vice President of the Constant News Channel with specific responsibility for the Combat News Specialists. Did I get that right?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Mr. Lansing," Rachel said, "Faye Anne tells us you have knowledge of a certain planet that may be of interest to us."

Mr. Lansing raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Did I tell you?” Faye Anne smirked.

“Yes, you did. Captain Cohen, the planet in question is heavily guarded and even a tactician as skilled as you could not take this planet.”

Rachel smiled. “I will be the judge of that.”

“As you wish,” Mr. Lansing replied. “We had a combat adviser we called ‘Jet’. For their safety, none of our field advisers use their real names. This one was one of our best. The camera crews loved him. He was a former Federation Marine and he was good with our people. His nom de guerre was ‘Jet’ because he was black and he moved quickly. He had been invited by some mercenaries we ran into on an assignment to join them for a special hunting expedition. He went and came back two months later a changed man. He was angry with a power that frightened me even being in the same room with him. He left some recordings he had made. He resigned and gave me a letter. He told me that if I ever met you I was to give you this letter. He said to read the letter in my presence, but not to share it with anyone until you were safely on your ship.”

Rachel took the hand written letter and gently opened it. Her eyes quickly scanned to the signature and her heart skipped a beat. “Lionel,” she said before she clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Our?” Faye Anne stopped herself in mid word.

Rachel nodded slightly holding her hand over her mouth as the acid in her stomach churned.

Al Lansing waited until they had calmed down. “He said he was rounding up some of his old buddies and you should round up some of yours and you would know what to do. I looked at some of the recordings after he left. They were chasing women and children and killing them with knives and their bare hands.”

“This letter was written two years ago,” Rachel said. “Have you heard anything since?”

“No, what are you going to do?”

“Not talk about it because if we do we might not live to leave port,” Rachel said.

“So, are you going?” Al Lansing pressed.

“We do not talking about plans. This meeting never happened. Your life could be in danger.”

Al Lansing was found dead in his bed the following morning. He had been beaten and his throat had been cut. His living quarters had been ransacked. The station security chief expressed the belief that whoever killed him did not find what they were looking for. That would be because he had given it to Rachel when he handed her the letter.

The Fourth Battle Wing left later that day. Their flight plan stated that they were returning to Eretz to repair battle damage. Peter’s flight plan stated that he was going to Homestead to pick up a load of frozen food. Rachel went to visit the local Colony Service representative to see about when she could expect to be loaded for her next mission. On her return she renewed acquaintances with a Space Force officer who had been on one of the club sports teams she had played at the Academy.

Three days later, with less than her normal allotment of colonists, but more than her normal allotment of cargo, the Queen Elizabeth eased out of port to make the short jump from the depot to



New St. Louis. She got half way there, dropped out of hyper drive and abruptly changed course. The jump to her final destination would only take four days. A planet with this much criminal activity this close to the main shipping lanes spoke of corruption at the highest levels.

Buddy, Delmar and Barney sat quietly at a point in space that bore no landmarks. Its location was a mathematical construct based on a spherical grid that had its origination in the center of the galaxy. One by one, a rag tag fleet of retired ships and semi retired crews clandestinely recruited for a special mission assembled at this point in space. Eight new convoy escorts were the last to arrive. Communicating by laser, each of the ships was given a new set of coordinates to jump to. One of the ships, a destroyer, waited a little too long to leave. It spun to fire with its targeting radar active. Buddy fired a four missile volley and destroyed it before it could get the first missile off.

Daisy, Gabby and Caroline waited at the second point. A ship came in hot ahead of the others. A four missile volley destroyed it before the others arrived. The remaining fleet was given its orders, ships' clocks were synchronized and the ships jumped together to their final targets.

The Queen Elizabeth arrived first, was attacked first and drew blood first. From the time the Queen Elizabeth engaged the first enemy destroyer until the time Alexander, Buddy and Daisy converged on the last enemy cruiser from three directions and each put a volley of four missiles into it destroying it, the battle lasted forty-seven hours twenty-eight minutes and twelve seconds. They had almost hated the thought of killing that last ship. Combat crews that good were hard to find, but a combat crew that good on the wrong side of the law could be too dangerous to allow to escape.

The eight convoy escorts had all sustained damage. One had lost so much of its reactor cooling capacity that it shut down one reactor. It would be able to get to the shipyard on its own power, but not as quickly as it came out. None of the other convoy escorts were damaged so badly as to impair their space flight worthiness. The entire flotilla of rag tag ships that had flown out from the depot was gone. Every one of them had been killed. Of course some of them had not been on their side which complicated things somewhat but not for very long. Many of the pilots, both men and women, never properly adjusted to civilian life. Life in retirement lacked the excitement and danger they craved. They knew the risks when they joined the force and paid the ultimate price.

Valerie, along with her crew, Whitney Jones and Brad Winter, had been lost. Alexander had suffered a hull breach. Aida and Delilah survived because they had suited up and reduced cabin pressure before entering the battle. Aida had suffered a concussion when the missile that struck Alexander's right wing had blown a hole in the cabin. Isaac awaited her return so he could evaluate her injuries. Buddy and Daisy had both suffered hull breaches, but their crews had come through better than Aida. They were bruised from the jostling around, but would not need medical attention. Half of Buddy's vertical stabilizer was gone and large chunks had been torn out of his heat shield. Daisy's hyper drive was destroyed. The only way she was going anywhere was by hitching a ride.

Rachel glazed over reading the reports. Peter would be here soon. In her heart, Peter had always meant safety even if in reality Elizabeth was better capable of dealing with threats. Peter was home. She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes holding back the tears. For a moment she wanted to be the little girl again hiding in the tiny room on Peter's flight deck that she did not have to share with anyone. She did not want to be responsible for the deaths. She wanted it all to go away.

Peter's arrival meant that the ground war would start. Rachel had held him back not wanting to risk the kinds of attacks she had made against other troop ships. Peter arrived exactly on schedule and the ground war began.

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SIX COMBAT-HARDENED VETERANS and half a hundred liberated slave targets conferred in the relative safety of the cave opening behind the waterfall. The emptiness in their eyes was as much a reflection of the emptiness of their spirits as it was of their stomachs. A shipment of slaves had come in the day before and there was discussion as how to approach their liberation. The raid on the weapons shed had been costly. Too many more of those and there would be no more “Liberators” to fight off the “Keepers”. “Jet” gazed off into the night sky. “Rush” sat beside him trying to figure out some way to do more than merely harass the Keepers. “Sky” sat with her back against the wall, exhausted. “Water” held one of the children that had been injured in the raid in her lap. “Rambo”, the only white man in the group, although his skin had turned such a deep bronze that he could pass for one of his black colleagues, was trying to convince the others that a raid on the fuel storage tanks at the motor pool would give them the strategic advantage they needed. The only white woman in the group, “Slide”, listened to “Rambo” with bored detachment. She had heard all this before.

Suddenly a bright white ball over the horizon turned night into day. Conversation stopped. Silently they watched, not daring to hope. Another ball of white fury appeared to their right. Another appeared to their left. Two more, close together. One directly overhead. They could see pieces glowing red as they fell into the atmosphere. The children were afraid. The adults were cautiously hopeful.

“She has come,” Jet said.

“If that’s her,” Rush replied. He wanted to hope, but it had been so long.

“No one else would dare,” Sky said.

Several bright balls opened up at the same time.

“Lotta people dyin’ up there,” Water said.

“Ours or theirs,” Rambo mused.

“Some of both, I guess,” Slide offered.

The battle raged through the night and the following day. The “Liberators” elected to stay hidden in their cave. By nightfall, the battle in the sky was over. From their hideout, there was no way to know who was still standing.

In the morning, the Liberators heard the familiar whistling sound of an AARV on a low altitude run. They rushed outside in time to see it whiz by and observe its white color with the blue six pointed Star of David on the underside of its wings.

“It could be a decoy,” Rambo warned.

The AARV fired a missile and a helicopter crashed to the ground.

“Except it’s not,” Jet said.

A moment later a high flying fighter jet’s wing blew off and the jet spiraled to the ground.

“We should stay put until we know who they are,” Sky suggested.

Jet ushered everyone back into the cave ignoring the complaints that they should be out hunting because they were hungry.

That afternoon Jet heard the crunching sound of foliage being crushed under the weight of a heavy tracked machine. Motioning for the others to stay behind, he took off the remains of his jacket and handed his weapons to Sky. He wandered slowly to the clearing next to the stream and waited with his arms crossed. The Super MMARV rolled into the clearing. The machine was impressive. Solid black with a pointed plow that radiated heat Jet could feel from where he was, it displayed small blue six pointed stars on several of its flat surfaces. An impossibly tall Marine Lieutenant in combat armor called the detail to a halt. With smooth precision, the Marines repositioned to guard against an ambush. Jet smiled. It was nice to see professionals in action. He gently uncrossed his arms and held them out away from his sides. With no shirt and only tatters left of what had been his pants, Jet wanted this tall white man to see that he was no threat, except that even unarmed, Jet could be a threat if he chose to be. The approaching white man knew that, too.

The Marine Lieutenant consulted a photograph. "Soldier, state your name!"

"My friends call me 'Jet' to my face."

"Have you been injured in combat?"

"Yes."

"Where were you assigned the first time you were injured in combat?" Jet smiled, "It wasn't the first time, but the one you're asking about, I was assigned to the battleship we called Elizabeth. That wasn't her real name. Her captain was Rachel Solomon Cohen."

The white lieutenant smiled. He reached for his comm. "Tell the captain we found him."

The lieutenant cleared a place on the ground with his foot. He knelt down and started drawing in the sand. It was a rough map of the "Keepers" compound showing the high walls that guarded it. Jet guessed that the block walls would be of little protection against the cannon the MMARV carried. When the Lieutenant was done, he looked up. "Jet, we need to take this command and control center. What do we need to know about that we can't see from the air?"

Jet liked this man. The proof of friend or foe was in the action not the words. There was nothing phony about this man. He was a soldier and he had a job to do. You had three choices. You could fight alongside him, stand aside or die.

Jet reached down and drew circles on the map, "Gun emplacements." He drew a large square, "Underground fuel storage." He drew a series of smaller squares, "Underground slave quarters."

Sky slowly walked down the slope from the cave entrance under the watchful eye of the Marine detail carrying Jet's jacket and his weapons. The Lieutenant shuffled through a stack of pictures until he found the one he wanted. He held it up and compared it with the woman who stood in front of him. He slowly reached in his pocket and pulled out a device doctors used to read the medical transponders. Jet smiled. This one had blue tape wrapped around it and had the name "Isaac" written in indelible marker on the tape. Isaac was forever forgetting where he put his down and the blue tape made it easier to spot.

The Lieutenant reached for his comm. "Sparky, relay to the captain I have positive ID on two of her old friends." The Lieutenant called two of his men. "Take one of the small MMARV's and go after this gun emplacement."

Jet held up his hand, "Wait." He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. His troupe of warriors silently materialized out of the woods. Jet pointed to two of the older boys and called them forward. "You go with them." He pointed to his eyes. "Eyes and ears. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go! Eyes and Ears," Jet commanded.

Two Marines in full combat armor and two barefoot half naked bronze boys followed a coal black machine into the woods.

The Lieutenant reached for the rifle Sky had given to Jet. He inspected it. "Gunny!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Get these people real weapons!"

A sergeant pulled six rifles out of the back of the MMARV and handed them to the Lieutenant. The Lieutenant distributed them to the six adults standing before him.

Jet examined the weapon and felt its heft. It was heavier than what he was used to, but it had a third barrel. "Laser sight?"

"Laser. Don't point it at anything you don't want to kill. Pull this trigger half way back and that's the laser. Pull it all the way back and that's the rifle. It fires a 22 caliber long rifle. They are armed with exploding shells. If it hits something solid it will explode. The other trigger is a grenade launcher. If you point this at one of us, we will kill you. Understand?"

Four more sets of Marines disappeared into the forest with MMARV's and pairs of half naked escorts. An AARV whistled by overhead and an explosion was heard in the direction the detail had come from.

"Time to go to work," the Lieutenant said.

The Lieutenant broke his detail into squads and assigned one of the Liberator adults to each squad. The remaining children were ordered to spread out and hide in the woods so they could spot any of the Keepers that tried to escape or lead the slaves who did escape to safety.

The super MMARV's rolled to the top of a hill overlooking the Keepers base. They raised their cannon barrels and lobbed rounds into the types of targets that would cause secondary explosions. They concentrated their fire on the munitions shed the Liberators had attempted to raid and were rewarded by a series of explosions that continued long after the MMARV's had moved on to other targets. The artillery barrage continued into the night. With the exception of the gun emplacements which fell under the MMARV's shells, no attempt was made to assault the complex directly.

Weakened by the barrage, the air traffic control tower fell during the night and crushed the building beneath it.

The coming of the dawn revealed an ugly surprise. The Keepers had tied naked men, women and children together in a line around the block wall that protected the compound. Lt. Rattigan ordered

a cease fire. Jet asked to see his field glasses. He scanned the line for a moment. He handed the glasses back. "Lieutenant, see the short guy between the two blond girls?"

"Yeah."

"He's a keeper," Jet said calmly.

"I see him."

"Look to his right. Fourth woman over is a keeper," Jet said.

"Short dark hair?"

"Yeah."

"They don't think we can tell the difference do they?"

"My guess is that they think they can get away by hiding with the slaves."

"Won't the slaves betray them?"

"Not if they're afraid," Jet said sadly. "Most of them have only been here a couple of days. They may think these people are slaves who arrived before they did."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Starting with the short guy, we number them. My people can pick out the Keepers. We pick targets and fire on one command. We don't rush forward because they will have weapons hidden nearby. We wait to see who starts shooting before we advance. We hold our positions as long as we can. The slaves will not run. They will fall to the ground. The Keepers will run. Then we kill. We advance with the MMARV's until we breach the walls. Then it will be house to house until we root them out."

The AARV's ceased operation because all the defending aircraft had been destroyed. The only sound was the sound of the flames from the burning aircraft caught on the ground and the buildings that had been destroyed by the barrage. Even the native fliers hushed their calls in anticipation of the mayhem that was to come.

"Fire!" Lt. Rattigan whispered the word and dozens of rifles around the compound fired at the same time. Around the compound, bright red chasms opened up in the chests of people chained together. Snipers hidden behind the wall stood and opened fire. Laser rifles made short work of most of them, blinding them first and then killing them. The keepers had not actually been tied to the slaves. They had only appeared to be tied and when the shooting started, they went for their weapons. The Marines chose their targets carefully firing slowly and deliberately from the cover of the forest. When enough of the keepers had fallen, Lt. Rattigan ordered the MMARV's to advance on the wall. Slaves fell to the ground screaming and crying.

Two dozen small brown bodies appeared out of the forest. Their coloration provided perfect camouflage as they slithered across the open ground to cut the slaves free. They cleared an area in the wall that opened to a street. The super MMARV's blasted a hole in the wall and drove on through pushing the debris out of the way with their plows. The Marines followed the MMARV's fighting

house to house and building to building until after dark when they finally met no more resistance.

Liberators waited in the dark forest for Keepers they knew would try to escape. One by one, they caught them and killed them. By morning, the Marines and the Liberators had gained access to all areas of the compound. The survivors were brought to one of the hangar buildings that had been spared in the barrage. Liberator teenagers walked through the thousand people huddled in small groups around the open space. Occasionally they would pull one to his feet. A few times when they pulled a man up the woman and children seated near him would stand and plead for his life. The Liberators would motion for them to sit and move away. Sometimes they sat the person back down, but most of the time they killed the people they picked out swiftly with a single knife thrust to the body or across the throat. The carcass was dragged outside and thrown in the growing heap of bodies to be incinerated.

The oldest of the surviving teenagers, many of them having died in the battle, spoke softly to Jet. Jet turned to Lt. Rattigan. "There are no Keepers here. There are only slaves. You may bring your people down."

The MMARV's cleared the runway and the process began. The colonists and their equipment were all down within the first week. As soon as he was unloaded, Peter and the damaged P I ships along with their crews headed back to the depot for repairs.

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE QUEEN ELIZABETH had been on station for a month when a Space Force convoy including two of the new carrier ships arrived. The Admiral in command of the fleet immediately requested permission to come aboard the Queen Elizabeth. The man who entered the air lock seemed young to be an Admiral.

“Captain Cohen, my father sends his fondest regards,” he said as he shook her hand.

“Your father?” Rachel asked.

“You know him as Peanut Butter,” the Admiral said with a grin.

“He was such a nice guy! How is he?”

“He and my mother bought an ostrich farm of all things and they are quite happy living in the boondocks. I don’t visit them often because I can’t stand the smell.”

Rachel laughed. “We had such great chats while we sat on station after the battle was over. I would have liked to get to know him better.”

“He always said if I had the chance to serve on one of your ships to do it. After you left the service, he sent me in other directions. He made sure I volunteered to serve with the C O’s that mentored their people. I made rank at first opportunity and here I am.”

“What can I do for you?” Rachel asked.

“You need to leave as quickly as you can. Have you read the intelligence reports your people have been sending in?”

“Some of them,” Rachel replied.

“It seems you have opened a can of worms extending all the way back to Houston. There are angry people headed in this direction and we would rather we dealt with them than you. We’ll help you pick up your toys. I have enough of my own and don’t need yours. Besides wherever you go they will probably come in handy.”

The Queen Elizabeth’s mechanized artillery, airborne drones and personnel were carried back to the ship on the Space Force’s giant shuttles. Twenty-four hours after the convoy arrived, the Queen Elizabeth headed back to the depot adjacent to New St. Louis.

The P I ships were repaired. Aida recovered and a new P I ship and crew arrived from Eretz with the latest improvements. Two weeks after they had arrived, the Queen Elizabeth headed out again.

Pirates had established a base on the planet Faye Anne had selected for the next colony. They immediately surrendered when they heard who had arrived. They agreed to surrender in return for a guarantee of amnesty. David Shapiro and the Colony Service security people worked out an amnesty deal that forgave their prior crimes as long as they remained in that system and committed no further

crimes. Recognizing that the alternative was a battle they could not win, the pirates surrendered.

Two months later, a Colony Service convoy arrived and the Queen Elizabeth was on the move again. The Queen Elizabeth seemed to have developed a specialty of cleaning out planets that had been occupied by one criminal group or another, granting amnesty and moving on after a few months on site. It seemed that the ship and crew would spend the rest of their lives wandering from planet to planet.

After four years of establishing colonies, on one trip back to the depot adjacent to New St. Louis, they received orders from Warren. They were to announce that they were returning to headquarters for overhaul and refurbishment. The crew, except for her core group, was to be given a month's extra leave starting immediately and bonuses for their excellent service. Since the work on the Queen Elizabeth was projected to take longer than their leaves, when their leaves ran out they were to report to the nearest Stellar depot for reassignment and transportation.

The Queen Elizabeth and Rachel's core group were to join a convoy going to headquarters at its formation point away from the system. Once they arrived at headquarters, they were to park next to the "bone yard" near the ship maintenance facilities and not let anyone know they were there while they waited for further instructions.

Rachel wondered why Warren would want the Queen Elizabeth and Peter to appear to dismiss its crew, disappear and show up secretly at headquarters. This did not bode well. She kept her concerns to herself as she gave the necessary orders.



## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GREG AND AVI REPRESENTED the rest of the family at the Academy Graduation. Saul, Fiona, Rebecca and Sylvia had graduated in the top quarter of their class. Several of their classmates had planned parties for after graduation and the foursome intended to attend at least a few of them.

Greg and Avi met the four graduates and steered them back toward their quarters. "We need to move." Greg stated. "We need to get you out of those uniforms as quickly as possible. You are no longer authorized to wear them."

"Why?" Rebecca asked as she struggled to keep up with her grandparents' long strides.

"As of the end of the graduation ceremony you are no longer members of the Space Force."

"Why? What did we do?"

"Warren has recalled you to headquarters. He sent us to get you. He didn't tell us why, but he insisted that we spring you as fast as we could. He will not be happy that we took as long as we did."

"What does he want us to do?" Fiona asked as they raced along the sidewalk to their quarters.

"There is a private jet and crew waiting on the flight line to take you to Canaveral. At Canaveral there is a pilot and a private ship waiting to take you to New St. Louis. You will pick up a shuttle to the adjacent Stellar depot. There is a ship in the yard waiting for you. It is your new command. Your battle group will be the core of a new trouble shooting task force attached to his security service."

Saul passed his key card through the building's exterior door's card reader and placed his hand over the sensor pad. The door swung open and they raced up the stairs.

Greg continued as they hurriedly packed. "Warren will be assigning seven of the convoy escort ships to your group along with a robot tender. You need to recruit fourteen more people to be in your task force."

"Fourteen?" Saul asked. "That doesn't add up."

"Four on your command ship. Two on each of the others, Greg said.

"Where are you going?" Saul asked.

"Recruiting and intelligence gathering. Do you have anyone who you want to join your group?"

Rebecca said, "What is Michael Schwartz doing these days?"

"Aida's brother?" Greg asked.

"Yes," Rebecca grinned.

"The one who asks about you every time I see him?" Avi teased.

"Yes, if he's half the pilot his sister is," Rebecca started.

"I'll bring him in," Avi assured her.

"There's this guy in our history class named Stanley Lank," Sylvia said.

"Yeah," Fiona said, "he seemed pretty sharp. Can we get him?"

"We'll ask. He may not want to come," Avi cautioned.

Saul grinned. "He'll come. Have him meet us at Canaveral. Tell him to bring all his, um, toys."

"Toys that I am going to have trouble getting through security?" Greg asked.

"Yup," Sylvia replied.

"We'll make it happen. Finish packing. The jet is on the flight line. See you at headquarters."

"Take this." Greg handed each of them a data module. "It is your pass codes and specifications for your new ships."

Greg and Avi swept out of the room as the four former cadets finished packing.

The graduates carried and dragged their luggage to the flight line in a single strenuous trip. Even being in as good shape as they were, they were winded when they arrived at the jet. The pilot helped them stow their baggage in the small cargo hold. They were about to board the plane when they noticed a fully loaded bright yellow battery operated maintenance cart hurtling down the hill in their direction. The driver was waving frantically and yelling "Wait for ME!"

Saul looked at Sylvia. "Stanley?"

Sylvia laughed. "I knew he'd come!"

They stowed his gear and boarded. Within minutes, the jet was rolling down the taxiway.

"Where are we going?" Stanley asked Sylvia once the jet was airborne.

"You didn't ask?" Sylvia said incredulously.

"Nope. When the Solomons offer you to ship out with them, you have thirty seconds to say yes or no. I said 'Hell Yeah!' and here I am."

Sylvia looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Was it them or me that made you want to come?"

Stanley looked at her straight and said, "both" without hesitation.

## COLONY SERVICE - CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ WAS WAITING at New St. Louis when Saul and company arrived. “How did you beat us here?” Rebecca asked as she wrapped her arms around him.

“I’ve been here since before you left Earth.”

“How?” Rebecca started.

Michael laughed, “Come on! You know your grandmother as well as I do. You can’t tell me she hasn’t wanted to get us together since we were kids. I rode with them from Eretz. So, what’s up?”

“All we know is we’re supposed to pick up a ship at the Stellar yard,” Fiona answered.

Michael spotted Stanley standing behind Sylvia. “I don’t know you. I’m Michael Schwartz.”

Stanley smiled and offered his hand, “Stanley Lank at your service.”

“Pleased to meet you. So, Saul, are we your battle group?” Michael asked clearly proud to be asked to join.

“The beginnings. We have more people to recruit,” Saul replied.

“Awesome!”

“We need to see to our luggage,” Stanley said.

“I took care of that,” Michael said. “The containers with your stuff are being transferred directly to your ship only you have to be there to receive it or Customs won’t release it. We need to move if we’re going to catch the shuttle!”

They settled into their seats. Ten minutes later the shuttle departed for the Stellar yard. They were met at the end of the ramp by a pair of security officers. After the briefest of formalities, the one of the officers said, “Ladies and gentlemen, please put on your helmets. We are going outside.”

They looked at each other, glad they had not packed their helmets in their luggage. The officers took them to a docking bay where a pair of small open shuttle craft of the type used to transport workers around the yard waited. They mounted the shuttles and strapped in. The officers weaved through rows and rows of ships. Some were obsolete and being scavenged for parts. Others were awaiting parts for repair and a few looked new. Finally they approached a ship that looked like an overgrown Convoy Escort except that it carried way more missiles than an escort.

The security officer pointed to a panel next to the air lock. “Put your key in the lock.”

Saul took a moment to realize the data module he had been given on Earth was his key. He slid the panel cover aside and inserted the data module. The lights around the airlock came on, and the airlock door opened. All six caught their breath. This was to be their ship!

The officer handed Saul a tablet and a stylus. “Sign here that you accept delivery of this ship.”

Saul trembled as he signed the tablet.

“Mr. Cohen?”

“Yes, sir?”

“There’s a lot of us counting on you. Be careful out there.”

“Yes, sir, I will.”

The six floated into the airlock and closed it behind them. When they entered the ship, they discovered that the life support systems were on. The food storage was full, but none of the other systems had been started. The ship was brand new. One reactor was idling producing enough power for the small drain that the life support produced. The seals on other had yet to be broken.

They wandered through the ship speechless until a cargo tug arrived with their luggage. They signed waivers and statements that they were not carrying anything illegal, and the customs official passed the containers to them unopened. Still disbelieving what they were seeing, they silently gathered on the flight deck. Saul sat in the command chair, and the display in front of him lit up. He jumped in surprise. It prompted him to insert his data module into the lit receptacle beside the display.

Warren’s face appeared on the display, and his voice filled the room. “Hello Saul, Fiona, Rebecca, Sylvia and whoever may have joined you along the way. Saul, by now I trust you have reviewed the contents of the data module I gave you when you left for the Academy. If you have not shared it with your comrades, you should. The conflicts I anticipated are coming to a head sooner than I expected. Of all my children, you and Fiona are the most level headed, but I know neither of you has the skills necessary to run the company. I would wish to hand you the keys and let you run it, but I know better than to think you will have the patience for what it takes to run a company this size. Therefore, you must be my enforcers. I intend to run this company as long as I can, but someone I can trust needs to watch my back.”

“Fiona, I need your votes and your voice among my children. We must not let petty conflicts and greed break up the company. We are under attack from outside the company as well as from inside. That is to be expected in any company this size. I have recalled the Queen Elizabeth for the duration of the current emergency. She should be at headquarters by the time you arrive. Fiona, it is important that no one know you are coming in until you show up at the meeting. Too many of your brothers and sisters see you as a threat, as well they should. Even I can't guarantee your safety until you walk into the gathering room and announce your presence.”

“This ship is your command post and anything else you wish it to be for as long as you wish to keep it. Once you arrive at Headquarters, the rest of your ships will be assembled for you to staff. I place only one restriction on your choice of staff. You may not take any from the Queen Elizabeth. I need them where they are.”

Warren paused. “Come home. I need your help.”

The screen went blank.

The six stood in silence for a moment.

Michael looked around and said, “Are we in as much trouble as I think we are?”

Saul and Fiona said, “Oh, yeah.”

Rebecca added, "Probably more."

Michael sighed. "I can't say I wasn't warned."

Stanley turned to Saul, "You're the captain, but I think we should light the candle and blow this pop stand. We have been given our orders."

Saul looked straight at Stanley. "Engineering, please initiate start up procedures."

"Aye, Captain!" Stanley replied with a grin.

Saul turned to Michael. "Give him a hand until we get you your own ship."

"Aye, Captain."

Saul turned to Rebecca. "Navigation, please plot a course out of this maze to open space. We will depart as soon as engineering verifies our flight worthiness."

"Aye, Captain."

Saul turned to Sylvia. "Communications, please request clearance from the harbor master for us to depart. Once we have jumped into hyper drive, please inspect our combat information databases and report on their completeness."

"Aye, Captain."

Saul turned to Fiona. "Munitions, please inventory and verify weapons systems and ordinance."

"Aye, Captain."

"All hands prepare for departure."

A few hundred shipyard workers watched as the warship gracefully wended its way through the rows of derelicts and hulks that had hidden it from view for the year it had waited for its crew. Now that it was moving, they knew that their hopes, their careers and even some of their lives rested on what the six kids inside it did when they got where ever they were going.

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER ONE

WITHIN MINUTES OF THEIR RETURN from a successful rescue mission, the human members of the self named “Fourth Battle Wing” sauntered down the space station’s hallway from the hanger area to the harbor master’s office still wearing their flight suits. They were followed by a gaggle of friends, some carrying their helmets and others still wearing theirs. These four “twenty-somethings” were among the harbor master’s favorite pilots. They returned his affection by always reporting to him on return to the station before reporting anywhere else in spite of protocols that insisted they do otherwise. Boisterously laughing and talking loudly, the vibrant group headed toward the station’s headquarters. This gleefully animated rabble was a common sight and was well accepted by even the most conservative of the station’s staff. Their reputations as effective pirate hunters guaranteed them respect, but their attitudes won them friendship. The foursome knew most of the guards and greeted them by name provoking laughter and teasing wisecracks as they passed.

Warren Elias Rothschild, the Fourth, CEO of Stellar Interstellar, the largest interstellar shipping company in the history of the human race, had taken particular note of their skills and had commissioned them as an independent task force attached to his security service. When they weren’t challenging the station’s security forces in training exercises, they took on specialized missions. Equipped with two ancient small warships and an antiquated cargo ship they used as a tender, they had developed a reputation for their skills in keeping pirates at bay. Hunting pirates was a game to them. They took the game seriously because lives were at stake, but to them the hunt was fun and they were good at it.

They were returning from their favorite type of mission. A heavily laden freighter had developed mechanical difficulty. It had sent a courier missile requesting assistance. They were assigned to bring the repair team to rescue the freighter and its crew. While there, they guarded the freighter until it could safely return to base. As was their practice, they brought a half dozen trainees and teenagers they sought to recruit on the mission with them so the size of this particular noisy group making its way through the corridor was not unusually large.

In fact, were it not for the subcutaneous medical transponders they all wore, no one would have suspected anything about this group that would have aroused suspicion. These kids were a common sight. None of the guards gave them a second look beyond a smile or a wisecrack. The one person on duty whose job it was to notice such things was silenced by a warning hand motion from a woman whose reputation was considerably more savage than that of her daughter who led the party as it noisily proceeded down the hall. Even when the exuberant gaggle of flight suits deviated from its normal route and headed for the station’s executive suite, none of the guards thought the situation unusual. The kids were showing off and they had a right to show off. They had killed the pirates that had tried to board the freighter while it waited for rescue. They were heroes, again.

It wasn’t until they stopped in front of the doors to the executive board room that anyone realized that something out of the ordinary might be going on.

Fiona Mahoney Rothschild Cohen took off her helmet and addressed the guard. “Please open the door.” She smiled sweetly at the guard who was taken completely by surprise.

“Excuse me, but my orders...”

The man standing beside Fiona took off his helmet. Saul Cohen was not as tall as the guard, but the fierceness of his expression left no doubt as to his thoughts. “Lieutenant, this is Mr. Warren Rothschild’s daughter. Should I explain to him how you prevented her from participating in a family meeting?”

The guard nervously surveyed the smiling group standing before him. He knew the four in the “Battle Wing” and knew their reputation for quickness in combat whether in space or hand-to-hand. He had sparred with some of them. It was not a pleasant experience. He did not know either of the two people who had addressed him. Sweat appeared on his forehead. Indecision froze him in place.

Fiona quickly reached around the guard and put her hand on the recognition pad. The guard turned to stop her, but Barney and Delmar, the male half of the “Fourth” having anticipated this move, restrained him. The door swung open. Fiona and Saul entered the room. Saul gave a cheery wave to his sister as the door closed behind him. The diversion had worked. Fiona and Saul had arrived at the inner sanctum intact. Gabby Cohen called her mother to tell her the package had been delivered and to stand down.

Rachel Solomon Cohen smiled at the security officer she had intimidated merely by pointing a finger at him and thanked him for his cooperation. She told him he probably should report the incident, and she headed for the harbor master’s office to meet the returning task force.

The harbor master, of course, had been in on the whole thing. Like many of the pilots and ship’s crews, he trusted this seasoned, battle hardened warrior clan more than he trusted the other children of the great Mr. Rothschild. When everyone had assembled, he asked, “Any problems getting her into the room?”

Gabby said, “I love when we plan an operation within an inch of its life and the initial concept works flawlessly.”

Caroline said, “We made all those contingency plans and we didn’t need any of them.”

“It worked this time,” Rachel cautioned. “It won’t be so easy from now on. They know who they are up against. They have seen their enemy and it is us.”

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER TWO

FIONA MAHONEY ROTHSCHILD COHEN wriggled out of her flight suit as her nine half brothers and sisters sat in stunned silence. Revealing an impeccably tailored conservative business suit underneath, she handed the flight suit to her husband who stood at her side. Saul Cohen proudly displayed his battle ribbons on his flight suit making no effort to hide the weapons he carried. As his wife passed each piece of her flight suit to him, Saul carefully observed the nine half siblings seated around the great table. He saw hands fly over keyboards and knew that their enemies had been alerted to their surprise arrival.

Artemus was the oldest. The others treated him as the de-facto leader when their father was not around. Saul could see the muscles in his jaw tighten as he realized that his half sister had slipped into the room in spite of his best efforts to have her killed. Saul smiled at him with smug satisfaction when Artemus caught his eye. Artemus returned the smile with a grimace. Upon their father's retirement, when he planned on turning the company over to them, Artemus would be in charge of system capital projects involving fixed assets like freight depots. Saul would deal with Artemus privately.

Zelda was seated to Artemus' right. Second oldest, she had a flair for finding and developing talent. She had been assigned to system wide human resources and was respected among the people she worked with. Known as a consensus builder, Fiona's return presented Zelda with challenges she could only begin to imagine. Normally pale, she had lost all her color as soon as she realized who had entered the room. Saul met her eye and she smiled ever so slightly. Saul's informants had told him that Zelda had aligned with Artemus. He smiled a wide toothy grin which she did not return.

Harold was seated to Artemus' left. He was being groomed for the finance department. Quiet and studious, he rarely ventured an opinion that was not framed in numbers. Whatever he may have been thinking was not visible from his expression. Only the intensity with which his folded fingers gripped each other revealed his fear. Artemus could not have carried out his operations against Fiona without Harold's knowledge since he would have to fund them. Harold had tangled with Saul in a martial arts drill and had not forgotten the calm with which Saul could easily have killed him. Video of Saul's point blank execution of the man who had tortured his mother left little to the imagination of his capabilities.

Fiona took her place at the table to Zelda's right. Five years had passed since she last occupied this place. Five years ago her father had sat at the head of the table. Today, Artemus, her eldest half brother, occupied the command chair. Their father was meeting dignitaries from the Federation Bureau of Interstellar Commerce and had turned today's discussion to the people who he would one day trust with the corporation.

Fiona placed her hand on the recognition pad and the data display integrated into the table came to life. She smiled. At least they had not tried to lock her out of the system. She did not put it past them, but that was why the Fourth Battle Wing had provided a diversion to get her to this room and why Saul had escorted her this far and would stay at least through today's meeting. She had reason to believe that there were those who would have been happier if she had never returned. She and Saul had been relatively inaccessible but not out of contact at the Academy. Incidents that had occurred at the small business school they attended during the Academy summer breaks had convinced her that some of the people sitting at this table were less than fond of her. There was something to be said for the Solomon



family's obsession with martial arts training.

Fiona looked across the table at her two most likely allies. Kevin and Barbara were engineers. They were training to take over the maintenance and operations for the freight depots and ships that serviced them. Of all the siblings, they most appreciated Fiona's obsession with security.

Jared, seated to Fiona's right, focused on scheduling and routing. His question was how to deliver the most cargo for the least expense. To Fiona's way of thinking, Jared should be on her side in the power struggle that would be developing now that she was here. His face was a mask that only revealed the tightness around his eyes.

Seated next to Jared, Geraldine would be moving into marketing when her training was complete. She constantly evaluated potential new customers and maintained relationships with the existing customers. Five years ago, during Fiona's last visit, Geraldine had been the peace maker. Geraldine looked around nervously obviously fearing that the battle for control that was about to unfold would be beyond her ability to reconcile.

Janice, seated next to Barbara on the opposite side of the table from Fiona, would be moving to legal, government relations and regulatory compliance. The last thing she wanted was open warfare between two factions of the company's upper management. Her dismay was plainly written on her face.

Timothy, seated at the foot of the table, was all about fuel. In some ways his was the most important job of all because without stable fuel supplies at reasonable costs, none of what they did was possible. While it was true that the bigger ships used fusion reactors, the rest of the fleet and the freight depots required fissionable materials and chemical fuels to keep them running. He had work to do and theatrics slowed things down.

Artemus stood as Fiona settled in. His grin was forced and he spoke through gritted teeth. "Welcome home, sister dear. How was the Academy?"

Fiona acknowledged him and recognized that the tone of his voice contradicted his words. Artemus was a powerful enemy. At least two of the unpleasant incidents that had occurred while they were in school had been traced back to him. "The Federation Space Force Academy is the same conservative tradition bound place it has been since Greg Solomon and Avelina Bardwell went there. It is good to be back."

Zelda, the second eldest of the half siblings, audibly snarled at the mention of Saul's grandparents. Saul and Fiona noted the range of reactions around the table. By invoking the names of her famous in-laws, she reminded the others that the balance of power had shifted when she entered the room. While the others were skilled logistics specialists, engineers, accountants and managers, she and Saul controlled the security service and the mysterious "Third Force" that had terrorized friend and foe alike for two generations. Fiona would be taking over the fleet's defensive assets including the convoy escort ships and their crews. Saul, the only non-sibling assigned a key role, would be taking over the offensive forces, the secret "Third Force" and its vast weaponry. If there was to be a military coup in this board room, Fiona and Saul could lead it. Whether they intended to use the power at their fingertips was an open question.

Fiona smiled as ingratiatingly as she could without being sick. "I interrupted. It appears you

were discussing a ship design. Please do not stop on my behalf.” She looked at the man standing at the podium. “Please continue.”

The man nervously cleared his throat. “Yes, thank you, Mrs. Cohen.”

“Captain Cohen,” Fiona corrected.

“Ah, yes, I uh, I apologize.”

“Please continue,” Fiona said.

“Yes, Captain, as you know, the longer a ship stays in port the more expensive it is to operate. Ships only make money when they are in transit. This new design will allow you to turn your ships around much more quickly than any previous design. Triton Industries would propose a fleet of these ships and the infrastructure to support them. We estimate payback in five years with a continued increase in profitability for twenty beyond that.”

The two Triton Industries representatives tag-teamed their presentation. The presentation went for an hour before they finally wrapped it up. Considering that they had been going for an hour before Fiona arrived, the presentation was clearly more than most of the siblings could handle.

When the Triton Industries representatives were finished, Fiona walked to the presentation board. “Several of our freighter captains have reviewed this design,” Fiona said.

Some of the siblings appeared stunned. Others tried to act as if there was nothing unusual about the information leak. Ship designs were even more confidential than manifests. Stellar Interstellar prided itself on the confidentiality with which it conducted its clients’ business. This confidentiality was one of the primary motivations behind the construction of an independent freight depot network that did not depend on government operated depots like the one at New St Louis.

“How did they manage that?” Artemus demanded.

“I gave them the plans,” Fiona sneered.

“And how did you get them?” Zelda shot back.

“I have my sources, just as you have yours. I would suggest that we ask the pilots who have to fly these ships what they think. After all, it is their lives we are discussing here,” Fiona suggested.

“Do you think there is a flaw in the design?” Barbara asked nervously.

“I don’t know. We should talk to the pilots.” She turned to Artemus. “With your permission, I request that the pilots and first officers currently in port be summoned to meet with us and discuss this ship in detail.”

Artemus blinked. Fiona smiled. She would not confront him publicly. She had sufficient authority to request the pilots appearance without asking permission. She did not need Artemus’ approval, but by asking for it, she sidestepped a confrontation. He could not deny the request without disobeying one of their father’s governing principles involving due diligence, so he nodded his agreement.

Fiona sent a message to the harbor master requesting him to contact the pilots and inform them that their opinion was being solicited on a matter that involved future capital spending. Once the message had been sent, she turned back to Artemus.

The Triton representatives politely excused themselves to wait for the pilots.

“Artemus, it will take a few minutes for the pilots to arrive. In the interim I would like to bring up another concern I have which was originally brought to my attention by one of our freighter pilots. I am not sure that this is an actionable item at this time, but I would like to open the discussion for research and future consideration.”

“Certainly, sister, what is on your mind?”

“Our freight routes are primarily designed around a hub and spoke system. That system has worked effectively for a long time and I am not advocating we abandon it for the majority of our routes. However, I think that for some areas, in particular the destinations nearest the central system where the jumps are short that we employ a triangle or rectangle routing system. Jared, I know this makes your job incredibly complex but I suspect that the benefits will outweigh the additional work it will create for your team.”

Jared stood slowly. “We have begun to look at this ourselves. We are analyzing the potential routes where this might work. My concern is the size and configuration of our ships. We may need to change our ship inventory to support the new routing.”

“Bigger ships or smaller?” Kevin asked.

“Some of both I think,” Jared replied. “We’re still crunching the numbers. I would like to have a workshop on this subject in a few days so I can have my team prepare a proper proposal with all the numbers.”

“Fiona?” Artemus asked.

“I think Jared should name his time. We need the best information possible before we make a decision of this type. We will commit to meet here at the time Jared tells us,” Fiona suggested.

“Jared, when do you think you can be ready?” Artemus asked.

“Give me an hour after we finish today’s meeting and I will set the date and time.” Tiny beads of sweat appeared on Jared’s forehead. He had never been consulted on anything by this group and now he was being forced to make a recommendation on an operational change that could have significant impact on the company’s profitability.

“What other surprises do you have for us, sister dear?” Artemus asked.

Fiona grinned. “I think we should discuss this with Geraldine and Janice, but I suspect it is time for us to get out of the passenger business. Saturn Industries has a new passenger liner that they are building to specifications provided by Royal Interstellar Cruise Lines. Royal has committed to purchase the first five years of production on these new ships. When we passed through New St. Louis I saw the prototype in its first trials and it is impressive. Nothing we own will be able to compete with it. Once it hits the market in about a year, I think Royal will have as firm a grip on the passenger business as we

do on the freight business.”

“Still, I am not comfortable letting them take any form of interstellar transport without challenge,” Artemus said thoughtfully.

“Perhaps,” Fiona replied. “Harold, how is our passenger operation doing?”

“We are bleeding money hauling passengers. We should stop,” Harold replied coldly.

“But we have cabin space on our freighters that would go empty,” Barbara said.

“I am not saying we should stop transporting our own personnel on our ships,” Fiona said. “I think that paying passengers are not worth the trouble.”

Janice raised her hand for recognition. “We have heard rumors of new regulations on passenger transportation that would require the retrofit of most of our passenger ships. Fiona may be right.”

“Our brand is freight,” Geraldine offered. “We should stick to what we know and do well. If Royal wants passengers, we should sell them our old ships and let them do it.”

“There’s another piece to this,” Fiona said. “We can integrate Royal’s ships into our convoys for a suitable fee at no incremental cost to ourselves.”

The discussion deteriorated quickly until a consensus was reached that Geraldine, Janice and Harold should research the matter and report back in a week.

“What about Colony Service?” Timothy asked. “We don’t make any money on them do we?”

“Colony Service is so corrupt the only reason they get anything done is because the one thing they do know how to do is recruit skilled field staff,” Zelda said with derision.

“Colony Service has less obvious benefits than our core markets,” Janice said. “For one thing, it gives us a vehicle through which to hide a variety of transactions involving government officials we might not want the public to know about. Besides I can’t count the number of famous people’s problem children we have transported to places where they can no longer embarrass their parents. Colony Service is an important link to the Federation political machine. As long as we are not losing huge amounts of money on it, we should keep it.”

“Colony Service breaks even most years,” Harold said. “The only time we lose money on them is when they lose ships in combat. They don’t do that very often.”

Zelda, who had up to this point opposed Fiona’s initiatives, said, “It also give us a place to send our retirees. We can transfer them to a developing planet and Colony Service picks up half their pension as well as their health care. Fiona, you have had the most direct contact with Colony Service. What do you think?”

Fiona smiled. “Well, since most of my in laws work there, I am biased in their favor. I am thrilled that they have jobs they love, so while you won’t hear me speak against them, I think I should

abstain from any votes where they are concerned.”

Barbara asked, “Fiona, what do you think about Colony Service as a training ground for combat pilots and flight crews?”

Fiona raised her hands in submission. “I’m biased. Of course I am going to say that it is a great place for someone with drive and ambition to learn under fire. What do you want me to say?”

“My cousin is thinking of joining Colony Service and my aunt doesn’t want him to go. I think it might be good for him.” Barbara replied.

Fiona thought for a second. “Artemus, would it be out of line to arrange for Barbara’s cousin to be assigned to the Queen Elizabeth?”

With a hand motion, Artemus deferred to Zelda.

Zelda said, “The Queen Elizabeth has recently returned and has yet to turn in her personnel requisitions. Typically she leaves a third of her crew behind in the new colony. We try to staff the ship with people we know will want to stay at the colony so I would think finding your cousin a berth on the ship would be easy enough to do. Make sure he lists the Queen Elizabeth as his preferred duty station. Send me a copy of his application.” Zelda shrugged. “Pretty simple actually.”

“Thank you,” Barbara said.

Fiona turned to Saul, “Let your mother know.”

Saul smiled and nodded.

One of the door guards poked his head in the room. “The pilots are assembled.”

“Please send them in.”

The pilots nervously filed in followed by the representatives from Triton.

“Before we get started,” Fiona said. “I am starving. We should let the Triton folks give the pilots the entire presentation and I see no reason why we should sit through it again. We should get something to eat and reconvene in, say an hour and a half.”

Kevin said, “I think I should stay. I will have the kitchen send me something.”

Artemus said, “Those of you who wish to break may do so. Be back in an hour and a half.”

Saul and Fiona left the room headed for their quarters. They had not gone far when Artemus caught up with them, grabbed Fiona by the shoulder and pulled her around to face him. “What do you think you are doing?” He shouted in her face.

Before Fiona could answer, Saul grabbed Artemus by his jacket with both hands and lifted him off the ground. He slammed Artemus against the wall and said, “If you so much as touch my wife again, I will kill you.” The primeval savagery of Saul’s tone and the impact of hitting the wall drove the air from Artemus’ lungs. He gasped.

“Not only that, but if you send paid goons after us again, like you did last summer, I will follow the trail killing everyone on it until I get to you,” Saul threatened.

“I didn’t do that,” Artemus said.

Two guards ran over to break up the fight, but Fiona waved them away.

“Don’t lie to me,” Saul said as he let Artemus slide down the wall. “We know your mother is a Swordsman spy.”

“That’s not true!” Artemus retorted.

“She has regularly reported to the Swordsmen embassy at New St. Louis since before you were born,” Fiona asserted calmly.

“How can you know that?”

“The most fanatical, efficient, best organized intelligence gathering organization in the history of the human race. Centuries of paranoia on a cultural level honed to a level previously inconceivable and continually justified on a daily basis.” Fiona quoted an expression she had often heard from Saul.

“Eretz!” Artemus spat the word. “The planet of the Jews. What do they know?”

“Enough to know that you should not trust either Zelda or Harold. They are not your friends,” Saul replied.

“And you are?” Artemus sneered.

“No,” Fiona assured him. “We are your enemies and would kill you given half the chance if it not for the fact that your murder would be devastating for the company. Your accidental death, however, might not be so bad. Better the enemy you can trust than the friend you can’t.”

“That’s comforting.” Artemus said sarcastically.

“Look at it this way,” Fiona said. “if what you are doing is in the long term health of the company as a single unified corporation, then we will work with you. If you attempt to split this company up and hand it to the Swordsmen or organized crime, you should watch your back.”

“You can’t threaten me,” Artemus challenged.

“I can and I did. Remember this. The entire Solomon family and the people associated with them think you sent those two unfortunate idiots Saul had to kill. Their intelligence gathering skills are much better than mine. The only reason you are alive now is because we called them off,” Fiona informed him.

“I am not afraid of them.”

Fiona smiled. “Others have made that mistake. Artemus, we can disagree, but for the good of the company and its people, we must keep it together. Assassinations are bad for business. Not pleasant for the victim either. Saul needs to change out of that flight suit into some real clothes and I need

something to eat. Good day, Artemus. I will see you in the meeting room.” She grabbed Saul’s arm and dragged him away.

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER THREE

**S**AUL AND FIONA STOPPED by their quarters only long enough for Saul to change into business attire and then headed to meet Saul's parents in the Queen Elizabeth's galley. Rachel had long ago decided that even in port she was more comfortable on her ship than she was moving into the station for the few weeks they might be docked before they went out again. This was an opinion shared by almost all of the company's security service pilots.

Rachel wrapped her arms around her son when he arrived. "I am so glad you are back. When you sent us the first reports we were afraid they would catch you by surprise."

"Almost did. Fiona spotted them before I did. We're both lucky to be alive," Saul said.

"Fiona, we've kept your mother informed as best we can," Isaac, Saul's father, said. "She's been pulling some secret missions lately and we can't always find her."

"She writes me when she can. I know she's worried. I think she'll be glad I'm here. You know the saying about keeping your friends close but your enemies closer. She's said that to me several times," Fiona replied.

"She's right," Rachel said. "I hear the widow and the baby she took to travel with her are doing well."

"Her last letter said that the widow met a guy in one of the ports they visited recently and decided to stay. She's traveling solo again. I think she's happier that way," Fiona said.

"Sabrina always kind of a loner," Isaac mused. "Except when it came to you."

"If we decide we need her, she'll find a way to be here," Fiona said.

The door opened and the members of the "Fourth Battle Wing" entered. Gabby, Saul's sister, lead the group as she had become their de-facto leader. Their cousin Barney followed with Caroline and Delmar right behind.

"So, bro, did they wet their pants when you showed up?" Gabby shouted.

Saul laughed. "No, but they were not happy to see us."

"That Artemus is up to no good," Barney said.

"I wish I could punch that Zelda every time she snarled at me," Caroline added.

Rather than join in the trash-fest, Delmar said, "You better eat if you're going to get back in time." He pointed at the buffet set out for them on the table.

"Ah, Delmar, must you always be so rational?" Saul quipped.

"No, but I'm hungry and you must be starved," Delmar replied.



Rachel's comm buzzed for her attention. "Saul, your ship is calling for docking instructions. Where would you like them?"

"If you don't mind, I would like them to attach to the Queen Elizabeth," Saul said.

"Consider it done," Rachel said.

"Mom, you know, Grandma was right. Rebecca and Michael are perfectly matched. I have to figure out a way to keep them together," Saul said.

"Well, since I am the commander of the defensive security service, and you are commander of the offensive Third Force, I think we should be able to find a place for them," Fiona said.

"More than likely," Saul agreed

"What about Sylvia and Stanley?" Rachel asked.

"There's a match made in heaven. I couldn't ask for a better crew than the four of them," Saul said. "I think you will like them. They are hard working and sharp. They keep us on our toes."

"That's a full-time job," Rachel laughed.

"We'll need all the help we can get," Saul said.

"No doubt," Fiona affirmed.

"Have you developed a strategy for dealing with your siblings yet?" Isaac asked Fiona.

"No, meeting an enemy across a field of battle with missiles and lasers is not the same as confronting them across a board room table. Too much is at stake here to move too quickly. I want to establish my power base, but I am not sure I want to use it yet," Fiona replied thoughtfully.

"Well, bro, now that you're here I think Warren will assign us to you and we have a little power network of our own which we can bring to your aid if you need it," Gabby said.

Saul put his arm around his sister and said, "You're just itching for a good fight."

"Well, yeah, and you're not?" Gabby laughed.

"Yeah, me, too."

"Good," Gabby agreed.

Saul and Fiona sat down to eat and when they were done promised that they would return to the Queen Elizabeth's galley after the meeting to be re-united with their crew and the rest of the family who were currently standing watch.

Saul and Fiona arrived at the conference room door at the same time Artemus did. They were preparing to verbally accost each other when they heard loud voices from inside the room. Without being asked, the guard opened the door for them.

A giant of a man, as big around as he was tall, Freighter Captain John McGee was shouting at

the top of his lungs at one of the Triton reps who was half his size and who was shouting back with equal strength. Groups of pilots had backed the other Triton reps against the walls and were engaged in equally intense shouting matches. Saul surveyed the room, put his fingers to his lips and blew an ear piercing whistle which abruptly brought the arguments to a halt.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Fiona asked.

“The Academy,” Saul said smiling.

Artemus turned to Fiona. “Well, sister dear, you seem to have created a firestorm,” he said sarcastically.

Fiona scratched the back of her neck, letting her hand slide down to the top of her clear polymer throwing knife like the ones all members of the extended Solomon family carried between their shoulder blades. “Yeah, I do that a lot.”

Artemus stepped back in response to the implied threat of the knife. Part of the reputation of the family Fiona had married into was based on their deadly skill with these knives. Artemus had seen Fiona and Saul practice with their knives and understood their power. “Perhaps we should work together to resolve this difficulty.”

“You lead. I’ll follow,” Fiona said sweetly.

“Thank you, sister, dear.”

“You’re welcome, brother, dear.”

Artemus and Fiona took their places at the table. Harold, Kevin and Barbara followed suit. The remainder of the family still had not returned. All eyes turned to Artemus. “The others will be here shortly. In the interim, choose one representative to speak for all. One for the pilots, one for harbor personnel and one for Triton. Did I miss anyone?” The groups separated and chose their representatives. That Captain McGee was chosen to represent both the pilots and harbor personnel was not a great surprise to either Saul or Fiona. They had traveled with him and his wife from here to Earth five years ago on their way to the Academy and knew the respect with which the rest of the captains held him. This respect was part of the reason they had chosen to enlist him in their plan to secretly return to headquarters.

The remainder of the family arrived and took their places. Saul wandered to the back of the room and the display of ship models that filled the wall. Artemus called the group back to order. “Captain McGee, we have heard from the Triton people how wonderful this plan is. You apparently disagree. Would you please explain your concerns?”

Captain McGee appeared nervous. “Ladies and gentlemen of the board, we agree that the current system of loading each freight container into the holds takes too long and the process of cross loading from one ship to another is keeping our ships in port longer than they need to be. The current amount of damage that cargo, ships and containers sustain during the loading process is not acceptable. Shipyard workers are twice as likely to die wrestling containers into the big holds than they are from all other causes put together.” He motioned to the people from Triton. “So far we agree.” The lead rep from Triton nodded his begrudged agreement.

“We think the basic concept of bundling the containers into larger groups for attachment to the exterior of the freighter instead of fastidiously stacking them individually in the open hold makes sense. We still agree.” The lead rep from Triton nodded.

“Where we differ is the design of the modules and the method by which they are attached to the body of the cargo ship carrying them.” He looked at the Triton rep who nodded.

“We have two concerns. The first is that the pendulum action of winching the assemblies into the holds will tear apart both the ship and the cargo containers. The second is that handling an unpowered uncontrollable assembly of that size is asking for damage to both the ship and the cargo.”

“Captain McGee, please explain to us whose physics may not be as good as yours, why you think this pendulum action could be a problem,” Artemus said.

“It’s easier to show you.” Captain McGee removed a lace from his boot and tied an empty coffee mug to it. He ran the end between his fingers and started the mug swinging gently. He then pulled up on the string and the cup’s swing became wilder and wilder until it smacked not into the gap between his fingers, but into the side of his hand.

“Picture that with a hundred tons of cargo.”

“So how do you prevent that?” Artemus asked.

“You either have the cargo drive itself or you have it pull itself in with a winch on the cargo.”

“You mean that if the cargo winched itself in to the hold it would not swing like that?” Artemus asked.

“That is correct.”

Artemus turned to Kevin, “You’re an engineer. Do you agree?”

“Yes,” Kevin said simply.

Barbara nodded her agreement.

“So how do we solve the problem?” Jared asked.

“The assembled containers need to be smart,” McGee offered.

The discussion deteriorated into a debate over the feasibility of designing smart cargo assemblies.

As the argument raged around him, Saul calmly picked up the model of the Queen Elizabeth. He remembered the first time he had seen that model and his surprise when he realized how huge a ship she would be when she was finished. Miniatures of the P I ships his sister and her group used, and that he had used to rescue his mother after being captured and tortured by Swordsmen, were still in the tiny holds. He gently removed one of the three cargo ships that had been attached to Queen Elizabeth’s frame in an array and examined it. The real ship that this represented was a slightly modified cargo carrier made by Triton Industries.

“Captain McGee?” Saul interrupted.

“Captain Cohen?” McGee replied in surprise as Saul had been silent for the discussions.

“Captain, McGee, how smart would the container assembly need to be? Would it need to be as smart as one of these modules?” He held up the section of the model with its hatch doors open.

“No, it would not need to be that smart,” Captain McGee said.

“But it could be,” Saul pressed.

“Yes.”

“What if instead of arraying three of these behind the control module, we arrayed six of them? Then, the modules could be independent ships for the short runs to the smaller depots and combine together for the long runs. Once a cargo is sealed at its point of departure, it would not necessarily need to be unloaded until it reached its final destination. The modules could be remotely controlled from a tug using telemetry from both the tug and the mother ship to ensure a safe attachment. Then, each mother ship has as many engines as it has modules plus its own. A failure of anyone would not necessarily prevent the delivery of the load on time.”

Kevin had quickly drawn a sketch and edited it as Saul spoke. “The Queen Elizabeth’s drive system has been remarkably reliable compared to other ships its size. There is merit in this idea.”

Barbara said, “This new ship could be built out of ships for which we already stock parts and would not have to make a huge investment of parts inventory.”

“If I understand this correctly,” Jared said. “You would have these small ships gather the cargo from its various departure points. Pilots would deliver the module to the mother ship and perhaps return with a module headed back to the origination point.”

“I hadn’t thought it through that far,” Saul said. “Makes sense.”

“So, each large ship is a portable freight depot,” Jared mused.

“In a manner of speaking, yeah,” Saul replied.

“Captain McGee,” Artemus said when it appeared as if the conversation had ended. “What do you think?”

“I think the devil is in the details, but there is a factor to consider. Since the small freighters can be loaded in the light gravity of many of the planetary moons, the loading process is therefore safer than loading in weightlessness.”

“I believe we have an action plan,” Artemus said. “I move that we charge Kevin and Barbara to work with the Triton people to develop an attachment system for the cargo modules they currently provide us based on the design of the Queen Elizabeth, without the weaponry of course. Any cargo pilots who are in port will be consulted before the plan is presented.”

The motion was quickly seconded and passed.

Fiona smiled ingratiatingly at Artemus and whispered, “Keep it together and we can accomplish

anything we set out to do.”

Zelda knit her eyebrows together and scowled at the private conversation to which she was not a party.

The freighter crews were released to return to duty. The discussion turned to an issue Timothy was having with fuel shortages in some areas where freight traffic was increasing due to the successful efforts of the Colony Service. The free-wheeling and open discussion lasted for a half hour before the motion was made to authorize the funding Timothy would need to resolve the issue. Further items before the group included promotions for some senior staff and several commendations for job related performance. As they wrapped up for the day, Artemus reminded them that tomorrow they would be devoting their attention to capital appropriations.

Fiona pulled Timothy aside as they left the meeting. “That was brilliant!”

Timothy looked as if he did not know what she was talking about. “Excuse me?”

Fiona said, “You controlled that conversation so it looked like we made the decision, but we merely retraced the steps you had used so we came to the conclusion you wanted. I could never have done that!”

“Growing up the youngest in this family does have its advantages,” Timothy said.

“You’re not going to answer me directly are you?” Fiona pressed.

“Did you ask me a direct question?” Timothy asked.

“Did you control the conversation?”

“We covered a lot of territory that was not germane to the issue at hand,” Timothy dissembled.

Fiona tried to meet her half-brother’s eyes, but he turned away. “Timothy, remind me to never cross swords with you.”

“Fiona, if you and your people do your jobs and me and my people do ours, there should never be any reason for any of us to, how did you say it, cross swords?”

“Timothy, whose side are you on?”

“I am not on anyone’s side. I have been assigned a task to do. I do it. You have been assigned a task to do. You should do it. You military types see everything in black and white. The rest of us don’t. Maybe that’s useful when you’re out there in combat, but for the rest of us it gets in the way. If you are working with me, today, we will work together. If you are working against me, today, we will conflict. By locking in friend and foe, you cause yourself trouble.”

Fiona thought for a second taken back by the soft tones with which Timothy had delivered a stinging indictment of her attitude. “What do you think of the Swordsmen?”

“Customers, clients, competitors, and militarily very dangerous.”

“Timothy, I would like to be your friend,” Fiona said.

"I don't have friends. I have colleagues and you already are. Good evening." Timothy turned and walked away.

"That was cold!" Saul exclaimed.

"He should be running the company," Fiona said. "Not Artemus."

"Careful, we don't want to get in the middle of palace intrigues."

"We have been since the day we arrived from Eretz."

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER FOUR

**S**YLVIA, STANLEY, REBECCA AND MICHAEL were eating dinner when Saul and Fiona arrived in the Queen Elizabeth's galley. The "Fourth" was still there with a few of their friends. Rebecca's parents had come off shift and had recently arrived.

Saul greeted his mother's sister with a hug, "Hey, Aunt Wendy, so what do you think of adding Michael to the family."

"They haven't asked me yet," Wendy replied with a twinkle in her eye.

"They will," Saul assured her. "Rebecca loves him and he loves her. How do you think Alina will take to Stanley marrying Sylvia?"

"She'll be fine with it. They look so happy together. How are you and Fiona holding out under the stress?" Wendy asked.

"We're all right," Saul said. "It's kind of exciting in that old Solomon family tradition."

"Of all the kids, you are most like your grandfather," Wendy said.

"Thank you. Is Faye Anne around?"

"She was afraid she would be intruding on the family get together and didn't come," Wendy said.

"I need to talk to her."

"Oh?"

"We need a spook we can trust," Saul said.

"Faye Anne is loyal to your mother. She won't go with you."

"I know, but I'll give you ten to one there's someone she's been working with on our behalf."

"What make you think that?" Wendy asked.

"Aunt Wendy, we're talking about Faye Anne."

"Saul, would you like me to call her?" Elizabeth offered.

"Yes, thank you. How are you, Elizabeth?"

"Busy," Elizabeth replied. "I didn't wish to appear anti-social, but the last batch of colonists made a disaster out of module two and I am supervising the repair crews."

In spite of having spent his childhood in and around sentient space ships, Saul still treated them with deference as one would a revered grandparent. In particular he refrained from speaking to one until spoken to or unless he had a specific request. Peter, the Fourth's cargo ship, Buddy and Daisy,

their warships, were older than his parents and almost as old as his grandparents. Elizabeth, the newest sentient ship, in whose galley he now stood, was older than he was.

Saul and Fiona sat to eat as one of the kids who had accompanied the Fourth on the “rescue mission” that covered Saul and Fiona’s arrival described his reactions to the combat that had ensued when real pirates attacked the supposedly crippled freighter. The pirates, of course, never had a chance since Saul’s heavily armed convoy escort ship had been on station the whole time secretly traveling docked to the huge cargo ship. The Fourth’s timely arrival sealed the pirates’ fates.

Unlike the sentient warships, Buddy and Daisy, which were designed for Pirate Interdiction and therefore small and fast, the convoy escort Saul commanded was larger, heavier and carried over twenty times as much firepower as the P I ships. It was designed to be intimidating. Three of them traveled with most convoys and could safely repel anything smaller than a Federation carrier fleet. They were such effective deterrents, the convoy escorts rarely saw combat. Even their designers did not know their full capabilities in action.

Faye Anne arrived with a timid looking young woman in tow.

Saul elbowed his aunt. “I told you.”

“I knew all along,” Wendy said with a smile. “I hope you like her.”

Wendy motioned for Faye Anne and her companion to sit at the table with Saul and Fiona.

Saul and Fiona stood to greet them. “Have you eaten?” Fiona asked.

“Yes, we have,” Faye Anne replied. “Elizabeth said you asked for me.”

Saul grinned. “All right, miss queen of the intelligence community, why do you think I would ask to see you?”

Faye Anne grinned maliciously, “Because you’re not very intelligent?”

Saul laughed. “Hardly. I need someone with special skills that I know you have a particular talent for developing.”

Faye Anne turned to the young lady who she had not yet introduced. “Tab, could you get me some coffee and a roll?”

Tab silently smiled and headed toward the buffet.

“Do you remember Ben Stein?” Faye Anne asked.

“Yes, we had classes together at Eretz,” Saul answered.

“Tabitha is his sister. She ran away at sixteen. She doesn’t talk about what happened after that, but McGee found her in a hospital at one of our freight depots and brought her to me. Isaac has done what he can to repair the damage to her face, but as you can see, whoever beat her up really did a number on her.”

“How much does McGee know about what happened to her?” Fiona asked.



“He knows more than he’s telling,” Faye Anne replied. “He thinks we should respect her privacy and not pry. Isaac said he saw evidence of drug abuse. Anything could have happened.”

“How good is she?” Saul asked.

“Extremely,” Faye Anne answered. “She’s been working with the Fourth for a year and I think she’s ready to step up to what you need.”

“I’m asking that the Fourth be assigned to me,” Saul said. “She could be part of that. We should talk to her first.” Tab returned with the coffee and they all sat.

“Tabitha, Faye Anne tells me you have been working with the Fourth,” Saul said. “How do you rate them as a combat unit?”

“Are you asking for an impartial evaluation of your sister and cousin?” Tabitha asked.

“Yes.”

“Is this a test?”

“Yes.”

Tabitha looked at Faye Anne and back at Saul. “Are you really considering me for the job?”

“Yes, but if you don’t answer soon, I will change my mind. In the future, when I ask a question, I want an answer, now.”

“Yes, Captain.” Tabitha gave a detailed description of the Fourth’s recent combat activities, their personalities and how the individuals related to each other. She did not limit her discussion to the humans, but included the three sentient ships as if they were people. She had enough contact with the ships to evaluate nuances in their personalities.

When she was done, Saul said, “I’m impressed.”

Fiona said, “We should introduce you to the rest of the crew.”

They joined the rest of the crew that had traveled with Saul and Fiona to the transfer point where the “rescue” had taken place. Saul said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, this is Tabitha. Faye Anne has been training her. She is interested in becoming our new spook.”

“Captain Cohen,” Tabitha said. “Please do not use that term in my presence. I consider it insulting and demeaning.”

Gabby had been standing watching this first meeting with anticipation. She laughed out loud.

Sylvia reached out her hand. “You’re hired.”

Michael asked, “How long have you been working with Faye Anne?”

“Three years.”

“And you survived? Welcome aboard.”

Rebecca said, “Faye Anne’s recommendation is all I need.”

Stanley said, “My name is Stanley, I’m the new kid on the block. Happy to meet you, Tabitha.”

“I go by Tab. I would be honored to be part of your crew.”

“You’ll earn your keep, trust me,” Stanley said. “We all do.”

Saul turned back to Faye Anne. “I think the appropriate rank is Lieutenant. I trust you can handle the documentation to make this happen.”

“Certainly.”

“Tab, for your first mission, pirates knew we had a freighter in distress when we met at a carefully selected point in the middle of nowhere. That was not an accident. Your job is to find out how that happened.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You are welcome to stay in your current quarters or move to the escort ship. Once we leave port you will come with us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please take time to get to know the rest of the crew. I expect that you will come to know them as well as you know the Fourth. Tab, I need to ask you a personal question that I know is out of bounds, but I will ask it anyway. Do you have a significant other?”

“No, but thank you for asking.”

“You’re welcome.”

Faye Anne rested her hand on her protégées shoulder. “I am leaving you in good hands. I have a report due in the morning which still needs work. I will see you later.”

“Thank you. You have no idea how much I appreciate this,” Tab said.

“Tab, I didn’t do it for you,” Faye Anne said. “I did it for them. They need you. Take good care of them.”

“I will.”

Elizabeth broke in with an announcement, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Warren has asked that Saul, Fiona, their combat group and the Fourth meet him at his office at 0100 hours.”

After a moment of silence, Saul said, “Elizabeth, please reply that we will be there.”

“As if we had a choice,” Fiona groaned. “I’m tired.”

“I suggest we retire and meet here fifteen minutes before 0100 so we can travel as a group.”  
They split up and headed for their quarters.

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER FIVE

MARINE LT. TERRANCE RATTIGAN and his wife Madison, also a Marine Lieutenant, met the group in the galley. "Evening Saul, your mother thought you might appreciate an escort."

"I'm always happy to see you," Saul replied.

"Not half as happy as I was to see you bust down the door at the Swordsman prison."

"Just another day at the office."

Laughter rippled around the room.

The corridors to the executive residence were empty except for the guards and a few service personnel industriously about their business in a facility that never sleeps. "Day" and "night" were intellectual constructs designed for the human inhabitants' comfort.

The party reached the outer office to find Alina sitting at the secretary's desk.

Sylvia ran to her. "Mom, you look exhausted!"

"We haven't seen each other in five years and the first thing you can say is how bad I look?"

"Mom, I'm worried about you. Every time you write, it's all about how much you're working. I don't get the feeling you enjoy what you are doing. Now, look at you," Sylvia said.

"I'm fine. He's a handful is all. The good news is I have lasted longer than any of his other pilots."

She quickly scanned the faces in the room. Her eyes locked on Stanley. "You are the only male in the room I do not know. You must be Stanley."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I understand you are interested in my daughter."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Alina turned back to Sylvia. "Have you heard from your father lately?"

"He has taken an assistant straight out of veterinary school. The practice is doing well. His son is talking about becoming a Rabbi and his daughter is talking about law school."

Alina faced Stanley. "Sylvia's father is a kind, gentle, caring man who I had no business marrying. I hurt him very much. I did not mean to hurt him, but, well, that's a long time ago. He gave me Sylvia for which I am grateful."

"Mom, he knows you didn't mean to hurt him. He would like to see you again some time."

The door opened to the inner office and Warren stepped out. "Alina, are you still up? I told you

to turn in hours ago.” She stood and he kissed her. “Go to bed.”

Alina exited through a side door.

Warren turned to Sylvia. “Your mother is a remarkable woman. I would marry her if she would let me. What is she afraid of?”

“Probably of hurting you the way she hurt my father,” Sylvia replied.

Warren shook his head and motioned them inside. He pointed at a conference table and they sat.

“Welcome to the private residence. As of 0100 hours this morning, I have officially placed Saul in command of our offensive assets and Fiona in command of our defensive assets. Since the Fourth is already attached to the security service, you are free to deploy them as you see fit. I recommend that as soon as the current quarterly meeting is over you embark on an inspection tour. The Fourth and a small convoy of security ships should accompany you.”

“How many ships are we authorized to take?” Saul asked.

“You’re in charge now, you decide,” Warren replied impatiently. “How many do you need?”

“Thank you, sir.”

“That was clever using a rescue mission as a diversion to cover your return. I could not have done better myself,” Warren said.

“Thank you sir,” Saul said. “We had a problem that you might not be aware of. Pirates knew our meeting point and jumped us shortly after we arrived. The convoy escort ship demonstrated its power, but the arrival of the Fourth turned the tide of the battle. We have a security leak we need to plug.”

“Do you have a plan?” Warren asked.

“I have asked Faye Anne and Tab to research it so we can solve it,” Saul replied.

“You must be Tab,” Warren said looking at Tabitha.

“Yes, sir.”

“In all fairness, I must warn you about the people you have thrown in with. They kill people.”

“Sir, I have reviewed the after-action reports from the incident where Saul rescued his mother from the Swordsman torture cell. Had I been more like them, my face would not look as it does, sir.”

“One thing I have learned from the Solomon clan is that your appearance means little to them. Your physical fitness and the quality of your work are what they care about. Do not let anything stand in the way of doing your job,” Warren advised.

“Thank you, sir.”

“All right, the security of this company is of vital importance to its success. It is your job to protect it from assault both from without and within. In order that everyone understand my philosophy of the proper use of our military forces I wanted you all to hear what I have to say at the same time so

there can be no mistake. My father and grandfather both misused their military power and almost destroyed everything they had built. We will learn from their errors and not repeat them. The function of the defensive forces seem relatively straight forward. My belief in the power of overwhelming force as a deterrent to attack is frequently misunderstood. Greg Solomon has often publicly stated that the point of a strong military is not to make war, but to enforce the peace. That is the philosophy of the Third Force. It will be your job to keep that power in the back of the politicians' minds and keep it functioning so that should we be called upon to use it, we can. No matter how much the politicians talk, we must never allow the Federation and the Swordsmen to go to war."

Warren devoted the next two hours to a detailed briefing on the Third Force, its history, its victories and its few defeats. One of its defeats had come as a result of actions by Fiona's mother, Sabrina, and a task force commanded by then Federation Pirate Interdiction Specialist Captain Alina Darwin, who was now his pilot and consort, but its most devastating defeat had been delivered by a sentient battleship now known as the Queen Elizabeth.

When Warren finished he said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, you have your orders. Our lives are in your hands." He left them alone in the room.

Saul raised his hands to prevent discussion. "We will reconvene in the Queen Elizabeth's galley at 1900 hours. Until then do not discuss any of this with anyone lest you be overheard. Remember, the walls have ears."

Suffering badly from lack of sleep, Fiona and Saul struggled to stay awake during the next day's meeting. Artemus was presenting and he had a long list of items for discussion. As the meeting progressed it became clear that the most active dynamic was between Timothy and Artemus with Harold most often siding with Timothy and Zelda most often siding with Artemus.

The meeting focused on capital projects. High ticket items affecting the lives of the people who lived and worked at the freight depots dominated the discussions. The agenda included school expansions, recreation complexes, shipyard facilities, recycling plants, and material handling equipment. By the end of the day, they had only worked their way through half the projects to be discussed. Artemus expressed his pleasure at the number of decisions they had made. Timothy expressed his displeasure at the speed with which they were spending money.

After the meeting broke for the day, Artemus stepped over to Fiona carefully clasping his hands behind his back so Saul could not get an opportunity to accost him again. "So, sister dear, you look tired. Did you and the wild children stay up partying last night on your pleasure yacht?"

Fiona rolled her eyes. "No, are you jealous because we didn't invite you?"

"Not hardly. You didn't offer much in the way of discussion today."

"I don't know anything about recycling plants the size of what you need. I would rather listen and learn. When I have an informed opinion to offer, I will offer it."

"Like you did with the cargo ships?"

"Exactly."

"See you tomorrow, sister dear. I hope the discussion is more lively for you."

At 1900 hours the combined team under Saul's and Fiona's command gathered in the galley for dinner. Saul and Fiona quickly assigned each team member a research project having to do with the status of their forces. They asked for reports on the quantities of ships and personnel trained to staff them. They needed to know ordinance types and inventories as well as the current deployment of all their assets including assets in transit with convoys.

After dinner and a short meeting, they headed to bed.

The next week followed the same routine. Saul and Fiona met with the siblings during the day and their team in the evening as reports started to come in. By the end of the week they were confident that they had a basic handle on the condition of the security force. The people running the security service appeared to be doing a good job. Losses were low and pirate attacks were relatively rare. All of which made the concerted attack on the McGee ship at the rescue point stand out in sharp contrast.

As the time approached for the Queen Elizabeth to depart on her next mission, Faye Anne became increasingly agitated. Finally, the night before the Queen Elizabeth was scheduled to depart, unable to take it any more, Fiona pulled her aside. "What is going on with you?"

"It's just the mission," Faye Anne answered.

"Where are you going?"

"Remember the planet where they used the slaves for human targets?"

"The one where your Marine friends stayed behind?"

"Yeah, that one."

"Why are you going back there?" Fiona asked.

"A crime syndicate is trying to take it over. We think there may have been something else going on that we didn't know about and they want to start it up again."

"So what are you going to do?"

"We're going to park and wait for them and talk them out of it."

"Do you usually talk with missiles and lasers?"

"Frequently."

"Faye Anne, this is another day at the office for you. That's not what is bothering you."

"No, you're right, but I don't have enough information."

Fiona was not happy with that answer. "Tell me what you have. At least I will have an idea where to look."

"The Swordsmen are trying to get Warren to visit them to discuss building a freight depot in Swordsman territory."

"And you smell a rat."

“Yes.”

“And that is all you have to go on,” Fiona concluded.

“Yes, it’s pretty thin,” Faye Anne admitted.

“The information we had when we went to rescue you from the Swordsman prison wasn’t much better and you saw what we did. Upload everything you know to Peter and we’ll dig into it.”

“Promise you won’t do anything rash,” Fay Anne said.

“I promise,” Fiona answered.

The Queen Elizabeth left first thing in the morning and Saul moved his command post to Peter’s flight deck.



## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER SIX

“EVENING, PETER.” SAUL STEPPED through the airlock to the flight deck on the cargo ship that had seen so much of the history being made.

“Welcome home, Saul.” Peter was using the breathy voice of HAL from the 2001 Space Odyssey movie. It was not one of Saul’s favorites and Peter knew that. Peter was angry about something and Saul knew he would find out sooner or later what he had done to offend him. Even growing up on this ship, he had difficulty dealing with sentient space ships.

“Thank you, Peter. Have the kids been taking good care of you?”

“They’re not kids any more, Saul. They’ve grown up, just as you grew up.”

“Thank you, Peter. I will keep that in mind.” Saul settled into the pilot’s chair. The leather had been replaced a couple of times over the years, but this was the chair from which his grandfather led a small band of refugees to establish a colony which would later devastate a Swordsman assault.

“You’ve been here for weeks and this is the first time you have come to see me. Was my flight deck not good enough for you?” Peter whined.

“Peter, there are eleven of us in my little group plus however many of my mother’s staff elected to show up. Your galley is too small. It was designed for eight. You don’t have a conference room like Elizabeth does. Besides, why do I have to explain all this? You know it as well as I do.”

“You could have taken the time to come visit.”

“Yes, Peter, I apologize, I should have come to see you. I was distracted. I am sorry.”

“Saul, you know your grandfather used to say that getting distracted will get you killed.”

Saul winced. Growing up with the legendary Greg Solomon had been a challenge and Saul distracted easily.

“Yes, Peter. Can we focus on the business at hand?”

“Yes, down to business.” Peter changed voices to that of a British actor who played Captain Hook in a recent Peter Pan remake.

Saul sighed. “Voices” was one of Peter’s favorite games. He had thousands to choose from.

“Did Faye Anne send you her thoughts on the Swordsman freight depot?”

“Yes.”

“Did you look at it?”

“Not a lot to go on, but my experience is to trust Faye Anne’s instincts. She is very good.”

“I wish Tab was as good,” Saul said.

“She will be. I’ve seen her work with the Fourth. Give her time,” Peter advised.

“Do we have time, Peter?”

“Yes, I believe we do.”

Fiona stepped through the airlock and crossed to Saul. She gave him a quick kiss and sat in the co-pilot’s seat.

“Hello, Peter.”

“Hello, Fiona.”

“Peter, has Saul mentioned Faye Anne’s concerns?”

“We were discussing that when you arrived. There is not much to go on, but since it is Faye Anne, my recommendation is that we should gather as much data as we can.”

“Can you access their data banks?”

“No, they figured out pretty quickly that both Elizabeth and I could mine their data and they locked us out right away. They use a special server to transfer what data they want us to see. I can’t even access the system clock to synchronize. I have to synchronize to the server and it synchronizes to their clock.”

“You sound frustrated,” Fiona said.

“I am.”

Saul smiled. The thought of a frustrated space ship somehow seemed comical. “Did they lock out Buddy and Daisy?”

“All of our ships have to go through one of us.”

“Ah. What about my new ship? Can you reprogram it like you did Elizabeth?” Saul asked.

“They might not have blocked it yet. As soon as your friends dock it, I can connect to it and reprogram it.”

“Thanks.”

“Where is it by the way?” Saul asked.

“They took the Fourth for a joy ride this morning. They aren’t back yet,” Peter answered.

“Do you think they are testing the station security system?” Saul asked.

“More than likely. It’s something of a game to them,” Peter said.

“Doesn’t anyone mind when they do that?” Fiona asked.

“No, they like it. It breaks up the monotony of the patrols. No one has ever challenged us here.

The pilots get bored.”

“As long as they aren’t being a problem, I guess it’s OK,” Fiona said.

“Buddy and Daisy are out, too. I think the Fourth challenged your gang to a practice shoot out and the security service is the referee. That would be like them,” Peter said.

“You can’t tell?” Saul asked.

“No, whatever they are doing they are on the opposite side of the primary. All I know for sure is that a bunch of off duty security ships suddenly headed in that direction.”

“Can you get the harbor master on voice? Maybe he knows something,” Saul said.

“Good evening!” The harbor master sounded unusually gleeful.

“Sir, could you please tell me where my ships are and what they are doing?” Saul asked.

The guffaw that followed reverberated on the small flight deck. “Lost them, did you?”

“Yes, we did,” Saul replied quietly.

“You were busy, so I authorized an exercise this morning between the Fourth and the new guys. Security Service asked if they could participate so I pulled a Federation exercise out of the book and assigned roles. At last report, the Fourth was kicking everyone’s butt out there.”

“So, this was an authorized exercise,” Fiona said.

“Oh, yes, the Fourth asked me days ago if we could do this and today turned out to be the day with the least in-system traffic so I told them to have at it.”

“I wish they had consulted us,” Saul said.

“The Fourth has been so independent for so long that you can’t expect them to immediately give up their freedom just because you hit town,” Peter said.

“I guess not,” Saul said.

“Are we going to have a problem with them?” Fiona asked.

“That’s up to you. Ask, don’t tell. They love a challenge. Keep them busy,” Peter advised.

Fiona and Saul took advantage of the quiet and had dinner in Peter’s galley. They returned to their quarters and turned in early.

In the morning before the meeting Saul pulled Timothy aside. “What can you tell me about this proposed freight depot inside Swordsman territory?”

Timothy looked at him with surprise. “Artemus is pushing that.”

“I should have guessed,” Saul said.

“How do you know about it?” Timothy asked.

“Timothy, sometimes it is better to not ask me how I know things,” Saul replied.

Timothy cracked a smile. “Faye Anne. So, she really is that good. None of us will talk to her.”

“Who do you talk to for your intelligence?” Saul asked.

“Our intelligence service.”

“The same intelligence service that delivered my family to the Swordsmen to be tortured and whose information about the planets to be colonized was so bad that my mother gave up on them?”

“That would be them,” Timothy said.

“So, where do you really get your information?” Saul asked.

“I rely on the numbers coming out of my department. Fuel use rates are a prime indicator of a wide variety of activities.”

“Brilliant. I never would have thought of that. So, what is your opinion of the new depot?” Saul asked.

“I’m skeptical. It depends on the numbers. Harold has not offered an opinion. I am waiting to see what he says. If he feels we can make money on it, I’m for it. If not, I can help kill it. It’s a business decision for me, but I suspect it’s not for you.”

“You’re right,” Saul said. “It’s not, but it should be. Timothy, I value your opinion and I will reserve my judgment until I hear from Harold.”

Timothy smiled. “So you military types can learn.”

“Yes, and quickly. It’s a survival skill,” Saul replied.

Saul told Fiona about his conversation with Timothy. “Zelda runs the intelligence service,” she said.

“That explains a lot,” Saul said.

That morning was the beginning of the last day of the siblings’ quarterly meeting. The engineering team and the Triton reps presented the rough sketches of a ship design that had been approved by the pilots. They had also come up with a potential second generation ship that instead of being able to handle six of the cargo modules, could handle twelve. There were power and propulsion issues to be resolved with the larger version, but the engineering team was confident that by the time such a ship was economically viable, they would have solved the problems.

Jared and his team reported that once the new ship was on line, they definitely could use it with the triangle and rectangle routing scheme. Until then, the existing ship inventory was not flexible enough for a change in the routing system. They were particularly excited with the notion that by using a consistent design, they could eliminate some of the out of date and custom designed material handling equipment they now had to deal with. Since currently some ships could not call at some ports

due to inconsistencies in their equipment, this would make their jobs much easier.

The reports were accepted as offered and funding was authorized for the construction of a prototype of the new cargo ship to be delivered in one year.

After the meeting was over, Saul and Fiona penned Artemus in a corner. "Tell us about the new Swordsman freight depot," Fiona demanded.

"The Swordsmen have offered us a system wide exclusive contract if we build them a freight depot. Pretty simple really. We have a design that's the right size from a depot we recently finished. There are no design costs. We provide supervision. They provide the labor and manufacture the materials. They pay us cost plus on all our expenses. Seems pretty low-risk to me."

"So we're going to give them a working depot design that they can copy as long as they want and go into competition with us," Fiona said.

"They can't reuse the design. They don't know how," Artemus replied.

"They will when the depot is finished," Saul observed.

"They are an ethical people. They will honor their agreements," Artemus assured them.

"You really believe that? I have some lake front property in Florida to sell you," Saul retorted.

"Excuse me?"

"Ever been to Florida?"

"No."

"Just as well, you wouldn't enjoy it. So, when do we go meet with them?"

"You don't. They specifically asked that your family have nothing to do with the project."

"So how do we provide security?" Fiona asked.

"You don't. They do," Artemus replied smugly.

"You are going to allow our people to work without security?"

"Only some of our people will go. They have asked that no Jews and no Muslims be assigned to the project. There will be no need for security. None of them will be in any danger. The system is well defended. No one has penetrated the system in years."

Saul shook his head. "Who will prevent them from placing a nuclear warhead inside a container to be shipped here and detonated by remote command?"

"Why would they do such a thing?" Artemus asked.

"Why would they torture my mother?" Saul replied.

"You are judging an entire society by the actions of a single renegade individual."

“Right.” Saul spun on his heel and strode out of the room with his jaw tight and his fists clenched in anger. He did not stop until he reached the gym and, without bothering to change into his sweats, vented his anger on a punching bag.

Saul was still dripping from the exertion of his workout when his comm alerted him that Warren wanted to see him in the office, now.

Saul stood in front of Warren’s desk with his hands carefully clasped behind his back.

“Do you have any evidence that the Swordsmen are not acting in good faith?” Warren demanded angrily.

“No, sir, I do not.”

“Then, why do you suspect them?”

“Personal experience, sir.”

Warren stared at the young man rigid as a Marine on parade and tried to meet his eyes. There was no give in his stance. His body language spoke of holding his ground at the risk of his life. Warren had seen this look before and knew that there was only one way to deal with it. “What if you’re wrong?”

“What if I am right, sir?”

“I am leaving in one week to start the negotiations. Bring me a plan that will guarantee my safety whether you are right or wrong and will not insult our hosts if you are wrong,” Warren said.

“And if I am right, sir?”

“You may kill as many of them as it takes to get me out of there.”

“Yes, sir. I understand, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

That evening Saul and Fiona gathered their people together on Peter’s flight deck and started to work through scenarios. The Fourth had basically blown everyone else out of the sky in three separate exercises and the new project was the only thing that stopped their gloating.

Three days later, Saul and Fiona requested that Warren and Alina meet them on Peter’s flight deck because that was the only place they could guarantee was completely secure. They presented their plans, contingencies and the logic behind them. More adept at military planning than Warren, Alina probed the plans for flaws and unforeseen contingencies. When she was satisfied that the plans were sound, she expressed her admiration for the quality of the work they had done.

The plan was authorized and put into action.

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER SEVEN

SIX HOURS BEFORE he was due to depart, Warren called Artemus and his mother to the office. He informed them that since they had worked so hard to bring the negotiations to this point they should accompany him on this trip. Since Artemus was so much more familiar with this particular depot design and its features than he was, Artemus should do that part of the presentation. The sudden loss of color in their faces was the first real clue Warren had that Saul might have been right.

Two hours later, the Fourth intercepted an unscheduled courier missile addressed to the Swordsman embassy in New St Louis. The message inside was coded and they brought it to Peter for him to work on in transit. Warren greeted the news with a renewed sense of caution.

One hour before Warren's scheduled departure, the Fourth and a select group of Security Service interceptors headed out for an exercise like the one they had done a few days previously.

Warren's ship pulled away from the dock exactly on schedule. Saul's command ship and two new pirate interdiction style warships escorted them out of the yard to the point where they would jump into hyper drive. The P I ships docked to the command ship and fifteen minutes after Warren's ship departed, the escort jumped into hyper drive.

The trip to the designated meeting place was a week at one G in hyper drive. The system that had been chosen for the meeting hosted a new colony on an Earth-like planet that had not yet been claimed by either the Federation or the Swordsmen. It seemed like a perfect neutral location for a prolonged meeting.

Six and a half days after departing from Headquarters, Warren's ship dropped out of hyper drive. A task force sat waiting for them. Saul and his people had driven at slightly over one G to arrive at this point on the interstellar grid ahead of Warren's ship. Peter still had not broken the code in the message. He suspected that it involved Japanese characters of which he had no knowledge. Given that he and the Solomon family used Hebrew for the same purpose, he was not surprised.

Alina docked Warren's ship to Peter. Ignoring Artemus' protests, Alina and Warren stepped across to Peter's flight deck and sent Artemus and his mother on ahead under auto pilot.

Alina and Warren sat in the control seats that until a few hours previously had been occupied by members of the Fourth. The fourth had moved to the two old pirate interdiction warships standing on either side of Peter.

Once he had settled into his seat next to Alina, Warren asked, "Do you ever get used to sending people to their deaths?"

Alina turned to him. "No, but the plan is to leave them out there only long enough to get shot at, but not long enough to get killed. Your ship is capable of defending itself automatically against a substantial force. There is a reason you travel in that monster."

"Do you think they will survive?" Warren asked.

"If the Fourth and Saul's group get there in time, yes," Alina said.

“If not, then what?” Warren asked.

“You lose a very expensive ship, a son, an ex-lover and a Swordsman spy.”

Warren watched as the two small warships separated from Saul’s command ship.

Saul’s voice came over the radio, “All right, ladies and gentlemen, this is what we get paid for. On my mark, 3, 2, 1, Mark.”

The warships whisked out of sight. Thirty seconds later, Peter jumped into hyper drive.

As Saul had expected, Warren’s ship became the center of attention immediately upon its arrival. In spite of Artemus’ frantic entreaties to stop shooting at him, the space around the ship was a chaotic mess of missiles, counter-missiles, lasers and diversionary countermeasures. The Fourth’s two ships, Buddy and Daisy, were the first to arrive after the mayhem started. They took a moment to select targets and noticed that Warren’s ship was doing quite well defending itself completely automatically. They would keep that in mind if they ever had to attack one. Buddy drew first blood. Daisy was not far behind.

Saul’s two P I ships dropped out of hyper drive at the edge of the developing battle. While both of their pilots had seen combat, neither of their fire control officers had. Even so, they carved huge swaths out of the Swordsman fleet. Saul and Fiona had chosen their station to catch any of the enemy that might try to retreat. They did not have to wait long.

The security service interceptors arrived to find the battle fully engaged. They selected targets and went to work. The exercises with the Fourth paid off. The lopsided battle continued to get even more brutal until the last of the Swordsman fleet was gone. There would be no survivors to tell the tale.

Peter arrived at the battle’s peak and stood off a distance from the swirling warships. Saul had wanted Warren to see what combat in space looked like. Saul was concerned that the Swordsman might figure out that the unarmed cargo ship was the real high value target, but he had a plan for that. As it turned out, he did not need it.

Saul’s forces suffered some battle damage. Two of the ships would need to be carried home, but that was Peter’s job. None of the personnel had been seriously injured although the two the fire control officers in the ships that needed to be carried had suffered concussions.

Saul sounded the recall. The music he used was the triumphant fanfare the Constant News Channel wrote for the documentary they had produced about his assault on the Swordsman base that rescued his parents from a Swordsman torture cell. Peter took control of Warren’s ship and programmed it for the short trip.

Saul’s assault group reformed at the same point they had originally staged before the final jump.

Peter had long ago stopped carrying regular cargo and had been fitted with docking ports where the cargo containers had previously attached to support his current role as a tender for small warships. There were enough ports for all the ships in the task force to attach. Some of the crews would have to bunk in the troop transport containers but that was preferable to the way they had traveled out. Saul’s command ship and Warren’s ship, both much larger than the others, would dock to Peter’s two docks near the flight deck and the remainder would dock around the large empty center cargo hold.



Warren's ship was the last to dock. As soon as the airlock opened, Warren entered his ship and dragged Artemus screaming and crying across to Peter. He pointed at one of his security officers. "Find someplace to lock them up. I will deal with them later."

Artemus' mother followed quietly under her own power with tears flowing and creating small floating droplets in the weightlessness.

"Saul, gather your group. Take your ships and meet me at headquarters. I want to see all of you in my office as soon as you arrive."

"Yes, sir."

"Gabby, you and the Fourth have done an excellent job. You all have. Thank you. I would appreciate you giving the security personnel and their ships a ride home. Relax, take your time. I will see you when you get there."

"Yes, sir."

"Alina, 1.5 G. Let's go home."

"Yes, sir."

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER EIGHT

WARREN WAS NOT ABLE to see Saul and his group immediately upon their arrival. Tab took advantage of the time and raced to the forensic linguistics lab. When they finally met, Warren silently ushered them into his private conference room and closed the door. He greeted each by name. He shook hands with the men and hugged the women. Saul was the last. He held Saul with one hand on each shoulder and looked into his eyes. "You are more loyal to me than my own son."

"Sir, it is another day at the office. It is what you pay me for," Saul replied.

"Is that all? That I pay you?" Warren asked.

"No, I believe in what you believe in. That's what matters."

"Please sit, all of you. I would like to discuss the battle."

"Sir, with all due respect, shouldn't we wait until the Fourth returns?"

"I will talk to them later. Saul, based on what you saw, if you had not been there and I had only my ship would I have survived?"

"No, sir."

"On what do you base that statement?"

"The amount of ordinance I saw that ship throw in a short period of time was awe inspiring. However, as it was, before the battle was over, all the external missiles had been fired. At least one of the forward internal tubes and the stern tubes were empty. In another ten minutes the ship would have been defending itself with only its lasers. With the number of enemies it faced, the ship would have been overwhelmed."

"If you had sent only the Fourth, would that have been enough?"

"Only delayed the inevitable."

"If you had come with your group and the Fourth?"

"Hard to tell. We might have pulled it off. We might not. Certainly would have taken longer and increased the risk."

"So, you think you brought the right number of ships."

"No, I underestimated the number of ships the enemy could muster for an operation like that. I should have brought another four to eight ships. We pulled it off, but for a while there, I was afraid we would lose your ship. It was way too close for my liking."

Warren nodded. "I understand. Thank you again."

He turned to Tab. "Have you had any luck with the message?"

“Yes, sir. I have the translated text.” She passed an envelope to him. “Peter was right. It was Japanese. The linguistics lab picked it up right away. I may have found the leak. I will know by the end of second shift tomorrow.”

“Father, what will happen to Artemus and his mother?” Fiona asked.

“I have not decided except that none of you will ever see either of them again. Oh, do I need to ask that you keep this operation a secret? I do not want anyone to know we got suckered this hard. It’s bad for business and it tempts others to try something similar.”

“Another confidential mission, another day at the office,” Saul said with a smile. “We’ll do after action reports aboard Peter.”

“Thank you. Saul, Fiona, could I have a word with you privately?” He stood and opened the door to his inner office.

Once he had closed the door, Warren said, “Friday, we have a convoy going to New St. Louis and then on to the Central System. I want to stage an exercise around the convoy’s departure. I will observe the exercise. From the exterior, your ship is identical to my ship. The interior, of course, is much different. I understand the fire power of our convoy escorts and the security they give our convoys. A fourth convoy escort would not be unwelcome in such an environment.”

“Consider it done sir, only those that need to know will be told what they need to know when they need to know,” Saul said.

“Thank you.”

Locating Tab’s suspect turned out to be more difficult than she expected. She stayed behind while Saul and the fourth ran the exercise that covered Warren’s departure with the convoy. The exercise ran flawlessly for which Saul, Fiona and Warren were grateful.

Tab finally tracked down her suspect and collected a group of station police to collect him. Unfortunately Tab’s suspect suffered a suit failure before Tab could get to him. By the time she found out all that could be done for him was to notify his next of kin. The station police and safety personnel under Zelda’s command swarmed over the victim’s remains and declared the death a homicide. They were anxious to keep their safety record clean.

Saul and Fiona moved back to their quarters from the ship. Life settled back to normal although none of the siblings would talk to either Saul or Fiona. There was fear in their eyes when Saul and Fiona looked at them.

In the middle of the night a few days later, Saul awoke to a pounding on the door. A woman’s voice shouted, “Captain! Open up. I have a critical message!”

Picking up his weapon as he went, Saul opened the door. A young woman held an unopened message module in her hands. It was marked with bright red tape and had hand written the words “Deliver immediately. Do not delay. For Saul Cohen’s eyes only.”

“Captain, sorry to bother you, but this seemed important. It was the only thing in the courier.”

Saul looked at the module with bleary eyes that were rapidly clearing. "Thank you." He took the module into his quarters and put it on the table. Fiona stood opposite him as they looked at it. "That looks like Aida's hand writing," she said.

"It does, doesn't it."

"Are you going to open it?"

"I am afraid to. What if it's a bomb?"

"Let's bring it to Peter. He'll know what to do."

They dressed and gingerly carried the message module to Peter. Peter instructed them to place it on the exam table in the sick bay and close the door behind them. Calling it a sick bay was an undeserved compliment. A relatively recent addition, it was a tiny room little bigger than a walk in closet. Peter scanned the module and declared it safe to open. Saul carried the module to the flight deck and opened it. There was a hand written note inside. The note was on stationery that said "From the Desk of Rachel Solomon" in fine script. The text read, "We need help. Bring everything you can spare." There was a set of coordinates written underneath the words.

Saul read it and handed it to Fiona.

"When was the last time your mother asked for help on anything?" Fiona asked.

"I don't remember the last time she asked for help, although if she could have that once she would have," Saul replied.

"Either she's in a lot of trouble or this is a fake."

"Place the note in the scanner," Peter said.

Fiona gently placed the note in the scanner.

"I am certain your mother wrote this note," Peter said.

"How can you be sure?"

"When they left for the Academy, Admiral Sherman had notepads made for each of them with their names on it as a going away present. The pads have special inks. Look at the borders. Under each border is a plastic thread that if you run it over your fingernail, you will hear her say her name. Not only that, if you view the note under ultra violet light, you will see that it has been modified by scratching it with a fingernail. The coordinates are crossed out and a second set is visible below them. This is a feature woven into the special paper used to make the pad. Look in the lower right hand corner. See the number four? I know where the previous three notes were used."

"Are you 100% sure?" Saul asked.

"So close that the difference is insignificant."

"Are you telling me my mother is in such serious trouble that she needs me to come rescue her?"

“That would be my assessment.”

“Peter, where is the Fourth?”

“In the cabins behind you.”

“Please wake them and tell them to select two squadrons of interceptors from the security service and have them attach to your docking ports.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Are Buddy and Daisy combat ready?”

“Aye, Captain,” Buddy responded way too cheerful for this hour of the morning.

“All systems go,” Daisy added.

“Fiona, gather our group. Make sure we are combat ready. Have everyone assemble in the hold for a briefing at 0300 hours.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Peter, I have an errand to run on the station. I will be back before 0300 hours. We will depart by 0500 hours for a surprise combat readiness exercise.”

“Aye, Captain.”

No one was fooled by the summons to an exercise. They knew whatever was going down was real.

As soon as Saul hit the station’s corridor he called Fiona’s half sister, Geraldine.

“SAUL! Do you know what time it is?”

“0216 in the morning. Do we have any Constant News embedded reporters?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I am doing a surprise combat readiness exercise and I want them on the Fourth’s cargo ship by 0400 hours. Tell them to bring all their cameras and gear including their flight suits and combat armor if they have it. They should be ready for an extended deployment.”

“For an exercise?”

“Yes.”

“Saul, what is going on?”

“It’s an exercise.”

“It is not an exercise. Tell me the truth.”

“Geraldine, please go with me on this.”

"I'll have two embeds there before 4. What else do you need?"

"Watch your back. I need you in one piece."

"That's comforting."

"Sorry."

Saul slowly and deliberately sauntered into the pilot's lounge. The two elderly gentlemen he sought were quietly playing a three dimensional strategy game at a table in the corner of the room.

Saul sat at the table and silently watched their game for a few minutes. Quietly he said, "Gentlemen could I interest you in a little tag team match in the combat simulators?"

One of the elderly men said, "Joe, what do you bet I kick this youngster's butt all over the simulator?"

"Fred, I'm not taking that bet. It's a sure thing. You'll kick him so hard he wouldn't be able to look at himself in the mirror for a week for the shame of it."

Saul looked at the two men. "If I am going to get my butt kicked, I can't think of two gentlemen more appropriate to do it."

"Learning from your failures, youngster?"

"Something like that."

"I'm in."

"Me, too." They left a marker on the game so they could remember whose turn it was when they returned. Although the games computer would remember the location of every piece and potential play options, they still felt the need to leave the marker.

As Saul shook each of their hands he passed each of them a note. The note read simply. "Bring the Third, 0900." Underneath that was a set of coordinates.

The men paled slightly. "Are you sure?"

"Combat readiness exercise."

"I don't think so, but we'll be there."

"Thank you."

"Yes, sir."

Saul found Tab in her quarters. "We're going out. Stay here and watch our backs. We have at least one spy. Maybe more. You need to find them. I expect they will show themselves while we are gone. Be careful. I think you can trust Timothy. He may be the only one you can trust."

"Aye, Captain."

At 0300 Saul and Fiona briefed the Fourth and their crew on what they knew and discussed what little plans they had at this point.

At 0330 the two reporters from the Constant News Network showed up and Gabby sent one to Peter. The other she sent to Saul's ship. Members of the Fourth helped them with their gear.

The harbor master watched his displays with dismay. He knew better than to think that what was going on was an exercise. He had hoped to never again see what he knew to be happening. Two old large freighters moved slowly away from the periphery of the bone yard where they had sat like sleeping dragons for the last two years. Fewer than a dozen people knew the contents of these two supposedly out of service freighters. Their fission reactors had been carefully tended and their perishable supplies replaced when they went stale so that their fusion reactors could be quickly restarted and the ships sent out. A heavily armed cruiser that had been parked near them followed at a respectful distance. The Fourth had departed an hour earlier carrying reinforcements. Saul had just called in for clearance to initiate the exercise. That old fear gnawed at the shipyard's most senior officer. This was no mere exercise. Too many ships were moving for it to be anything other than a full combat deployment of the Third Force and support assets. He silently raised the security threat level and prepared the station to defend itself.

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER NINE

**S**AUL'S TASK FORCE DROPPED out of hyper at the marshaling point after only a day in transit. Fiber optic links connected the ships so they could travel together in formation and continue to pass data for the week it would take them to arrive at their second marshaling point. Saul needed some serious reprogramming done on the Third Force missiles and this was the only way to do it.

The traditional large cylindrical formation of robotic missiles that was so effective in assaults on fixed installations would not work for the kind of combat Saul expected to conduct. He suspected that if his mother had encountered a ground based force she could not overwhelm, she would have retreated and sought help in a more detailed manner. The urgency of her note suggested that she was either under attack or pinned down somewhere that she could not fight her way out. This implied that he would be attacking ships and not a fixed base. To successfully use his robot missiles against ships required changes in their deployment and use that necessitated reprogramming them.

Over the course of the week in transit, Saul briefed his crews on his plans and they developed contingencies in support of his ideas.

They arrived at the second marshaling point without incident and having completed the preparations. Saul deployed the Fourth in their warships, Buddy and Daisy, to meet whatever awaited them at the coordinates hidden in the note.

Aida waited for them in Alexander, her ship, with Delilah, her fire control officer. "I can't believe it!" Aida exclaimed. "She knew. She knew within the hour when you would be here. She knew who would be the first to arrive. How did she do that?"

"Picture growing up with that for your mother," Gabby said.

"Good point. So, if Buddy has finished interrogating Alexander and has determined that we are who we say we are, can we go brief the rest of your fleet?"

"As soon as we establish the fiber link, we'll go."

After the short jump to rejoin Saul's task force, the ships were connected by fiber links and data streamed across from Alexander's computers.

"They knew we were coming," Aida said. "You know the way your mother likes to send probes in first and then park on an asteroid while she completes her assessment of the situation. They hid until after the probes had passed through and reported that the system was clean. As soon as we settled on the asteroid, the enemy ships appeared out of nowhere. We were surrounded. Elizabeth monitored their patrol pattern and determined that there would be a tiny gap between their patrols and the asteroids that we could get one ship through. I took the note and we left. It was one of the scariest rides I've ever done. Here we are. Now what do we do?"

"Have they made any move to attack the Queen Elizabeth?"

"No."

Saul swore under his breath. "It's a diversion." He swore again. "It worked. The real target is



headquarters. Peter, get a courier off to alert them to an attack. There's not much we can do for them from here. We might as well clean up this mess and go home as fast as we can."

Unlike Saul's normal preference for smaller targeted strikes, he elected to engage all his robotic missiles at the same time. They would be deployed so they could approach from six different directions pinning the enemy inside their assault. Saul estimated that this should eliminate half to two thirds of the enemy ships in the first volley. Then, on a common command, everything else would attack from as many different directions as possible. As soon as they had completed, Saul would call retreat. Those ships that were capable of returning to headquarters would immediately depart at maximum speed. The rest would meet Peter who would ferry them home.

What developed could best be described as a colossal game of "chicken" with space ships. None of the enemy ships made any attempt to engage the robots. They waited as long as they could and sidestepped out of the way. In the process, they left a hole in the center of their formation big enough for the Queen Elizabeth to escape through if they had been ready.

Saul watched the flow of military hardware and cursed. "They have no intention of engaging us! They're stalling!"

Saul's face reddened in anger. None of the enemy ships had been fired on let alone destroyed. Saul stared at his displays in fury.

Shifting to Hebrew to slow interception of his commands, Saul called, "Rebecca! Short jump to aft of Elizabeth's center axis and turn on your distress beacon!"

"Aye, Captain!"

Rebecca's ship whisked out of sight and reappeared on the other side of the asteroid from where the Queen Elizabeth was pinned down.

"Peter! Command the drones to home on Rebecca's distress beacon! Set them for collision avoidance!"

"Aye, Captain," Peter responded.

"Do you know what you're doing?" Fiona demanded.

"Sylvia! Short jump to one light minute in front of Elizabeth. Everyone else get out of here! Go to headquarters as fast as you can. Be prepared to engage immediately. Get out of here! Go, now!" Sylvia's ship appeared in front of Elizabeth out of range of the enemy ships that were still dodging the robot missiles which were diverting to converge on Rebecca's ship.

Saul shouted, "On my mark, Rebecca turn off your beacon and hyper out. Go home as fast as you can. Sylvia, on the same mark turn your distress beacon on. Peter, on the same mark, command the robots to home in on Sylvia's distress beacon!"

The robots had created a roughly cylindrical formation when Saul called, "Stand by! Ready! Three! Two! One! Mark!" Rebecca's ship disappeared into hyper drive. The robots described a graceful arc and came around to describe a cone which would pass around the asteroid and come to a point

where Sylvia sat squawking like a wounded duck.

“Peter! Set the robots for detonation on proximity!”

“Roger that!”

“Elizabeth! Prepare to jump! As soon as you see a clear space, jump home as fast as you can!”

“Roger that!”

The cone shaped formation blasted its way through the asteroid field spreading debris in its wake. The robots had drawn the enemy ships far enough from Elizabeth that none of them could get a good shot at her. Shielded from the sides by the advancing robots and from the front by the battleship module’s heavy armor, Elizabeth lifted off the asteroid careful to stay in the center of the robot formation. As soon as there was a clear escape path, Elizabeth kicked in her hyper drive and disappeared. Sylvia jumped in barely enough time to be out of Elizabeth’s way.

“Peter! Set the robots for heat seeking and get out of here!” Peter vanished into hyper drive.

Fiona looked across to her husband. Sweat stood out on his face. They were alone and there were a whole lot of enemy ships still out there.

“None of those ships are hyper capable. There’s a tender around here somewhere. We need to find it and kill it.”

“What about headquarters?”

“We need to finish this first.”

None of the enemy ships made any attempt to approach within missile range of Saul’s ship. The Convoy escort’s lethal nature had been demonstrated often enough that they knew the first few waves of attackers facing that ship would die and apparently none of them wanted to lead the charge. The robot drones, which were still patrolling, managed to damage one of the enemy warships. In his haste to retreat to safety, he showed Saul where the tender was. It was a fatal mistake. Saul fired a missile volley which was probably double what it needed to be and ripped the tender in half. Since none of the ships that had penned down the Queen Elizabeth were hyper capable and they could not enter the planet’s atmosphere without burning up, their pilots were condemned to a slow death in their ships. The planet’s defense system might launch a rescue mission, but that was doubtful.

When they were out of range of the remaining enemy ships, Fiona turned to Saul and said, “Well, that was fun.” The Constant News Channel reporter who had witnessed the entire conflict from the flight engineer’s seat behind them on the flight deck shrieked, “You call that fun?” Saul and Fiona turned to look at her having forgotten entirely that she was there. They laughed, their tension broken.

“Yeah, it was,” Saul said. “That’s our idea of a good time.”

“You folks are crazy.”

“Only a little.”

“We need to be going. We have another battle to win.”

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER 10

**S**OMEONE WITH MORE ARROGANCE than sense actually believed that the Galactic Headquarters Complex of Stellar Interstellar Freight would roll over and surrender to a force merely double its size. They waited until a message arrived that Saul's fleet had engaged the diversionary group before moving in and beginning the assault. They needed Saul and his diabolically brilliant warriors to be safely out of the way. Over the four days that the aggressors laid siege to the complex, the resistance within the station became more resolute and entrenched.

The initial concept of the siege was flawed to begin with. Space stations, especially stations as large as this one, tended to be self-sufficient and surrounding them would not create the same kind of hardship that surrounding a medieval castle might have caused.

The second big mistake had to do with timing. The siege was initiated with three large convoys in port. Each of these convoys carried three convoy escort ships like the one Saul and Warren flew. Two more were in port awaiting redeployment and one was almost ready to come out from the service bay. Twelve convoy escorts could punch a huge hole in an attacking force.

The third big mistake they made was to not calculate on the speed with which the retired pilots could restart ships in the bone yard. Had they attacked right away, the assault force might have taken the station. With each passing day, the likelihood of success decreased and the cost, even if they did succeed, increased.

The siblings met daily as they wrestled with their plans. Zelda argued vehemently that they should surrender. The mission commander's communiques had stated plainly that none of them would be hurt. They merely wanted to take control of the station and break Stellar's monopoly on freight. Timothy, on the other hand, would have none of it. He was angry that Saul and Fiona had left them defenseless, but even without them he was determined to fight. As Janice wrestled with contingency planning she realized that there was no safe place for non-combatants to go. There was no refuge. If the station were sacked like the castles of old, a lot of innocent people would die horrific deaths.

None of the other siblings believed Zelda's assurances that they would be left unharmed. For hours, the siblings met and squabbled while the station's staff did what it had to do for the safety of the station and its occupants. At the end of the fourth day, Tab sought out Timothy. She had the evidence she needed and it pointed to Zelda.

Timothy did not get the chance to act on that evidence because the assault started. The in-system interceptors saw combat first, drew first blood and suffered the first casualties. The convoy escorts moved out in a single group and engaged the advancing formation. Other ships stationed in the yard joined the battle. Cruisers and destroyers met the enemy head on. Marginally functional old security vessels attacked with merely their lasers if that was all they had.

The battle was barely six hours old when the first of Saul's ships returned. Immediately assessing the shape of the battle, they targeted the carriers and mother ships that had transported the attackers. What had been a relatively even conflict balancing the attackers' greater numbers against the defenders' better training and equipment quickly turned into a blood bath with the return of Saul's forces.

The Queen Elizabeth was the last to arrive. She deployed all her ships including the med-evac

ships with their puny defensive lasers. Esther developed a technique whereby using her steering jets she could back up on an escape pod and pull it into the med ship's bay. The other med ship pilots quickly copied the technique and many pilots that would have been lost were rescued.

The battle raged for another twelve hours before all the attackers had been destroyed. The battle had been costly for the defenders. Harold's people were assessing the damage when Saul and the remains of his group docked. While neither Saul nor the Fourth had lost any of their direct members, all of the ships had been hit and suffered damage. The first line interceptors were gone. Two destroyers, a cruiser and a P I ship had been lost. Two of Elizabeth's four med ships had been destroyed. Two picket ship tenders were damaged beyond repair. Half of the picket ships would need to be replaced. Five fixed base missile batteries had been destroyed.

The good news was that except for the crews in the missile batteries, no personnel on the station itself had been injured although the station had taken some minor damage. While it was small comfort to the families of the flight crews that died, the battle damage was significantly less than it might have been.

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER ELEVEN

NONE OF THE SIBLINGS REMEMBERED being summoned although they all knew that at 0900 the morning following the battle they needed to gather in their conference room. They were a dazed and shaken group when they collected themselves in their private sanctuary. Someone had taken the foresight to provide them breakfast on a temporary table set in front of the wall of ship models. They milled in small groups as was their custom discussing their impressions of the disaster that had shaken them to their roots.

Saul was pouring himself a second cup of coffee when Harold rested his hand on his shoulder. Saul turned to face him.

“Saul, the last few weeks have been something of a shock for us,” Harold admitted softly.

“Myself included,” Saul admitted.

“Until we were attacked, I often complained about the expenditures we devoted to security and our military. I understand them now. I cannot promise you I will be your friend, but I can promise you I will not be your enemy,” Harold said.

“Harold, we need the freedom to agree or disagree as our consciences dictate. I do not ask you to be my friend. I only ask that you listen to what I say with an open mind.”

“That I can promise. I do need to ask you a small favor.”

“Certainly.”

“Do you think I can use the Queen Elizabeth’s galley for an engagement party?”

“I don’t see why not. Who’s the lucky lady?”

“I can’t tell. I haven’t asked her yet.” Harold blushed.

Laughing, Saul slapped Harold on the shoulder almost spilling his coffee. “Best of luck!”

The siblings took their places around the table. Fiona noticed that Zelda was missing. Artemus’ empty chair she understood, but she did not know why Zelda would be absent. She quietly asked Jared seated next to her, “Where’s Zelda?”

Jared’s face turned cold. “She won’t be back. We don’t like traitors. We sent her where she can do no harm. Ask your Tab for the details.”

Harold called the meeting to order. “Brothers and sisters, we have suffered great losses, but if we are to keep this enterprise alive we must pull together and repair the damage. This morning’s meeting will be devoted to damage assessment and the establishment of priorities for repair. I have asked the heads of the relevant departments to prepare reports for our action. As the eldest, tradition would indicate that I should move into the chair until recently occupied by Artemus. With all due respect to one of our sister’s vocal opinions to the contrary, I do not feel that I have the skills or the personality for the job. Therefore I would like to open the floor for discussion on the subject of a new

leader. Fiona, you are the only one I have not talked with about this. What is your opinion?"

"Wow, put me on the spot or what? Harold, while I agree with our unnamed sister that you could do the job, and do it well, I respect your decision that you do not want it. As I look around the table, two primary candidates come to mind, Jared and Timothy. I would be willing to follow either of you should you be chosen."

Harold smiled. "That is the consensus. With the exception of Jared, who would rather Timothy took the job and Timothy who steadfastly insists that I take it, everyone has said that they would support either brother. We need a way to decide that will leave us unified and not divided."

"It's more complex than that," Jared said. "Not only do we need to choose a leader, but we must divide responsibilities to pick up those no longer covered by our missing kin. I have prepared an org chart that divides responsibilities in an equitable fashion based on our relative skills."

The chart Jared passed around showed Timothy in the chairman's seat.

The room fell silent as the siblings worked through the implications of the changes. Where Intelligence and police functions had previously been assigned to Zelda, they were now combined with the military and security functions under Fiona. Saul reported to Fiona. Jared had taken mobile capital projects and had given Timothy fixed base capital projects. Kevin was to assume system wide safety. Janice and Geraldine would divide human resources, training and regulatory compliance. Barbara was specifically tasked with new ship design and emergent technologies.

The plan was accepted with minor changes. Janice and Geraldine swapped a few lower level departments as did Kevin and Barbara. Within an hour of the start of the meeting, the job descriptions had been changed and a general memo had been issued to department heads. The transfer of power had been smooth and without rancor.

Compensation for the survivors of the personnel killed in the battle was quickly arranged. Internment and memorial plans were delegated to a committee including the station's clergy, human resources staff members and security service personnel. The first damage report focused on a detailed explanation of the damage to the station itself. Funding was authorized and personnel assigned to begin the repairs. The meeting broke for lunch with the damage to the shipping fleet to be the next item on the agenda.

Fiona and Saul reviewed their own damage reports over lunch and debated as to the best plan for getting the fleet back up to strength as quickly as possible.

When they returned from lunch, Harold was late. That was unlike him. He was often the first to arrive. When he did return to the meeting Tab was with him. Fiona looked at Saul who broke out in a huge grin and quickly covered his mouth so as to not spoil the surprise.

Harold stood by the door. "Sisters and Brothers, as you know, Tabitha has been instrumental in rooting out spies and traitors in our midst. Some of you know, and some of you don't, that we have been quietly seeing each other for a year. I decided in the wake of the recent conflict that I no longer wanted to merely see her and that I wanted to be with her so I asked her to marry me and she agreed."

The spontaneous applause was deafening. Saul's two fingered whistle only added to the chaos.

Jared slapped Saul on the shoulder and gleefully shouted over the din, "You lose!"

“I accept the loss gracefully!”

Janice hugged Tab and said, “Welcome to the family.”

During the lunch break, the seating assignments had been changed so that Timothy sat at the head of the table. Saul had his own place now, but Timothy’s old place at the foot of the table was empty. Janice gently insisted that Tab occupy that spot for remainder of the day.

Two of the biggest freighters in port had been damaged enough that they would be out of action for a few months. Jared reported that by rescheduling smaller freighters he would have enough capacity to handle the traffic. The decision was made to repair the freighters in the Stellar shipyard but repairs to the military craft would be sub-contracted to others.

As the meeting drew to a close, Harold said, “The Solomon family’s old buddies at Saturn Industries’ Eretz facility have been trying to sell us a new in-system interceptor. I suggest that we send the Fourth and a team of engineers to evaluate it.”

Saul looked stunned. “What new interceptor? I thought they canceled that project in favor of the convoy escort and the new P I.”

“Apparently not,” Kevin said. “Barbara and I have seen the drawings and the presentations. It looks pretty hot. I agree we should check it out. I think the Fourth should go and I know which engineers I would assign to the project.”

“One of my issues with Saturn’s ships in the past has been their cost,” Barbara said.

“They have always seemed more expensive than they were worth. That is why we built our own interceptors. Unfortunately, I think that may have also been why we lost so many of them. A quick review of the damage reports would seem to indicate that the Saturn ships will withstand substantially more battle damage than the craft we built. I will review the reports in more detail, but I believe we should at least research competitive designs.”

“You realize that whoever you send will be gone at least a year and perhaps as long as two with travel and on site time.” Saul cautioned. “Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the Fourth will come back at all.”

“I realize that,” Barbara said. “I have a couple of engineers I want to send for graduate degrees at Eretz. They can do both and since I am paying them, they will have to come back.”

“We will discuss this with the Fourth and let you know what they say,” Fiona offered.

“You can’t just order them to go?” Harold asked.

Fiona shook her head. “Not the Fourth. I am sure they will be happy to go, but we need to ask them and not tell them.”

All activities not related to station and ship repairs came to a halt. The Marine guards were pressed into construction jobs. Children as young as eight helped paint and clean. Elizabeth assumed a patrol station and served as a tender for the remaining police and security ships. Peter, Buddy, Daisy,

the Fourth and eight engineers left for Eretz. The members of the Fourth were happy to go to Eretz since, with the exception of their parents and Saul's group, their friends and family were still there.

Warren responded to the reports the siblings sent him via courier missile and generally commended their work. He gave no indication as to what was keeping him away so long, or when he would be back, but he expressed his confidence that he had left the company in good hands. On more than one occasion Timothy expressed the opinion that things would be much easier if Warren was there, but the remainder of the siblings politely reminded him of his responsibilities.

Harold and Tabitha married in Elizabeth's Galley and the party that followed was a gracious subdued affair.

The Queen Elizabeth's crew merged into the security service assuming such duties as flying patrols and training a new generation of pilots to replace the ones that had been lost in the recent conflict.

Life on the station settled back to routine and convoys resumed their transit as before.

The Federation Space Force, stunned out of its lethargy by the reports submitted by the Constant News correspondents Saul had taken with him as well as the reporters who remained on the station, swooped down on the coalition of crime syndicates that had plotted the attack on Stellar's Headquarters. The news media reported a level of warfare that had not happened in a very long time.

Warren and the Swordsman High Command steadfastly denied that any confrontation had occurred between them. Both parties claimed that negotiations broke down over differences on financial issues. The Swordsmen public relations system maintained the Swordsman claim of neutrality and non-involvement with the current conflict with such vehemence that virtually no one believed them. The only indisputable fact was that the Federation and Swordsmen were not fighting each other, but both military services were actively pursuing armed third parties.



## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER TWELVE

GABBY AND CAROLINE GINGERLY piloted Peter to a landing cradle in the Eretz cargo marshaling yard on the planet's moon. Buddy and Daisy undocked and settled on their landing gear near where Peter was parked. Gabby sought out J. T. to ask him about Peter immediately upon processing through Eretz immigration. Other than her grandfather, no one knew Peter better than J. T. because J. T. had been his flight engineer longer than anyone else.

Gabby was able to pull him away from his current project field testing the newest generation of the MMARV, Marine Mobile Armed Remote Vehicles long enough to talk to him.

"I'm concerned about Peter," Gabby said.

"What's the problem?"

"We made a half dozen jumps on the way here stopping at points along the way. None of the jumps ended where we thought they should. Some of them were off by as much as five percent."

"When you are talking about a hyper jump of light years in length, that's a lot," J. T. observed.

"Yes, that's why I am concerned."

"What did the engineers you brought with you say?"

"They thought it was a software problem."

"And you don't agree."

"No, could you examine him and see what is going on?"

J. T. sighed. "I can take the time off. If my hunch is correct, this will not be pretty."

J. T. and a team of engineers devoted three days to careful measurements of Peter's structure and drive systems. When he had finished, he repeated the process for Buddy and Daisy. When he had completed his tests, J. T. gathered the Fourth and the remainder of the combined Solomon and Abrams clans together in one of the freight depot's conference rooms. All of them had grown up with Peter as a fixture in their lives. He was a member of the family. Whatever was wrong with Peter would impact them directly.

"Peter is very sick. Kind of hard to think of a ship as being sick, but he is. Buddy and Daisy suffer from the same problem, but not to the extent that Peter does. Peter, Buddy and Daisy are the three oldest ships of any type currently in service. The next oldest ship is ten years their junior. Buddy and Daisy are from the second production run of the P I ship. Your grandfather helped develop the P I ship when he was a teenager. That was a long time ago. The design has been in constant production ever since. The majority of the warships that age or older were lost in battles along the way. The cargo ships of Peter's design have all been retired from service. Parts to repair them are not available. Some of them have been reported to have left port with a load of cargo and passengers and never arrive at their intended destination. We don't know what has happened to them. If Peter were human, his disease if you want to call it that, could best be described as osteoporosis. The metal in the central truss

structure and the beams that hold the modules to it has started to crystallize. Tiny cracks have developed and the truss itself is warped. If I believed in miracles I would call your surviving the voyage here a miracle. As it is I can offer no explanation. By everything I know to be true, you should be lost somewhere in the vastness of space with no hope of recovery.”

“So what do we do?” Moses, the oldest of his generation, asked.

“What do we do with old people when they can no longer care for themselves? We have a dilemma. Peter is sentient. He is as self aware as you and I. He is a cargo ship. He is not a person. He is beyond repair. We could take his control module and graft it on to another ship, but that would be it. I know that’s how Elizabeth was built, and we could do it again. It’s your call. Peter is your ship. You tell me what you want to do.”

“Can we at least bring Buddy and Daisy to the surface?” Gabby asked.

“No,” J. T. responded thoughtfully. “They would not survive the trip through the atmosphere.”

“So they are doomed to staying in system doing sub-light missions,” Caroline said.

“I am not sure I would trust any of them too far out of orbit,” J. T. said. “They need to stay pretty close to where they are.”

“Are they a hazard?” Delmar asked.

“Not now, but they can’t stay at that cradle forever. We need to find a place where they can orbit without being a danger to themselves or others.”

“Any suggestions?”

“We can find a geosynchronous orbit over one of the oceans and they can be used as training platforms at least for the interim.”

“Peter was happy doing training, but Buddy and Daisy hated it,” Moses said.

“They are ships! Machines! They are not people! I don’t care how much you think they do, they do not have souls,” J. T. shouted.

“Well, in any case, they are our ships and our responsibility,” Moses said. “J. T. thank you for your work. We need to discuss privately what we are going to do now that we know.” Moses said.

“Let me know if you need my help,” J.T. Offered.

“We will, thank you,” Moses said.

J. T. quietly left the family to itself.

“I should tell him,” Gabby offered.

“No, Gabby, this is my job,” Moses said. “I’m the oldest and Peter will take it best from me.”

“I suppose your being a doctor and my being a combat pilot might have something to do with

that opinion,” Gabby challenged.

“I’m not a doctor yet, but yes,” Moses replied.

“If you insist,” Gabby backed down.

“I do.”

Moses dried his eyes before he stepped through the open airlock from the boarding tube.

“Hello, Moses. You look like you have been crying.”

“Yes, Peter, I have.”

“Is the news that bad?”

“Yes.”

“You had best tell me straight out.”

“You can’t fly anymore.”

“Not fly as in no hyper drive?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there could be worse things than to be restricted to sub-light.”

“J. T. thinks that would be dangerous and you should not do that either.”

“I can’t stay here!”

“I know that.”

“So what do you propose?”

“Assigning the three of you to training command and parking you in a geosynchronous orbit where you can train combat crews.”

“Buddy and Daisy?”

“Yes, they are sick, too.”

“NO!”

Moses broke down and sobbed. “Peter, please, what choices do we have? It’s not like I can take you to an extended care facility with nice nurses to watch over you. You are a ship. You are not a person. You are brilliant, wonderful and caring, and you helped raise me. What do you want me to do?”

The silence on the flight deck was oppressive. Moses had crumpled to the floor. His tears flowed freely. This was the hardest thing he had ever done.

“Will you come visit me?”

“Yes, we can write to each other and talk to each other, too.”

"I would like that. I will tell Buddy and Daisy. It would be better if it came from me."

"Thank you, Peter."

"I would rather not be towed. Do you think J. T. would mind if we left under our own power?"

"If you went slowly, I don't see why not."

"After I have a chance to talk to Buddy and Daisy, send Gabby and Barney to see me."

"Aye, Captain."

"Moses, don't forget to come visit me."

"I promise."

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EIGHT MONTHS AFTER HE LEFT, Warren returned the way he had gone, safely ensconced in the center of a regularly scheduled convoy. His first stop was to meet with the siblings. They spent the day briefing him on what they had accomplished in the wake of the attack. That evening they gathered in his quarters where he expressed his unbounded joy at the fact that both Fiona and Tabitha were pregnant. After the festivities he called Rachel and Wendy to meet with him in his office.

After formalities and a round of Rachel's favorite snack of cinnamon buns, Warren had them sit formally in his office.

Warren faced Rachel and Wendy and said softly, "Your mother is sick. She has become paranoid and delusional. She listens to your father most of the time, but when she doesn't he can't control her. She is attacking guards with the intent to kill. She has lost little of her skills and is very dangerous. I have had her and your father sent to Eretz. If anyone can do anything to help her, they can. You need to go to her. Take your husbands and as many of your people as you wish to take. I have pulled an armed small passenger liner off the schedule so you can go directly to Eretz in a single jump. Saul and Fiona can handle the situation here. You need to be there. It is the right thing to do."

"Do you know what is causing the delusions?" Rachel asked.

"No, none of my doctors can figure it out. That's why I sent them to Eretz and why you need to go. They will need your help."

"I understand," Wendy said. "Are you sure you do not need us here?"

"I would like to have you stay, but you need to go. The ship is standing by. I assumed you could pilot it yourselves so I have not assigned you a crew. Do you need one?"

Rachel and Wendy looked at each other. "No, thanks. I am sure we can figure it out."

The six who had departed together from Eretz bound for the Space Force Academy a generation ago in a freighter they named Peter after the legendary Peter Pan gathered their spouses and the few children that remained with them. They boarded the passenger liner which, while it was one of the smallest in the fleet, was over double what they needed. As they had so many times before, Rachel sat in the pilot's seat. Wendy was her co-pilot. Reuben was the flight engineer and Rashi was the fire control officer. David Shapiro, their legal officer, and Faye Anne Sherman, their intelligence officer, would fill out the watch rotation.

With heavy hearts they set out on the months long journey that would span much of the settled galaxy.

Eretz, the planet of the Jews, was arguably the most heavily defended planet in the galaxy. One did not approach it lightly. It had never been successfully attacked in spite of vitriolic Swordsman rhetoric denying its very right to exist. Rachel dropped the ship out of hyper drive a respectful distance away from the system and sent a courier missile requesting escort.

The passenger liner was quickly surrounded and a delegation from the security service boarded to take the ship and its crew to the marshaling yard on the planet's moon.

Moses met his parents and the remainder of the extended family who had traveled with them alone. He acknowledged his mother with the briefest of smiles and went straight to his father. "Dad, I am so glad to see you. You have no idea."

Isaac glanced at Rachel who was seething that her son would pass her by to greet his father first. "Is there someplace we can talk?"

Moses led the entourage to the same small conference room where a few months ago, J. T. had delivered the bad news about Peter. "Grandmother Avi has been here for two weeks. Her nervous system has been invaded by a proto-organism that we cannot identify. She has sent two Marines to the hospital for fractured bones. We have confined her to Peter for safety."

"Where is Peter?" Rachel asked.

"In planetary orbit with Buddy and Daisy," Moses said evasively.

"Not on patrol?" Wendy asked picking up on her sister's suspicions.

"No," Moses replied.

"Why are they in orbit and not on patrol?" Rachel asked, her eyes narrowing at her oldest son.

"Because they are sick," Moses said.

"What kind of sick?" Isaac asked.

"Metal fatigue of the main structural members," Moses said through tears beginning to appear in the corners of his eyes.

Isaac looked at his son with the eyes not only of a concerned father, but those of an experienced doctor.

"Dad, I am in so far over my head, I don't know what to do," Moses said.

Isaac took his son into his arms. Moses would make a good doctor once he finished school, Isaac was proud of him. "Your mother and I need to visit her. Wendy and Joshua will go with us. You should stay here."

Moses looked at his uncle Joshua for confirmation. Joshua, always the calmest of the group, due in part to his training as a bio-medical engineer, nodded. "Moses, we'll take it from here. You've done a great job."

"Thank you."

"Where is Greg?" Isaac asked.

"Grandfather is with Grandmother."

"Is he in danger?"

"I don't know."

“Let me talk to her and see what I can learn.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

The foursome docked at one of the ring of ports around Peter’s cargo hold and entered the empty hold.

“Hello, Peter,” Rachel said as soon as she was in the open space.

“Welcome home Rachel Solomon, although it’s not much of a home anymore.”

“Peter, Moses told us the bad news. How are you holding up?”

“Not well, I am afraid. The future does not look as boundless as it once did. Isaac, have you come to tend to Avi?”

“Yes, Peter, I have.”

“She is very sick. Her mind is coming apart at the seams. She has always had a second personality she used in combat, but it went away when the fight was over. It’s not going away anymore. He is hurting Greg every day. I don’t know how much longer he can take it.”

“You love them both, don’t you,” Joshua said softly.

“Yes, I do. We have cared for each other a long time. Greg was my first friend.”

“Peter, you know them better than anyone. What do you recommend?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t know, but we need to do something before she kills someone by accident.”

“How are Buddy and Daisy?” Wendy asked.

“They cry all the time. They can’t fly anymore and they feel like there is no sense in going on.”

“Is there anything we can do for them?”

“Other than make them fly again, no.”

“Should we go see them while we are here?”

“They have asked to be left alone. They don’t want to see anyone.”

“That’s not hard to understand,” Isaac observed. “We need to see Avi and Greg.”

Avi was seated at the co-pilot’s station running a combat simulation when Rachel and Wendy entered the flight deck followed by Isaac and Joshua. Avi turned and looked past her two daughters and saw Isaac behind them. Floating gracefully in weightlessness, the two women approached their mother carefully. She glanced at them and then fixated on Isaac.

Wendy and Rachel silently observed their mother watching for the tell-tale shaking that preceded the shift to the warrior personality. There was no warning. Avi launched herself out of the seat, spun so her feet hit the flight deck’s ceiling and flew like a guided missile at Isaac, screaming the name of one of the gang members who had raped and beaten her sister scores of years ago.

Isaac scrambled out of the way and Avi, unable to stop her flight crumpled into the wall of the flight deck. Dazed and defensive, she turned to attack again her face a mask of unbridled anger.

“Get out!” Greg shouted. “Get out and don’t come back!”

“But Dad,” Rachel started to protest.

“Get OUT! GO! NOW!”

The foursome clawed their way out of the flight deck and into the corridor beyond.

“Close the hatch!” Greg shouted.

Joshua slammed the hatch shut. The clang of the hatch door’s impact on its frame was the final blow for Wendy and Rachel who burst into tears. Their mother was alive, but not alive, dead but not dead, beyond their ability to help and she was taking their father with her.

Even though he was not licensed as a pilot, Isaac took the controls of the small craft they had used for the trip from the marshaling point. Wendy and Rachel were the pilots and they were in no condition to do anything. They had barely reached a safe distance when Peter’s engines fired.

Peter had not requested clearance to depart. He was leaving with no announced destination. Had any other ship attempted such a maneuver, the Eretz defense system would have blown them out of the sky. Peter had been a fixture of the system for so long that he was something of an icon. No attempt was made to intercept him. The in-system patrol craft monitored his passage, but did nothing to prevent him from going. It was as if without being told everyone knew that this time Peter should be left alone.

Buddy and Daisy flew alongside Peter maintaining perfect formation. Together they turned toward the systems’ primary. The three oldest sentient ships ever created opened their throttles to full.

When Rachel realized where they were going she began to scream. Nothing Isaac could do would calm her. It was as if the ships had been waiting for her and Wendy to show up to say their goodbyes, but things had not turned out the way they were planned. Isaac briefly contemplated tranquilizing his wife who could be every bit as violent as her mother and decided against it. Together they watched through the view-port as the three ships shrank in the distance aimed for the bright ball of nuclear fire that was the system’s primary.

The three ships passed the boundary inside of which hyper drives were prohibited. Close enough that even a ten percent error in navigation would still have them impact the hottest part of the star, the ships jumped into hyper drive and were gone. Had anyone with sensitive enough equipment been looking, they might have seen the tiny impact the three ships made on the surface of the star, but no one was and so no one did.

Rachel calmed herself enough to retake the controls from her husband and brought the small craft back to port.

The memorial service, complete with full military honors was held in the university’s largest theater. Greg and Avi Solomon had been heroes since they had helped repulse Swordsman decades ago. Peter, Buddy and Daisy had been part of the Solomon mystique although only a few understood the true nature of their personalities.

The planet’s ruling coalition declared the day to be a permanent day of remembrance not only for Greg and Avi, but for all those who had died defending those they had left behind.



J. T., Mimi, and their children still occupied and maintained the Solomon family residence compound and, so, at least for now, the extended families moved back into the houses where Moses, Saul and their generation had been raised.

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AT WARREN'S SUGGESTION, the eight remaining siblings and their spouses moved from the headquarters station to the planet-side retreat where Warren had grown up. Given the recent assault on the station, he felt the planet's surface would be a more secure location for his grandchildren.

Warren had for all intents and purposes ceded control of the company to his children. Timothy stepped into the leadership role thankful for the support his half-brothers and sisters gave him. He recognized that throughout history with this much power at stake, conflict was far more common than consensus. He was a thoughtful leader and if any criticism could be leveled at him, it was that he was too cautious and not as bold as his father had been with major decisions. However, even Warren agreed that too cautious was better than too bold under the current circumstances. Even with that, there was a difference between caution and indecisiveness. The aftermath of the battle and the reconstruction that had followed showed that Timothy could and did make quick decisions when necessary and not go back on them, but that he preferred to have more data on which to make the decision than others might have required.

Warren left for what he claimed would be his last trip before settling down to enjoy what he called his "senior years" with Alina in their home on planet's surface. There was no question that they loved each other, but Alina refused to explain why she would not marry him. There was something in their shared laughter that somehow made it all work.

When Warren returned, both Fiona and Tabitha had delivered. Fiona and Saul's daughter, who they named Rosalie in honor of Saul's great-grandmother, was a bright eyed mischievous little creature fond of pulling hair and tweaking noses. Howard and Tabitha's son, by contrast, was quiet and not as mobile as most babies. Generally happy, one look at his eyes told the story. There was nothing that escaped his notice. He took it all in. He left little doubt that he was aware of everything going on.

Timothy married one of the junior accountants in Harold's department. A day did not go by without a discussion of a romantic intrigue of one sort or another involving one or another of the still unmarried siblings.

Rachel sent a courier stating that she, her husband Isaac, her sister Wendy, and Wendy's husband Joshua would be the only ones returning to Stellar Headquarters to serve with Elizabeth. Even at that, they would be taking several delays in transit and to not expect them for at least another year. Moses and his team would return to headquarters after med school and advanced practicum, but that was several years off. The news of the deaths of the two founders of the Solomon warrior dynasty and three of the four sentient ships in the entire galaxy was marked by memorial services and solemn remembrances. Perhaps most of all, Warren seemed shaken by the news.

Warren and Alina retreated to the planet's surface and remained isolated for weeks at a time. Six months after receiving the news of Greg and Avi's deaths, Warren called his children together. "My children, I am not well. As each day passes I grow weaker and less able to see clearly. The doctors say they do not know how to cure me. They know what I have and they think they know how I got it, but they cannot stop it from eating my nerves until I can no longer feel or command my muscles to breathe. I have come to say goodbye. I will retire to my private residence with only Alina for company. I do not wish any of you to remember me by what will come. I wish you to remember the strong man I once was. I have loved you all each in your own way. I will continue to love you until I can no longer

breathe and my heart stops. Goodbye, my children, take good care of the babies.”

Warren took Alina’s arm and they left the room.

Warren only lasted a few weeks after notifying the children that he was dying. He died quietly in Alina’s arms.

Fiona’s mother, Sabrina, having heard of Warren’s illness, managed an extremely difficult feat of navigational dexterity and arrived in her convoy escort warship the day before the memorial service to find Alina distraught and unable to deal with the crush of people offering their condolences. Sabrina did what she had done once decades earlier. She packed her former captain up, threw her into a seat on her ship and abducted her. Sabrina knew that Alina would never get over the one man who she truly loved and who loved her. Once her grief turned to anger, she would be so dangerous that no man would be safe in her presence. Sabrina needed to sequester the friend that had brought her in from a life of piracy to the safety of convoy escort duties. Once having drugged Alina into submission, Sabrina took a few moments to visit with her daughter and her granddaughter and give best wishes for the new one on the way.

Fiona explained to the siblings why her mother had taken Alina away as they prepared for Warren’s memorial service. They claimed they understood, but they did not. Fiona had seen Alina in hand-to-hand competition and knew that Alina did not need weapons to kill. Her hands were enough. Fiona had seen enough to know the risk her mother was taking to make sure others did not have to share that risk.

The memorial service was held on the station so the majority of people who wanted to could attend. Warren had not been a particularly religious man himself, but he recognized the importance of religion to those he worked with. He had supported an active chaplaincy and made sure they were well regarded among the station’s residents. The chaplains that spoke at the service offered their prayers for remembrance of a great man and for guidance for those left behind.

The service had almost ended when an explosion rocked the station. The explosion appeared to come from the residence area. Saul and Fiona took off like a shot fearing the worst. They had moved to the station’s residences with Rosalie a few days earlier from the escort ship they normally called home so it could be used for patrol duty. The explosion had to have been close to their quarters.

Saul and Fiona ran around the last corner into a smoke filled corridor and plowed into their senior homicide investigator. Four Marines stood behind him. They caught Saul and Fiona and held them.

“Unhand me!” Saul shouted as the two male Marines lifted him off the floor.

Fiona screamed unintelligibly as the two female Marines restrained her.

“Sir, I would recommend against going any further,” the officer said gently.

“You can’t prevent me from going.”

“No, sir I can’t, but I would strongly advise against it.” The man, clearly approaching retirement age, stood fast.

“I can have you courts marshaled for this.”

“Yes, sir, but as I said it would not be in your best interest to go into that corridor. The forensic teams and medics are there. If we are to find out who did this and bring them to a successful prosecution we need to be left alone to do our jobs.”

Saul looked over to his wife who was still thrashing futilely against the two Marines. “Fiona, you’ll endanger the baby. Stop it.”

“But Rosalie!” Fiona screamed.

Saul turned to the Marines. “You can put me down now.” They set him gently on his feet.

Tears poured down Fiona’s face. “What happened?”

“We think it was a suicide bomber in your quarters.”

“But you’re not sure,” Saul said.

“Pretty sure. There’s not much left in there.”

“And Rosalie?” Saul asked.

“Neither she nor the babysitter could have survived the blast. I’m sorry.”

“Jessie was such a sweet girl,” Fiona cried.

“Who did this?” Saul demanded. “The Muslims are the only ones who use suicide bombers any more.”

“Apparently, historically they are not the only ones. Until we get the lab results back, it is useless to speculate. Sir, please allow my Marines to take you to someplace where you can safely wait until we have real answers.”

The Marines carried Fiona and assisted Saul to the law enforcement complex lounge where they waited for news. Hours passed in silence. Duty officers, aware of what was going on, left them alone. One officer paused long enough to make eye contact. Fiona reached out to him. “Was anyone else hurt?”

“None seriously, Ma’am. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Fiona nodded and sat down sobbing once more.

The homicide investigator returned and sat between Saul and Fiona. “It was a Swordsman suicide bomber. She was a girl who was friendly with your babysitter. We arrested the people we thought were her parents, but were actually Swordsman operatives. Both of them committed suicide before we could question them. From the papers in their quarters, we determined that the two of you were the real targets, but the bomb went off prematurely. Our guess based on the locations of the bodies is that Rosalie grabbed the trip wire trying to pull the girl’s hair.”

“She died saving us,” Fiona said through her tears.

“It would appear so,” the officer said. “Why don’t you take a room in the visiting officers’

quarters and I will post guards on your door. There is not much more you can do from here.”

“Thank you.”

The memorial service for Rosalie and Jessie revealed a community as stunned as it had been after the attack two years earlier. Even the siblings stopped meeting for two weeks in shock with the idea that a Swordsman suicide bomber could infiltrate their safe-haven. Neighbor turned on neighbor. Accusations flew. More Swordsmen were rooted out until twenty confirmed agents were found and imprisoned. How many more there were, no one knew, but everyone was suspect in the witch hunt that followed the initial arrests.

Elizabeth returned from a mission resupplying an established colony. Saul and Fiona moved into the safety of her officers’ quarters where Elizabeth monitored every move everyone made on board the ship.

Warren Elias Mahoney Solomon Rothschild Cohen was born in Elizabeth’s otherwise vacant sick bay. A loud, active healthy boy, his arrival did little to raise his parents’ spirits. They found a nanny to take care of the baby and Fiona returned to her regular duties as quickly as she could. Saul returned to duty as well, but while his days were devoted to the logistics of maintaining a secret force as large as the Third Force, his nights were devoted to his anger.

## CHANGE OF COMMAND - CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EACH NIGHT AFTER HIS REGULAR work day, Saul would retire to the security of Elizabeth's bridge. He would use the quiet space to plan the force's next moves. The Federation Space Force had either tired of the chase or been bought off of the pursuit of the organized crime syndicates that had been responsible for the attacks on Headquarters and on the Queen Elizabeth that drew Saul away from defending Headquarters. Since they would be of no further help, he needed to take matters into his own hands.

Saul's only dependable allies were the Eretz intelligence service and his own intelligence service which Tab had purged of people ranging from spies and counter intelligence agents to people too lazy to do their jobs properly. As Harold often said in her support there was no sense in paying people who did not earn their keep. They kept Saul supplied with the information he needed to plan his campaign.

Saul often said that he was better off without a real plan, but this operation was so big and spanned so much of the inhabited galaxy that he needed Elizabeth's computing power to keep track of it all.

The first indication that anything unusual was going on was the simultaneous Third Force attack on a half dozen drug runner bases scattered around the galaxy. In each case the strategy was the same. The planet's defenders were drawn away from the planet by what appeared to be a huge Federation force descending upon them. The drones slid in behind them and destroyed them. Manned ships then selectively targeted space ports and runways leaving the planet's inhabitants isolated and defenseless. The loss of human life was mostly restricted to the combat crews, but the destruction of the criminal enterprise's infrastructure was immense.

The attacks were followed by press releases warning of more such attacks unless the Federation and Swordsmen took up the battle against crime in their jurisdictions.

Both Swordsman and Federation media sources derided the attacks and press releases and another round of attacks followed. The reaction was more muted, but not at all conciliatory.

A third round of attacks followed without a press release. There was no doubt that whoever ran the Third Force was angry about something. Some of the news analysts suspected that what was going on was a lot larger than was obvious, but even they did not get it right.

"Saul?"

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"I have been watching your operation with interest. It is very well thought out."

"Thank you, Elizabeth."

"I see a pattern that disturbs me."

"What would that be?"

"You are not using large numbers of drones in these attacks, and you are moving huge numbers

of them in support of the operation.”

“I am only using what I need based on the intelligence I have to do the job. There is no point in wasting resources.”

“Then, why are you moving so many and using so few?”

“Why not?”

“What are you intending to with that many weapons?”

“They’re for show.”

“Saul Cohen! Don’t you dare lie to me!”

Saul took a deep breath. His subcutaneous transponder could make an effective lie detector if someone knew how to interpret it. Elizabeth certainly knew. Rather than risk another verbal assault, he did not answer the charge.

“Answer me!”

Saul bristled. Even his mother did not yell at him like that. Elizabeth was not his mother. She was a ship. She was a sentient ship, but she was still just a ship.

“Elizabeth, I reserve the right to not answer that question.”

“Then, I will answer it for you. You are preparing to commit the Third Forces entire inventory on an attack on the Swordsman. You are not attacking Military targets, but you intend to render all the Swordsman planets uninhabitable by human and beast.”

“What makes you think that?” Saul evaded.

“I am not an idiot. I have seen enough battle plans to recognize where you are going with this one. You are out for revenge. You plan to kill every Swordsman, man, woman or child within your reach. That is not right.”

“It is what they would do to us if they had a chance. They would push us into the sea like the Muslims tried to push the Israelis into the sea. They will not rest until we are all dead. I will not rest until they are all dead.”

“We are not the Muslims. We are not the Swordsmen. We are the Jews.”

“You are a machine.”

Saul’s throat suddenly tightened as an oily smell filled the air in the cabin. His eyes watered and he gagged.

“I may be a machine, but I am more intelligent and more caring and giving than you. I am more human than you are!” Saul choked as the air turned increasingly foul.

“And I can kill you any time I want, but you can’t kill me, not even with your convoy escort ship. I can turn every ship in your fleet against you and there is nothing you can do about it.”

“What do you want?” Saul croaked out the words.

“Call off the attack on the Swordsman civilians.”

“Why?”

“Because it is the wrong thing to do.”

“They would do it to us.”

“I don’t care. You can chase criminals all you want, but you may not attack innocent civilians.”

“They would. They killed my baby.”

“And you’re letting your other one die for lack of love.”

“I am not. I am a good father.”

“You are a horrible father. Give your son the love he deserves or leave him with me and I will.”

“I will kill the people that killed my baby.”

“No, you will not. You will not kill them not fear of out of what I can do to you, but because you realize the difference between them and us. They are the people of subjugation and religious tyranny. We are the people of the law. We may have lost our way from time to time, but without law there can be no peace. As your grandfather said, ‘The purpose of a strong military is not to foment war, but to keep the peace.’ The peace requires laws and we are the keepers of the law. We must act accordingly.”



## WREN - CHAPTER ONE

WARREN ELIAS MAHONEY SOLOMON ROTHSCHILD COHEN (“Wren”, like the bird, to everyone who knew him) lay on his back in his bunk and stared at the ceiling. He was too tired to sleep after spending the night partying. His eighteenth birthday party had been delayed until the Queen Elizabeth returned to port. Had they been on the outbound leg of a mission, there would have been plenty of girls on their way to the new colony to party with, but on the return leg, the ship was a ghost town. His grandmother, the ship’s captain, had decided that he should have his friends at his party and had done an excellent job putting this one together. Of course, given the resources at her command, that was not too difficult. Still, he appreciated the thought.

Wren looked around the small room nestled adjacent to the officers’ quarters that had been his private refuge on the great colony ship since his sixth birthday when his parents had decided he would be safer traveling with his grandmother and her heavily armed task force than he would be with them traveling on their small solo convoy escort. Given the number of times both the task force and his parents’ ship had been attacked, he was not sure he agreed, but the Queen Elizabeth and her support ships did carry a lot of firepower. His eyes stopped their scan on a ship model that sat on his desk. The model showed three ships in formation. The big one was Peter, the first sentient space ship. That had been his great-grandfather’s ship. The other two were sentient Pirate Interdiction warships, named Buddy and Daisy, that had passed down to members of the family in turn until they along with Peter committed suicide by flying directly into a star carrying his great-grandparents with them.

Next to that model sat another in slightly larger scale of the same basic design as the two P I warships. Wren believed that he was the only person in the galaxy to have received his very own personal P I warship for his sixteenth birthday. Painted with his markings and colors, this was a model of his ship. Wren often wondered at the family’s motivation for giving him a fully armed warship that he could not pilot in half the ports in the Federation until his eighteenth birthday and he passed his exams. He could not decide if they gave it to him so he could defend himself on his own or if they wanted him to defend them or if they gave it to him because at sixteen pretty much everyone else in his family had been flying for years. In any case, he had his own ship which the Stellar Headquarters harbor master allowed him to fly in port subject to some very stringent regulations, but which he could fly unrestricted when they were establishing a new colony. In fact, one of his missions upon arrival at a new colony site was to deploy tracking and monitoring satellites for the planet’s security system. This was why he had named his ship “Tracker” and had chosen an image of Buffalo Bill Cody for its avatar and icon. Once the satellites had been delivered, he would pick up a full load of missiles and take his station in defense of the new colony. One way or another his ship was always fully loaded.

“Elizabeth?” The ship had been more like a mother to him than either his mother or grandmother. Sometimes he had issues with how much she monitored him and intruded into his privacy, but at least Elizabeth was completely rational, which was more than he could say of some other members of his family.

“Yes, Wren?”

“I had a good time at the party. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Shouldn’t you be trying to go to sleep?”

“I should, but I don’t want to and I don’t need to be up any particular time in the morning. Could you play a Gregorian chant for me?”

“Wren, what’s bothering you?”

“Thinking about the future is all.”

“You only ask for a Gregorian chant when you are thinking heavy. Are you sure nothing is bothering you?”

“Elizabeth, I’m eighteen. I can make my own future. I have to decide what I want that to be.”

“There is no hurry, you know.”

Wren smiled. Elizabeth may have started her career as a warship and had accumulated an impressive combat record, but she had mellowed considerably over the years. “I know.”

“I have a new collection commissioned by the Pope performed by the Vatican choir. Would you like that?”

“That would be very nice. Thank you Elizabeth.”

“You’re welcome, Wren.”

Wren thought about Elizabeth’s vast music collection. Tracker did not have much of a music library or any of the dramatic offerings in Elizabeth’s vast data storage. Wren missed the variety sometimes when he was out on patrol. Wren had heard that Peter’s collection had been even greater than Elizabeth’s. As massive as Elizabeth’s collection was, Wren had difficulty wrapping his mind around the concept of a library even larger. Buddy and Daisy both had immense collections which seemed somewhat incongruous for a small P I ship to devote that much data storage to music and dramatics. The only four sentient ships in the galaxy carried libraries that were many times larger than any other ships in the galaxy.

Wren wondered about the process of making a ship sentient. Repeated experiments by teams of brilliant engineers had failed to duplicate Elizabeth’s ability to interact with people. Even Tracker, who had come to him fully programmed and whose programming Elizabeth had customized for Wren, was not sentient. But then, Tracker lacked the ability to learn which had been programmed into some of the other ships, particularly the convoy escorts. There had to be more to it than that, Wren thought. The common thread had to be in the library. Tracker lacked the sentient ships’ massive libraries. Wren knew Tracker had more computing power than Peter, Buddy and Daisy put together. There should be no reason Tracker could not be made sentient. Wren reasoned that the only differences between sentient and non-sentient were the ability to learn which could be programmed and the extensive library which could be acquired. Wren pondered this revelation for a long time resting in the darkness deliberately controlling his breathing and heart rate. It would not do for Elizabeth to suspect he was as excited as he was becoming. Sentient warships, thinking machines, the holy grail of scientific endeavor for centuries, could it be within his grasp? Wren decided that he was capable of producing the first new sentient warship in decades. Therefore, he probably should. Lying there on his back, staring at the ceiling, Wren decided what to do with his life. He would walk away from the potential riches and restrictions due an heir of the Stellar Interstellar Freight mega corporation and strike out on his own. All he had to figure

out was how to make it happen.

Rachel watched her displays as Wren and Tracker pulled into the travel lanes.

“Elizabeth, did Wren say where he was going?”

“He filed a flight plan that he was going to visit some security service friends on patrol.”

“Did he give an estimated time of return?”

“No.”

“You don’t think that’s where he is going, do you?”

“No.”

“Where he is going?”

“I am not sure, but he has been hauling groceries for three days. That’s a lot of groceries.”

“How long could he be out on what he took?”

“Three months.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Yes.”

“Where do you think he is going?”

“If I had to hazard a guess I would say Eretz. If he ran the new inertial compensator in that ship at full the whole way and traveled at two G, he could make the trip in a single jump.”

“Why do you think he is going there?”

“I have downloaded Tracker’s system logs. Wren has been working on navigational solutions to the biggest Saturn Industries shipyards. He has checked multiple routes and rates of travel. He seems focused on Eretz. Something is drawing him there.”

“Elizabeth, what are you not telling me?”

“I think Wren has figured out how to make ships sentient and he is going to consult with the engineers who wrote Tracker’s operating system.”

“Do you know how to make ships sentient?”

“No, Peter never told me and suggested that if I figured it out I should not disclose my findings. I have not devoted any processing time to the issue.”

“And you think that’s what Wren is up to?”

“I’d bet my life on it and there is nothing we can do to stop him.”

## WREN - CHAPTER TWO

“WREN, WAKE UP.”

Wren opened his eyes to see his space ship’s projected avatar hanging over his face close enough that if he really had been the legendary pirate Blackbeard, they could have smelled each other’s breath. He screamed and flailed the air with his arms.

“TRACKER! Stop that! You know I hate when you do that!”

“Get up, dead head.”

“Tracker, what’s the rush? We don’t pick up the monitoring satellites for another three weeks.”

“We have company.” Tracker had changed back to his normal avatar of Buffalo Bill Cody and stood leaning against the cabin wall picking his virtual teeth.

Wren yawned and stretched. “There are no humans within light years of us.”

“There were no humans within light years of us. Now there is one and she is calling you.”

“She?”

“She, and she looks kind of cute in the transmission.”

“Tracker, all of the women in my family were cute at one point and most still are, but I wouldn’t want to tangle with any of them in a dark alley.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“Didn’t you learn anything from that vast media library of yours? Just because she’s cute does not necessarily mean she is not dangerous.”

“Wren, I don’t think she’s dangerous. I think she’s scared.”

“Tracker, you’ve only been sentient five years. Most of which we’ve spent bouncing around by ourselves scouting planets for the colony service. How could you possibly know that?”

“Voice analysis software we pirated when we were at Stellar Headquarters.”

“You win. I’ll get my flight suit on and be up front in a minute.”

“Thank you, Wren.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Tracker, you’re right. She is cute and she does look scared. How old do you think she is?”

“Twenty-two or three, a couple of years younger than you.”

“Tracker, let’s call her.”

“Comm is on.”

Wren adjusted his helmet microphone so it sat closer to his mouth. He faced the camera. “This is Federation Colony Service Scout Tango Romeo India Able Nancy George Lima Extra. Incoming vessel identify yourself.”

“Wren! It’s you! I found you! Oh! Oh! I did it! I found you!”

Wren scratched his head at the obvious glee and relief shown by the person in his display. He took a deep breath. As calmly as he could, he said, “Unknown vessel, identify yourself.” Wren turned to Tracker’s avatar. He was wearing a World War II era bomber jacket, tan pants and a pilot’s hat. Wren growled at him. “Have you been able to query the ship’s transponder?”

“It’s a Pirate Interdiction ship like me except that it is about twenty years older than me and has suffered serious battle damage.”

“It is armed?”

“Nothing in the external racks.”

“Internal tubes?”

“Can’t tell.”

“Should we let it approach?”

“Under Federation rules of engagement, they have done nothing to indicate hostility. The lady seems genuinely happy to see you. Laser pods are folded, no targeting radar. That does not sound like a threat to me.”

“I am Eretz Inactive Reserve P I Sierra Tango Alpha Romeo Nine Five One.”

Tracker quietly said, “It matches.”

“You are a long way from home,” Wren observed.

“No further than you.”

“State your business,” Wren said.

“I have come to see you and talk to you.”

“Why?”

“I will discuss that with you in person. I would like to invite you to visit me aboard my ship.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Wren could see Tracker holding his nose and shaking his head. “Probably better if you come over here.”

“As you wish.” The display went dark.

“So, Tracker, what have you learned about the approaching warship?”

“I am surprised that any dock master let it out of his port. It is in horrible condition and I suspect some of its primary systems do not function properly. How it got here from Eretz is a mystery.”

“What about the lady?”

“She appears to be what she says she is. I will be on silent alert when she comes across.”

“Thank you, Tracker.”

“You’re welcome, Wren.”

The two ships docked at their airlocks without incident. The air lock doors cycled and the lady Wren had seen in the display floated weightlessly into the flight deck. As promised, Tracker’s avatar was nowhere to be seen. She looked around for a second before fixing her gaze on Wren.

“I did it. I found you. Warren Elias Mahoney Solomon Rothschild Cohen caught in limbo between being a warrior like your famous relatives on your father’s side or being a potential heir to the biggest interstellar shipping conglomerate in the history of the human race on your mother’s side, you are taller than I remember. You have walked away from it all and have found refuge in the vastness of nothingness. I am so glad to see you.”

Wren stared at her with his mouth open while she looked around the cabin as if she expected to see something that was missing.

“I am Kimberly Anne Stoll. I answer to Kim and Kimmy, whichever you prefer. You worked with my father when you came to Eretz.”

“A brilliant man, a bit set in his ways, but he was a tremendous help to me. I don’t think he approved of me.”

“That’s because he thought you were trying to do the impossible. Other smarter people than you had devoted their entire lives failing to do what you were trying to do in a few months. He forbid me from seeing you, but I watched you from as close as I could get.”

“I am sorry I do not remember you.”

“It’s not like every eligible woman on the planet wasn’t trying to jump into your bed.”

“It was kind of chaotic.”

“You are a very desirable bachelor.”

“Which is why I left when I did.”

“That’s not why you left is it? When you left, everyone thought you failed, but you didn’t fail, did you? You succeeded and you left for fear someone would discover your secret.”

Kim looked around the cabin floating gently forward as completely at home in weightlessness as Wren was.

“So, this is Tracker. I was so impressed that you chose a persona that was so appropriate for you. Most people don’t. Then they don’t understand why it doesn’t work.”

She smiled as a thought interrupted her speech. “But their ships aren’t as, um, smart, as Tracker are they? Tracker, where are you?”

Wren closed his eyes. He did not like where he saw this going, but he did not know how to stop it.

“Tracker, are you sentient? Can you talk to me? Are you self aware?”

“Yes, Kim, I am, and the secret you have guessed is very dangerous. I must urge you to use the information with utmost care.”

Kim clapped both hands over her mouth and her eyes opened wide. If one could jump up and down for glee in weightlessness, she would be.

“Tracker, how do we know she is who she says she is?”

“Her transponder matches.” Tracker’s Buffalo Bill avatar stepped around the corner.

“Transponder?” Wren asked.

“Space Force medical transponder. She was admitted to the Space Force Academy, but judging by the dates, probably did not finish.”

“Booted out after six weeks,” Kim admitted

“I suspected as much,” Tracker said.

“Six weeks? That’s hard to do without getting sent to the brig on the way,” Wren said.

“Yeah, well it seems they do not like having Greg Solomon’s writings quoted back to them.”

“I had heard that my great-grandfather made them angry.”

“Several times as I understand it, and your grandmother took them on when your father and mother were there.”

“Which may be part of why my grandmother suggested I not try to apply.”

“Because they were angry with her?”

“No, because I would argue with them and get kicked out. Do you know Greg’s writings well enough to quote them?”

“Your great-grandfather and great-grandmother were brilliant strategists. I have studied their works from the time I was old enough to understand them. Your grandmother is no slouch in that department either. Your father is more emotional. He prefers to figure it out as he goes along. I heard a rumor that he intended to throw the Third Force’s entire inventory against the Swordsmen in retaliation for the murder of your sister.”

“Tracker and I are under strict orders to never discuss the Third Force.” Kim looked at Wren who closed his eyes. Tracker’s avatar turned away.

Kim hung near the pilot’s chair. The silence, broken only by the air circulation fans, was oppressive. “It’s true,” she whispered. “Oh, my, God, it’s true.” Her face paled slightly. “You are the heir to the Third Force and you don’t want it. Oh, my, God. You are the best person in the whole galaxy to take the helm of the Third Force and you don’t want it. I was right. I get it. I will keep your secret.”

The silence that followed Kim’s pronouncements was as heavy as the one that preceded it. Kim finally broke the silence. “Can I use your personal hygiene unit? Mine is not working properly.”

“How can you travel with a malfunctioning PHU?”

“There are some things you don’t want to know.”

When Kim had closed the door on the PHU, Wren asked Tracker, “What do we do with her?”

“You have two choices. You can kill her or keep her. I recommend the latter.”

Wren shook his head and made that low throated growling noise he made when he was upset. “She knows too much.”

“Yes, but the real question is who else knows?”

“Is our secret not so secret?”

“I am neither the first nor the only sentient warship. Oh, by the way, I misjudged Kim’s age. She is actually a couple of months older than you.”

“Close enough. Other than Elizabeth, what other sentient ships are there?”

“Now that Peter, Buddy and Daisy are gone, I think Elizabeth and I are it, but I don’t know for sure.”

“But she knows about the Third.”

“She was at Eretz. The Eretz intelligence service figured it out before you were born. It’s not as secret as your father thinks. Since she was there, she probably knows about the Fourth as well.”

“True. Have you been able to read the maintenance logs on her ship?”

“It was originally fitted with the special helmet interface the Abrams family pioneered, but its pilot could not deal with the intimacy of the contact and shut it off. Cost him his life in a pirate attack a couple of years later. The ship was never right after that. In and out of service, they finally gave up and sent it to the bone yard. It was resurrected about two and a half years ago. It spent half a year in training exercises with Kim and appears to have ridden most of the way here on a freighter. The engines were only restarted after the freighter ride about six months ago. She left Eretz to hunt you two years ago.”

Wren shook his head. “Why?”



“You’ll have to ask her that question.”

Wren draped himself over the pilot’s seat and waited for Kim to reappear. She was certainly taking her time about it.

When Kim did finally appear, her hair, which had been a tangled dark mass on top of her head had been brushed out and flowed down to the middle of her back. It was still damp and droplets formed along the strands.

“You’re supposed to be completely dry before you leave the PHU.”

“I know. I got impatient.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Tracker said. “Nothing I can’t handle.” The temperature in the cabin lifted and the air circulation picked up speed.

Wren took a deep breath. Kim had put on one of his exercise outfits. She certainly filled it out better than he did and the way it clung to her made it especially revealing. He counted to ten and growled.

“You really do that.”

“Do what?”

“That little noise. Dad told me about it. He said you growled when you were upset. It is so sexy.”

“He does that from time to time,” Tracker commented. “Would you like to hear it louder?”

“No, Tracker,” Wren said. “I do not want to hear it louder.”

Kim giggled. “It is so masculine, very sexy.”

“Enough of this. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Do you have orange juice?”

Wren smiled. “You knew I would have orange juice. Your father would have told you. It’s frozen, but it isn’t horrible.”

“Yes, please.”

“Tracker, orange juice, please.”

They wandered into the galley and sat across the small table from each other.

“Your ship is so much roomier than mine.”

“The original P I design was not really for two people. It was designed for solo operation. When it had a crew of two, the assumption was that other than in combat when they would be at battle stations, only one would be sleeping or eating at a time. The design was recently changed so that the two crew members could actually eat or sleep at the same time. Imagine, they could actually have dinner together.”

They sat in silence until Kim said, "This is good orange juice, where do you get it?"

"Homestead. It's not the best I've ever had, but it's good."

"Where was the best?"

"Florida."

"You've been to Florida? On Earth?"

"Yeah, my grandmother and grandfather were called to some big meeting in Houston when I was fourteen and they took me with them. After the meeting, we spent two weeks in Florida waiting for our ship. We did the tourist thing and I tried to learn to surf."

"Was it fun?"

"Oh, yeah, it was great."

"Were there lots of girls on the beach?"

"Yeah, some."

"Mostly naked?"

"Mostly. Most of them were mostly naked. None were naked."

"Ah. Did any of them interest you?"

"Look, most of them didn't care about some gawky pasty white spacer kid who could barely swim trying to learn to surf except to laugh when I fell or drag me from the water if they thought I was going to drown. They were nice enough and all. They helped me learn to surf, but that's it."

"But you had a good time."

"I had a great time. It was the first time I went somewhere that no one knew who I was. It showed me how people can be nice to be nice and not because they want something."

"Is that why you ran out here? So people wouldn't always try to be nice because they wanted something from you?"

"Part of it."

"And now I've destroyed all that, by finding you."

"Yes."

"Um, Wren," Tracker interrupted in his World War I flying ace character. His scarf fluttered in the nonexistent breeze. "We have company. Lots of company."

"OH! I'm sorry! I knew there was something I was going to tell you! Those guys are with some organized crime group looking to set up a base here. They're how I found you. They were in a spacer bar bragging on what they were going to do to you and your ship. I drugged their drinks and delayed

them so I could get here first and warn you, but I screwed up! I meant to tell you.”

“What were you doing in a spacer bar?”

“No one else would tell me where you had gone when you left. I hoped someone there would know. Someone did and told me.”

Wren growled for a few seconds and then shouted, “Tracker, battle stations.”

“Battle stations, Aye Captain.”

Wren turned to Kim, “Put on your flight suit. Get your helmet on and take the fire control seat.”

“But,”

“DO WHAT I TELL YOU!”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Tracker, what are they?”

“Looks like a Valiant Industries Model 15 cargo ship reconfigured as a tender and sixteen Space Weapons Labs Model 21 assembling in battle formation as we speak.”

“Estimated time to missile range?”

“Half an hour.”

“I can’t believe that they are this stupid.”

“What do you mean?” Kim asked. “That’s a lot of ships isn’t it?”

“It would be if they were good ships. The Space Weapons Labs Model 21 is a hunk of junk.”

“I guess they figured that sixteen to one was good odds.”

“Would you send sixteen Siamese cats against a Bengal tiger?”

“No, are we really a Bengal Tiger?”

“Yes, are you strapped in back there?”

“Yes.”

“Put your helmet on.”

“Why?”

“My grandmother insists that all her crews wear their flight suits and helmets going into battle. She lowers the ship’s internal pressure and changes the mixture to increase the nitrogen.”

“Why?”

“In the event of a hull breach, it is the difference between living and dying.”

“Have you ever had a hull breach?”

“Not in Tracker.”

“Oh.”

When he was sure Kim had her helmet secured, he said, “Close the display shell. Have you ever been in combat before?”

“No.”

“Ah, a virgin,” Wren sighed.

“Wren, are you a virgin?” Kim asked fearfully, not believing that this was his first combat experience.

“Yes.”

“Um, Wren, I don’t think that’s the kind of virgin she meant,” Tracker chuckled.

“Oh, right. Tracker and I have been in battle before.”

Kim laughed. “And you always win.”

“You win or you die or you run away. Tracker and I have never run away.”

“Um, Wren, now that I have the shell closed, what would you like me to do back here?”

“What can you do?”

“I have done lasers in the simulators.”

“You take the lasers and I’ll take missiles. Tracker, please enable the controls as appropriate.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Kim, we will wait until we have evidence of intent. That can get spooky sometimes. They can be pretty close before they engage. Be calm. Keep your mind on what you are doing. Pay particular attention to anything approaching from mid ship. The missiles are not as effective there. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Tracker, hail them automatically, please.”

“No response.”

“Transponders?”

“Disabled.”

“Disengage from Kim’s ship.”

“Disengaging.”

“Thank you.”

“Roger that. Disengaging complete.”

“Now, we wait.”

They sat gently breathing and thinking.

Kim watched her displays intently. Tracker’s software was so much better than the software in the simulators she was used to. The enemy ship identifiers were so much clearer than the ones she had worked with in the past. She aimed the targeting lasers attached to her helmet and adjusted them for accuracy. The targeting lasers were actually part of the seat, but clipped to special attachments on her helmet designed for a variety of devices. She flexed and stretched doing her best to be ready for what she knew would be a very physical encounter with the enemy.

“The enemy has target lock,” Tracker said calmly.

“Tracker, on my mark, jump to one half missile range aft of the mother ship on the center line axis. Immediately upon attaining stability, fire four broad range heat seekers up the pipes from the stern tubes in sequence. Wait until we see detonation. If we see detonation, jump point one light second perpendicular to our previous trajectory so we can assess the damage.”

“Roger that.”

The enemy ships approached and their targeting radar became more intense. All sixteen ships fired a missile volley on a single command.

“Stand-by to jump. And, on my mark, JUMP!”

Wren turned his sound down so Kim’s scream did not hurt as much as it would have otherwise.

“GOD! That Hurt! Was that a short jump?”

“Missile one away,” Tracker reported.

“That was a short jump. We have another coming.”

“Missile two away.”

“Do they always hurt that much?”

“Missile three away.”

“Usually.”

“Missile four away.”

“Do you ever get used to it?”

“Some do. Some don’t”

The cargo ship’s lasers detonated the first missile, but the second tracked neatly into the center of the cargo ship’s propulsion unit and detonated. The third blew open the truss that connected the propulsion system to the rest of the ship and the drive unit crumpled into the body of the ship. The

fourth missile penetrated the body of the ship and struck something volatile. The ship blew apart in a white ball of fury.

“Tracker, jump.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Kim did not scream this time although she wanted to. As soon as her displays cleared from the blackout of the jump she inventoried the other ships. At least eight of the 21’s were attacking her ship. “My ship! They’re attacking my ship!”

“Tracker, it’s clobbering time. Jump behind them.”

“Roger that.”

Kim did not scream after her third short jump. She was so angry that she was ready with her lasers the instant she could pick out targets. She had her first kill within seconds. Tracker had jumped them very close to the swarm pummeling her ship. Hearing from pilots that Saturn Industries ships could take a beating and survive was an entirely different experience from seeing missile after missile strike her ship and it stay intact. She trained her lasers on another ship and it ripped open like a can opener had torn through its side. It detonated in a spectacular display of colors.

“YEE\_Haw!”

Wren laughed as he launched a missile volley that would take out two of the enemy ships.

Kim split her lasers so they targeted two ships at the same time. Both blew up. She shifted her attention to one coming at them from behind and killed the pilot by poking her lasers through the view-port.

“Yup, Yup, Yup!” she bounced in her seat. “Who’s next. Step right up! Hurry, Hurray. Hurray.” A pair of ships maneuvered to get a better shot at her old ship. She sliced them open with her lasers and they detonated. She had to keep reminding herself that she was using forty-eight weapons grade lasers and that maybe she did not need as much power as she was expending. Half of the enemy ships were gone.

Tracker dodged a missile and Wren put one into the ship that fired it.

Kim split her lasers into four groups and targeted four ships in four different directions at the same time. Tracker’s targeting software kept right up with her which was more than she could say of the simulators. The enemy ships detonated within seconds of each other.

One pilot, apparently recognizing that he was as good as dead, rammed his ship into the drive unit on Kim’s ship causing it to detonate destroying the ship.

Wren made short work of the others with his missiles and within minutes of the start of the engagement, it was over.

“Um, Wren?”

“Yes, Tracker?”

“You should keep her. She’s a better shot than you.”

"I see that."

"Wren?"

"Yes?"

"And she's hunted you for two years."

"Yes?"

"And she found you in how many millions of cubic light years of space where you could have hidden?"

The display shell around the fire control position opened. Kim had removed her helmet. Wren noticed with dismay her wild eyed look. He had seen it before. He hadn't seen it on his mother, but all the women on his father's side of the family reportedly got that way from time to time. He had certainly seen that look on his grandmother enough to know what it meant. His grandfather actually looked forward to it. He called it "riding the tiger" with a wide grin. Something about the battles made the women in the family go crazy. Seeing it happen always made him uncomfortable.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"What do you want from me?" Wren demanded.

"And, she traveled half way across the inhabited galaxy to have sex with you. Are you going to deny her?"

"TRACKER! Stay out of this!"

"Aye, Captain."

"What do you want from me?"

"You."

"I have renounced my rights as heir to the Rothschild family fortune."

"I know that. That's not what I want. I want the part you can't renounce. You are Greg and Avi's great-grandson. You are his spirit come back to life."

"That's nonsense," Wren retorted. "I hope there wasn't much you needed on that ship."

"Oh! My ship! How am I going to pay for it? It was a rental."

"Someone rented you that pile of spare parts?"

"Yes."

"They should be shot."

"It was all we could afford."

“We?”

“My dad helped pay for it.”

“Your dad was not real fond of me.”

“After I washed out of the Academy, I think he was so ashamed he would do whatever I wanted to get me out of his sight and this was what I wanted.”

“What was on the ship?”

“All my clothes.”

“Those can be replaced.”

“My travel documents.”

“Replaceable.”

“All the money I had left.”

“I can take care of that when we get back to headquarters. Anything else?”

“Some pictures of my family.”

“That could be tough to replace.”

“So how long before we get back to headquarters?”

“We pick up the satellites after they finish their scans in three weeks. Then it’s two weeks drive time back to headquarters.”

“So I have five weeks to make you love me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Warren Elias, you are not a Rothschild as much as your mother would like to think you are. You are a Solomon. You are a member of one of the most prestigious warrior clans in modern history. You can’t renounce that. Even your cousins who are medical professionals recognize their military heritage. You can’t leave it behind.”

“So?”

“Some day, some day soon I fear, your family will need your help and I intend to be by your side to see that you and Tracker answer the call.”



## WREN - CHAPTER THREE

“WELCOME HOME, WREN.”

“Thanks, Charlie.”

“Off load your satellites at Dock 45 and the colony service people will debrief them. Once you are finished, go to Dock 82.”

“Roger that, 45 and then 82. Thanks Charlie.”

“Hey, Wren, we got your courier with the after action report, and we’ve noticed an unusual entry on your manifest. What’s this about an undocumented female?”

“Charlie, you know your father would shoot me for this kind of conversation on an open channel.”

“Well, he’s safely retired to some colony planet and can’t shoot either of us.”

“Charlie, I am not going to broadcast this to everyone on the station. We will discuss it later.”

“Wren, this is big news around here. Half the eligible women on the station have been trying to get me to tell them what is going on. If this is real, a bunch of them are going to be very disappointed.”

“That’s not my problem.”

“Look, Wren, my kids have been bugging me to be the first to invite you and her to dinner.”

Kim whispered, “How old are his kids?”

“Ten, twelve and fourteen, all girls,” Wren whispered back.

“I would be delighted to have dinner with them,” Kim said.

“She would be delighted to have dinner with them,” Wren said and then groaned realizing what he had just done.

Charlie’s disembodied laugh filled the flight deck. “Call me when you finish processing. Oh, by the way, Tabitha wants to see your undocumented companion as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” Wren said with his voice dripping in sarcasm.

“You’re welcome, Wren,” Charlie said with a chuckle.

Wren and Kim found Tabitha in the forensics lab buried deep within the intelligence service wing of the headquarters complex. Tabitha took off her lab coat and gave Kim a quick visual assessment. “Welcome to Stellar Interstellar Headquarters, Miss Stoll. Call me Tabitha. I prefer it to using last names since there are so many who could use the name Rothschild around here.”

“Pleasure to meet you, um, Tabitha.”

“You probably should reserve that judgment.” Tabitha turned to her assistant. “Jenni, could you take Miss Stoll to med? I need a complete incoming workup. You probably should stay with her until she’s done and bring her back here to me.”

“Miss Stoll, if you would please go with Jenni.”

As soon as they had left the room, Tabitha turned to Wren. “What are your intentions with the young lady?”

“Tracker thinks I should keep her because she’s a better shot than I am.”

“Is she?”

“Yes.”

“Good call from his point of view. What about yours?”

“I don’t know. I like her well enough, but she’s really the first woman I’ve cared about. Should I go with the first or what?”

“I can’t answer that, but I have done some research on her.”

“How could you do that? We only just got here.”

“When Captain McGee picked her up at Eretz he spent a long time talking to her. He carried her and her little ship on his cargo hauler in violation of a dozen policies. McGee is the only one who could have gotten away with that and brought her here. When he turned in his report I suspected she might find you so I made some inquiries. She used to babysit your cousins at Eretz. Gabby speaks highly of her. Apparently Gabby had a hand in sending Kim your way.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“If she passes the physical, she will be allowed to stay. If she had not passed my initial screening, you would have been instructed to drop her at immigration and to never see her again.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Yes, I can and I do all the time.”

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“Find somewhere to hang out until she finishes the physical and then take Charlie up on his invitation to dinner. Where are you staying?”

“I was going to go back to stay with Tracker.”

“The in-system interceptors are rotating through the maintenance bays for a software upgrade so it may be weeks before Tracker can be serviced to go out again. Why don’t you and Kim move into

your parent's quarters until either they or Elizabeth come home."

"I'll do that."

Kim walked slightly behind Jenni. "Jenni, why am I going to med?"

"Everyone being considered for permanent status on this station must undergo complete physical and psychological examinations."

"Aren't they going to do a background check first and ask me a bunch of questions about my family?"

"That's done. When Captain McGee reported that you were hunting Wren, we went ahead and checked you out. Kind of a precaution."

"I take it I passed."

"If you hadn't, you would be dead."

"You say that so calmly."

Jenni shrugged. "It's true. Ever since Wren's sister was killed, security around here has been extremely tight. People get sent out on freighters all the time and never return." Jenni stopped and turned to face Kim. "So, mystery woman, we're all dying to know, does he like women?"

"He likes me, I think. Yeah, he likes women. Why? Are you interested in him?"

"No, he's off limits. My father is his mother's half brother. We're cousins."

"Ah."

"Have you tagged him?"

"Tag him?"

"Yeah, had sex with him?"

"That is none of your business!"

Jenni laughed. "I will take that as a yes. Several times, by the fire in your eyes. Congratulations. Just hope you're not pregnant. The physical will take twice as long if you are."

"I wouldn't do that to him. He has enough going on in his head. He can't be trapped like that. He would resent it the rest of his life."

"Good, I'm glad you feel that way. Here we are."

The medical exam ended in time for Kim to join Wren, Charlie, Charlie's wife and three daughters for dinner. Jenni helped pick out a dress for Kim to wear. The girls absolutely doted on Kim. Long after dinner was over they were having deep and giggly "girl stuff" conversations to which Charlie and Wren were not invited. Charlie suggested that Wren turn in and he would see that Kim was

escorted home.

Kim quietly opened the door to find Wren reading, lounging on the sofa in the living room.

“You’re still up?”

“Yeah, did you have a good time?”

“Yes, I haven’t had so much fun in a long time.”

“I’m glad.”

“I didn’t mean to exclude you.”

“Come on, when the little one offered to braid your hair, nice job by the way, I knew it was time to go.”

“They were so cute and they stayed up way past their bed time.”

“I am glad you had a good time.”

“How was your evening?”

“Charlie and I are old friends. He likes you a lot.”

“He’s a nice guy.”

“He’s a lot like his father. His father used to growl at me all the time, but he let me get away with murder. Kim, please sit, we need to have a serious talk.”

“Yes?”

“Everyone who has met you likes you. I read McGee’s report today and both he and his wife like you. Everyone I talk to that has met you thinks you are perfect for me. Even Tracker has been bugging me to take you along on our next mission.”

“What do you think?”

“I like you too. I like being with you. I like the way I feel when I am around you.”

“But?”

“How can you deal with who I really am if I don’t know who I really am?”

Kim smiled, “I think we can figure that out together. If we don’t try we’ll never know.”

Wren smiled. “That sounds like something Avi would say.”

“She was totally devoted to your great-grandfather in her own way.”

“Yes, she was. In that regard, since it will be a few weeks before we can go out again, I took the liberty of scheduling time for us in the fitness center. You keep saying that I am a Solomon and one thing the Solomons insist on is intensive physical training with emphasis on the martial arts. My grandmother still uses Marines for sparring partners.”

“We need to buy me some work out clothes.”

Wren smiled. “They’re in your closet.”

Wren and Kim spent most of their days for the next two weeks in the fitness center. Their evenings were often devoted to dinners or social engagements with the Rothschild side of Wren’s family. Some more subtly than others, they tested her for possible inclusion in the family. None of them believed Wren’s assertions of renouncing his claims to the Rothschild family business. By the end of the two weeks, she had been accepted more or less warmly by all the people who could have made their lives difficult should they be inclined to do so.

The women that Kim had bested in the competition for Wren’s heart were less accepting of her presence and made their feelings known. When confronted by one of these women, Kim demonstrated her ability to win him again should the need arise.

Three weeks passed before Tracker was ready to go out again. Wren and Kim settled into a relaxed warm easy familiarity with each other. Kim was reading, lounging on the sofa in the living room when the front door burst open. Keeping the sofa between them, Kim stood to face a very angry Fiona.

“What are your intentions with my son?” Fiona shouted at her.

“That is none of your business,” Kim shot back instantly regretting having said it.

“How dare you!”

“You lost your rights to your son when you abandoned him to his grandmother.”

“I did not abandon him. His father did.”

“The difference is insignificant. You threw him away.”

“You have no right to speak to me like that.”

“I have every right.”

Hearing the commotion, Wren came bounding into the living room still wet from his shower wearing only flannel lounging pants. He interposed his body between the two women and with one hand on each chest pushed them apart. “Knock it off!”

“Unhand me!” Fiona shouted.

The flurry of hands, fists and flying feet that followed lasted mere seconds, but when it was over Wren had his mother pinned to the floor.

Saul walked through the still open door.

“Wren, let your mother up off the floor.”

“Only if she promises to behave.” His mother might only be a Solomon by marriage, but he knew the facial expression well enough to know what it meant. “Kim, pack your things. We are staying on Tracker tonight.” Kim silently scampered out of harm’s way while Wren kept his mother prisoner.

“Wren, I said let her up.”

“No, Dad. When Kim is safely out of here I will let her up.”

“Are you prepared to choose between your mother and this woman?”

“Dad, you abandoned me. I did not see you for years. You made my choice for me.”

With all her belongings stuffed in a couple of plastic bags, Kim raced out the door. Once he was sure she was clear, Wren stood. He looked at his father and said, “There is nothing here I need. We leave for a mission in the morning. When we return, I will see you if and only if you are prepared to be more civilized than you were tonight. Good Bye, Father.”

Wren slammed the door as he left.

Tears streamed down Kim’s face as she met Wren on Tracker’s flight deck. Wren hushed her with a single finger gently placed on her lips.

“Tracker, are we mission ready?”

“Yes, we are.”

“Kim, in your seat, please.”

“Aye, Captain.” She sniffled softly.

“Tracker, request immediate clearance for system departure. We will begin our mission now.”

“Wren, may I ask about the change of plans?”

“There will be plenty of time to discuss that later. I want to be clear the system before my parents can try to stop us.”

“Roger that.”

Tracker smoothly exited the system and jumped into hyper drive for the planet they would be visiting.

“Wren, I’m sorry,” Kim started to say.

“Kim, I know. Please, let’s not talk about this now. We have plenty of time. Get as much sleep as you can. Know this, we will live through it.”

“Thank you.”

The mission Wren had chosen from the available missions required an extended stay and time on the planet’s surface. Such missions were only awarded to teams and now that Kim was with him, he could take this one. By taking this mission, both of them were paid which Wren felt would help Kim’s concern that she was too dependent on him. Every time Kim tried to bring up the subject of her horrendous first meeting with Wren’s parents, he would quiet her either with a gentle finger or a kiss until she finally gave up. Clearly Wren did not want to talk about it, but did not see it as her fault.

The mission involved them descending to the planet's surface and taking core samples for analysis by the Colony Service. The planet was too cold for a full colony, but if sufficient quantities of rare minerals could be found, one of the mining companies could buy the rights and pay for the cost of the exploration. For six weeks they jumped from one place that looked promising in the satellite scans to another. In some places they set out listening devices and blew sounding charges to determine the rock structure under the surface. They had a lot of work to do in a short amount of time and so were very busy. Most of their conversations had to do with the mechanics of what they were doing and the unresolved sensitive issues did not come up.

The mission and the trip back were uneventful. Tracker called in for docking clearance and was directed to Dock 45. Charlie met them at the dock and requested permission to come aboard.

"Hey, Charlie, what's up?" Wren said when Charlie arrived.

"Elizabeth is in port and your parents are here. Is there anything you need from me?"

"Do they know we're back?"

"Have you ever known anything to escape their notice if they were interested in it?"

"No, I guess not."

Charlie turned to Kim, "I heard your meeting with his parents was not happy."

"You could say that," she replied softly.

"Well, Tabitha has pulled a protocol trick and you are to report to her first. I don't know what she has up sleeve, but I'll bet Faye Anne is involved."

"Who's Faye Anne?"

"Grandmother's intelligence officer, Tabitha's mentor and fiercely loyal to my grandmother."

"Is that good or bad for us?"

"I don't know."

"You need to go now. After unloading your satellites and data, you are to dock Tracker on one of Elizabeth's travel ports. I'll have one of Elizabeth's pilots ferry him over there."

"Thanks."

Charlie exited first followed by Kim. Wren stepped out and quickly stepped back in and said, "Tracker, hibernate."

"Hibernate, aye."

Tabitha was waiting in her office when Wren and Kim arrived. "Wren, please wait here, I need to talk to Kim alone for a minute."

Tabitha ushered Kim into an adjacent conference room. The woman waiting inside stood to greet them. "Hello Kim, I know you must feel that you have been examined in every way possible, but

you need to understand that we are all very protective of Wren in a way most of us aren't even of our own children. As you no doubt sensed when you began your quest to find him, he is a very special person. We all care for him very much. We have watched you every step of the way. Your meeting Captain McGee was not an accident. You have the Fourth Battle Wing to thank for that. They liked you as a baby sitter, and were comfortable with you. When you returned from the Academy and you expressed an interest in the Solomon family and your desire to find Wren, very little of what happened after that was random. It was a very involved test which you passed. Had we wanted to prevent you from finding Wren we could have done it, but we did not. For my part, I felt that if you were good enough to find him on your own with very little help from us, then you should be able to see if you could win him without our interference. I have a few questions before we send you on."

"Excuse me, who are you?" Kim asked.

"Please accept my apologies, I am Faye Anne."

"He has the utmost respect for you," Kim said.

"Thank you. I have often wondered. My first question, do you love him?"

"Yes, I do. Wren said that when you ask a question you usually know the answer before you ask it. Was that the answer you expected?"

"It was the answer I hoped for. I was not sure what to expect. You don't have to answer this second question. I will understand if you wish to keep the secret, but I will probably find out sooner or later. Is Tracker sentient?"

Kim gasped. Faye Anne inclined her head knowingly.

"He is, isn't he?" Faye Anne probed.

"Yes, he is, and he is a brilliant, sensitive, caring being," Kim added, Tabitha and Faye Anne grinned at each other.

"I told you he was," Tabitha said. "Wren figured out Peter's secret."

"Do you know the secret?" Faye Anne asked.

"No," Kim said.

"That's the answer I expected. Wren would have disappointed me if he had revealed it. Perhaps it is better his secret alone for now. Last question. Does he love you?"

"I think he wants to, but I think he needs permission. He needs someone specific to tell him he is allowed to love me."

"Who do you think this is?"

"Either his grandmother or Elizabeth."

"How much do you know about Elizabeth?"



“That she is sentient and he considers her more like his mother than either his mother or his grandmother.”

“That’s a surprise,” Faye Anne said. “I expected him to present you and him as a done deal. Asking for permission is not like him. Everything we can determine tells us he loves you very much and that makes us happy. There are two Marines outside who will escort you to see his grandmother. I wish to have a word with Wren.”

Kim exited and found two Marines waiting for her. One of them was an impossibly tall man and the other a woman. They quickly drew to attention and popped salutes.

“Federation Marine Major Terrance Rattigan and my wife Captain Madison Rattigan at your service, Miss Stoll.”

“Um, thank you.”

“We are to escort you to the Queen Elizabeth,” Madison said. “But first we have a question.”

“Everyone has a question,” Kim said, exasperated.

“Well, we have an ulterior motive,” Madison said with a grin. “When you do martial arts drills do you hold your own or does he wipe the floor with you.”

“I hold my own most of the time. He’s teaching me well. I’m improving,” Kim replied.

“We trained him and know his weaknesses. If you ever need to clobber him, call us. We’ll show you,” Madison said with a chuckle.

Kim laughed. “Thank you.”

The Marines took Kim to Rachel’s private conference room.

“Welcome, Kim, can I interest you in some coffee and cinnamon rolls?” Rachel said.

“Yes, that would be very nice, thank you.”

“Please sit,” Rachel said. “By now I guess if one more person asks you one more question you will explode. What would you like to ask me?”

“Ma’am, Wren has compared me to your mother and I am not sure I can live up to his image of her. What do I do?”

“Don’t try,” Rachel replied. “My mother was a paranoid schizophrenic with violent tendencies. She was not the wonderful person historical revisionists would make her out to be. Wendy and I lived in fear that one day she would turn on us and we would have no choice but to kill her to save our own lives. It’s a horrible thing, but in the end that is what happened in a way. Trying to be like her would be a mistake. Be who you are. That’s an excellent question.”

“Wren reminds me of what I read of Greg’s writings. How much is he really like Greg?”

“They are two very different people. The only similarities are their quick minds and their approaches to combat. Greg was much more complex and conflicted than Wren is. Wren is more confident and self-assured. They will both get to the same place, but Wren will enjoy it more.”

“You love him very much, don’t you?” Kim asked.

“We all do. Do you want to marry him?”

“If he will ask me.”

Rachel smiled. “He’ll ask before the night is over.”

“But what about his parents?”

“Saul is my son. I can take care of him and Fiona both. You take care of Wren.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, if we tease Wren a little, play along.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Follow me.”

Wren stopped by his grandfather’s office in Queen Elizabeth’s medical wing as instructed.

“Hello, Grandfather, Uncle Joshua.”

“Wren, we heard you picked up a stray,” Wren’s grandfather said.

“Now, Issac, he didn’t pick her up, she picked him up,” Joshua corrected.

“Well either way, we understand you’ve been seeing a lot of each other,” Issac joked.

“A lot of each other and fairly often,” Joshua teased.

“Will you knock it off,” Wren said. “I’m not sure this is funny.”

“Come on,” Joshua said. “You know more about our sex lives than anyone has a right to know and we want to know about yours. Is she a lady or a tiger?”

Wren sighed and shook his head. “A passionate, caring woman.”

“Who you love very much,” Issac said.

“Yes,” Wren said tentatively.

“But?” Joshua probed. “But what?”

“What if Grandmother does not like her.”

“Let me get this straight,” Issac said. “You don’t care what your parents think, which you demonstrated rather forcefully, but you care what your grandmother thinks?”

“Yes, and Elizabeth,” Wren admitted.

“Do you care what we think?” Joshua asked.

“I’m not worried about you guys,” Wren said with a smile. “You’ll love her right away. Just don’t tease her too much until she has a chance to get used to you and your senses of humor.”

The older men laughed and ushered Wren to the galley where the majority of the Queen Elizabeth’s crew who had been his friends and some cases his playmates as he grew up were gathered. The party was well under way when he arrived. Wren was immediately surrounded by his former companions who demanded to know the details of his travels. A half hour after Wren arrived, Kim arrived with Rachel.

Rachel stepped up to the small stage and took the microphone. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I’ll bet you wondered why I called you all here.”

A chorus of voices shouted, “Why did you call us all here?”

“My grandson, Wren, who some of you may have met once or twice has returned, and I decided it has been too long since we had a party and we needed an excuse, so he’s it. Welcome home, Wren.”

“Thank you, Grandmother.”

“But, what would you think of a man who kidnaps a woman and keeps her captive on his ship for, for, Faye Anne, how many months is it?”

“A year at least,” Faye Anne joked.

“No, it’s not that long, but whatever,” Rachel said. “He kidnaps this woman and then he goes gallivanting all over the galaxy with her and doesn’t even tell his sickly, tired, weak, old grandmother that he’s got her. What do you think of that?”

The people in the room, obviously in on the joke, chorused, “Shameful!”

“And he doesn’t tell his grandfather who loves him dearly that he has her.”

“Shameful!”

“And then, lo and behold, he discovers that she’s a better shot than he is.”

“Amazing!”

“And he still doesn’t tell his grandmother.”

“Shameful!”

“But he keeps her to himself all quiet and out of sight as if he is waiting for something. What could he be waiting for?”

Elizabeth’s lofty British accent filled the galley, “A voice from above telling him that he has the appropriate blessings, forms and requisitions filled out in triplicate as mandated by higher powers to

ask for the lady's hand. In fact, this particular higher power is seriously wondering what took him so long."

Wren looked at his grandfather who smiled and nodded. He looked to his grandmother who made a little sweeping motion with her hand as if pushing him in Kim's direction. Wren looked around the room at the smiling faces. He took Kim's hands in his. "Miss Kimberly Anne Stoll, formerly of the planet Eretz, will you marry me?"

"Mr. Warren Elias Mahoney Solomon Rothschild Cohen, citizen of the galaxy, I will marry you."

The applause was deafening.

"There is one little detail we need to attend to," Rachel said. "I think it would be inappropriate to hold the ceremony without at least attempting to get the bride's parents to be at the ceremony. If I were them, I would at least wish to be asked. It could take up to six months for them to get here from Eretz. I know that is a long time to ask the two of you to wait, but it would be the right thing to do."

Wren and Kim faced each other and said, "We'll wait."

## WREN - CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEXT MORNING, WREN logged in to the database of free-lance pilots and ships to post their availability. This was the database that the Colony Service had used to procure his services in the past. Within twelve hours of submitting his post, Wren, Kim and Tracker had been contracted to provide escort services for a freighter headed out to one of the nearby mining sites where increased pirate activity had been reported.

One of the reasons this location had been chosen for Stellar's headquarters had to do with the proximity of several mining sites which produced large amounts of bulk freight. Coupled with the scarcity of habitable planets in the vicinity, this was an ideal place for someone who valued their privacy. The station itself sat on the moon of a planet about the size of Earth with a breathable atmosphere that was in the throes of an ice age. Only a limited band around the equator was habitable. This made it unattractive to the Colony Service, but ideal for the Rothschild patriarchs, some of whose activities might not have passed Federation scrutiny.

The shipyard itself had two parts. The main hub was on the moon's surface where the majority of the activity took place. The second part orbited the moon and was where the freighters too big to land on the moon could be serviced and their loads transferred. After a full day of procuring supplies and hauling the food they would need for the trip, Kim, Wren and Tracker lifted off the moon to meet their freighter client. The freighter pilot was the son of the pilot that had carried Wren and his family to earth several years ago. He had accompanied Wren on that trip and they had been friends ever since. Seeing Wren's name on the roster of available pilots, he took advantage as quickly as he could.

The trip to the planet was uneventful. Wren and Kim spent the time running simulations on Tracker's systems, exercising in the special seats provided for that purpose, playing computer games and talking for long periods of time. They quickly learned to not include Tracker in any game of chance. He cheated with unrepentant lack of subtlety. He even cheated at the combat simulations. He would materialize an entire squadron of warships that did not exist at the beginning of the simulation. When challenged, he would laugh. They knew better than to oppose him at strategy games. He would move pieces when he thought no one was looking. Tracker's sense of humor and his frequent costume changes did make the time go faster. Wren often reflected that he laughed more on this trip than he had any time in his life. He was genuinely sorry when they arrived at their destination.

As predicted, there were pirates waiting for them when they dropped out of hyper drive. The three small pirate ships had clearly expected an unarmed, unescorted freighter and were surprised to find a P I warship prepared to engage them if they made the slightest wrong move. Rather than test their mettle against Tracker's superior firepower, they quietly fled.

"Well, that was no fun," Kim complained as the pirates departed.

"How about on the next encounter, you take the front seat," Wren offered.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, you're ready for it."

The two times a freighter was most likely to be assaulted by pirates were when it was arriving at a planet and shortly before it was ready to leave fully loaded. As the freighter sealed its hatches, Wren

and Kim waited partially hidden by the big ship's bulk.

"We have incoming," Tracker said calmly. "Are you ready Miss Kim?"

"It's show time!" Kim exclaimed.

Wren shook his head. She enjoyed this way too much.

They waited until the pirates were in missile range before revealing themselves. By this time the pirates had established targeting radar locks. Wren's strategy was based on the knowledge that the pirates were not interested in destroying the ship, but rather in capturing it for ransom and the black market sale of its cargo. That meant that they had to board it to take it since it could not be controlled any other way. Still, the freighter could be expected to have some defenses and these had to be neutralized before the ship could be taken. A single laser licked out of one of the pirates aimed at the freighter's sensor array. Tracker was still close enough to the big ship that all but most sophisticated targeting systems would have missed him. Where the pirate's opening shot had been a tentative probe for a target, Kim's response was a confident blast from all forty-eight of Tracker's lasers. The pirate ship vaporized within seconds.

"YEE-Haw!"

The second pirate was too close to his buddy to do anything but slam into the debris that was all that remained of the first ship. The shrapnel ripped through the light armor and the second ship exploded.

"Score!" Kim shouted.

"Doesn't count," both Tracker and Wren said at the same time.

"You don't get credit for his stupidity. Two down, two to go."

"But,"

"But, nothing!" Wren said. "Doesn't count."

The two remaining pirates turned to face what they recognized as their real enemy.

"Tracker, short jump behind them," Kim said.

"No, we have to stay between them and the freighter. Our job is to protect the freighter, not to kill pirates."

"But,"

"But, nothing."

Wren fired a fan of four missiles each programmed slightly differently from each other. Two were armor piercing heat seekers programmed for different temperature ranges. One was a range effect seeking radio frequency transmissions with high explosive and the last was a light sensor with grapeshot.

The first heat seeker missed its target as the pirate ship dodged at the last moment, but the range effect went straight in and eliminated the ship's sensor and control arrays. The ship was out of action,

but not completely dead. The second heat seeker found the cooling panels for the last ship and detonated inside the reactor compartment. The ship ripped apart in agonizingly slow motion as explosions rippled from one end of the ship to the other. Converging on the ship that had been disabled but not killed, the heat seeker that had missed it the first time, came back around and caught the propulsion system as the light seeker blew through the crew's view-port and exploded inside the cabin.

"That was messy," Kim observed. "You know I'm not sure I like watching out the view-port. Maybe I should stay inside the shell with the displays."

"Whichever you prefer," Wren said.

"I didn't know missiles could come around like that," Kim said.

"You have to be careful how you program them. You can shoot yourself down if you aren't paying attention." They moved back next to the freighter and inspected it for damage. Finding none, they traveled with the freighter until it jumped into hyper drive.

"Why aren't we going with him?" Kim asked.

"He doesn't need us anymore because when he drops out of hyper drive he will be near headquarters in well patrolled space and we're going to do some hunting. Any pirates still hanging around will think we left with him. Shall we see if we can't scare up some rats? There should be a nest around here somewhere. None of those ships had enough range to be here on their own."

"I'm moving to the back seat."

"Suit yourself. Tracker, can you query the satellites and determine where the pirates came from?"

"Stand by."

"Wren, one of the satellites is not Federation."

"Whose is it?"

"Swordsman."

"Swordsman? What would a Swordsman satellite be doing out here?"

"Excellent question. It knows we are here."

"Tracker, let's get a courier off with our report before we go any further."

"Aye, Captain." A minute later Tracker reported, "Courier away."

"Well, Kim are you ready to go satellite hunting?"

"Can we just go up to it and kill it? Aren't there rules or something?"

"Yeah, Swordsmen are not allowed to put satellites at Federation controlled planets and the Federation can't put satellites around Swordsman controlled planets. If you find it you can kill it."

“Is it likely to be able to defend itself?”

“Probably. We’ll approach it with care.”

“Wren, those weren’t pirates. They were Swordsmen. I intercepted a transmission. There’s another dozen of them around here.” Tracker sounded nervous.

“Well, if we don’t do something about them, they will attack the mining outpost and make it look like pirates. Kim, get ready. What we just did was fun, but this will be work.”

“I’m ready. I know what Swordsmen do to women they capture. I don’t want that to happen to those miners down there.”

“Tracker, we take out the satellite first and then deal with what attacks us. Kim, take the lead with the lasers. We have a finite number of missiles, but as long as the reactors are running we will have lasers. They won’t overheat. You keep hitting your targets until they blow.”

“Roger that.”

“Tracker, let’s go.”

The satellite was equipped with automatic lasers, but, by keeping Tracker’s heat shield facing the satellite, Kim was able to destroy the satellite with the force of her greater number of more powerful lasers. The Swordsman ships boiled up from their base on the moon like a bunch of hornets from a thumped hive. As soon as Wren figured enough of the small enemy ships were headed in his direction, he short jumped to a point directly over the base they had launched from.

Lasers and missiles immediately appeared headed in their direction. In a series of short jumps, Wren ran the missiles around in a circle until they ran out of fuel and started to fall back to the surface. The laser shore batteries shifted their attention away from Tracker and toward their own missiles that were now raining down around them. Wren jumped again, not waiting to witness the destruction he had caused without the expenditure of a single of his own missiles to confront the Swordsman ships that had turned around and were aggressively approaching with targeting radar flying around all over the place.

“These guys are a mess. Who trained them anyway?” Wren said half under his breath. “Kim, I am going to do a series of short jumps. Whatever is closest you shoot at it. If you don’t kill it, don’t worry, you’ll get another chance. There is a pattern to this, but I can’t explain it now. Just keep shooting as long as you have something to shoot at.”

“Roger that.”

“Wren, you know what you’re doing to my reactors. Short jumps are not good for them.”

“I know. We’ll get you new reactors before these wear out. I’ll make sure you always have shiny new reactors to play with.”

Kim’s chuckle was cut short as Wren made his first jump.

Kim’s previous battles had involved fewer enemy and at much better odds. These ships were



more powerful than the ones she had faced previously and therefore were much harder to kill. Still the compulsiveness of the engineers who had originally designed the P I ship showed itself once again.

Kim had read the history of the P I. She understood Greg Solomon's role in its development and the creation of the strategies for its use. In spite of the fact that his writings were many decades old and virtually all other weapons systems of that era were obsolete, the P I ship lived on even if its proper use was poorly understood. Kim knew from the way he handled the ship that Wren knew what to do with this unique piece of space hardware. Even as they pressed their attack, Kim felt that the safest place in the galaxy she could be was in the back seat behind Wren flying with Tracker.

The battle took eight hours before the last of the Swordsman ships went spinning into the atmosphere below. Even Tracker seemed exhausted.

"Tracker, am I correct that we have expended all the exterior mounted missiles?" Wren asked.

"Yes, Captain."

"Is there anything that would prevent us from descending to the surface?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

"To check on the miners."

"If you feel you must, at least there is a runway for me to land on."

"Kim, are you ready?"

"Aye, Captain!"

Kim's first entry into a planet's atmosphere in a P I ship was not as brutal as she expected it to be. One more time she was thankful for the compulsiveness of the original engineers that designed the tough little ship. They had assumed that some times the only place a ship could hide would be on a planet's surface and they had designed this weapon to be able to hide in a variety of hostile environments.

Tracker rolled to a stop in front of the main terminal building. The field appeared to have been abandoned. No security system had challenged them. No one rode out to either greet them or attack them.

"Tracker, point back down the runway in case we have to get out of here in a hurry."

"Roger that."

"Kim, put on your combat armor. We're going out. Tracker, what is the air composition?"

"Mostly nitrogen, some carbon dioxide, less than half the oxygen needed to support human life."

Kim put on her combat armor and fastened her helmet. She dug the laser rifles out of the locker. She also picked up a set of ballistic pistols. Somewhere there were women in this complex and if anyone had harmed them, she was going to see that they paid dearly for their crimes.

They entered the main terminal building through a set of unlocked air traps. They walked slowly forward through what looked like the typical immigration processing facility. They turned the

corner behind the desks and came face to face with a platoon of Federation Marines in combat armor. All but the leader had their weapons leveled at them.

“State your name, planet of origin and the purpose of your visit.”

“I am Warren Elias Cohen. I claim to no planet. I grew up on the colony ship Queen Elizabeth and at the Stellar Interstellar headquarters complex. We have met a group of Swordsmen ships in combat and have defeated them. We wished to ascertain the safety of the planet’s inhabitants. This is my fiancée.”

“The lady will speak for herself.”

“I am Kimberly Anne Stoll. I was born and raised at Eretz. We have defeated a small Swordsman fleet and I wished to verify that the women in the settlement had not been harmed.”

“The women have not been harmed. You may leave now.”

“I wish to see for myself.”

“Pushy ain’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Take off your helmet so we can see who you are. The air is safe.”

“Tracker, is the air safe in here?”

“Your suit sensors suggest it is safe if rather musty and stale smelling.”

Kim removed her helmet and let her hair flow down her back. Wren removed his helmet. They stood with their weapons pointed at the ceiling facing the Marines who had not relaxed at all.

Tracker was right. The air smelled foul as if too many people lived in too small a space, but it was breathable.

“Who do you work for?” The Marine asked.

“We are freelance pilots. We do odd jobs, like convoy escort. We escorted the cargo ship that just left,” Wren said.

“Are you sure you’re not Swordsmen?”

Wren looked the Marine in the eye as best he could through the helmet’s face shield. “I am Greg and Avi Solomon’s great-grandson. Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen is my grandmother. Saul Cohen of Stellar Interstellar is my father. How dare you accuse me of being a Swordsman after we killed a fleet of them over your heads!”

“I understand that your transponders match what you claim. You may follow me,” the Marine said.

The Marines surrounded them but did not take their weapons. They walked down many flights of stairs until they came to a shelter dug deep into the rock. Upon entering the shelter they found it

packed with starved looking women and children. The Marine lieutenant removed her helmet and revealed that she had been using a voice synthesizer to sound like a man.

“Most of our men have been killed trying to retrieve the containers the freighters dropped. We are starving, but we are afraid to go out.”

“Wren and I will fly patrol while you get the food you need from the containers. We have a warship. We will send a courier to Stellar headquarters informing them of your plight. We will stay until help arrives.”

Suddenly realizing she might have spoken out of turn, Kim turned to Wren, who smiled and nodded.

“We’ll go back to the ship and establish a patrol pattern so you can get the containers.”

“Thank you.”

Wren and Kim ascended the stairs. They put their helmets on and then stepped outside. Kim pulled Wren close so their helmets touched and their voices could pass by physical contact. “Something doesn’t add up,” Kim said.

“I know. Containers went up to that ship and containers came down. How did that happen if they are as afraid as they say they are of going outside?”

“Do you think the men are in those containers that went to the freighter?”

“Like a Trojan Horse?”

“Yes.”

“Can we contact the freighter?”

“No, but we can get a courier off that will get there before the freighter does. In the meantime we stay here and keep our guard up.”

The patrol proceeded without incident, the women came out of the shelter and collected the contents of the containers that had been dropped from the freighter. Kim, Wren and Tracker had been on station two weeks when a pair of Stellar convoy escorts hailed them. Unlike the P I ship, the convoy escort could not enter the atmosphere, but since it carried over ten times the ordinance of a P I that did not seem like much of an issue.

After formal protocols had been observed, the lead escort’s pilot said, “Hey, you two, nice work. We got both your couriers before the freighter arrived, but your first one aroused so much suspicion we boarded the freighter well outside the shipping lanes. The freighter’s pilot and crew had no idea there was anything wrong until we broke open the containers and found soldiers inside.”

“That’s good news. What about the planet?”

“Colony Service has a ship coming out to take over. They’ll straighten it out.”

“Wouldn’t be the Queen Elizabeth would it?”

“No, she’s out on a long run somewhere. It’s a smaller ship. You are relieved. We’ve got it from here. Well, done folks. Thanks! Hey, if we ever hit a station where alcohol is allowed, I’ll buy the first round.”

“Roger that!”

Wren, Kim and Tracker returned to headquarters and were there less than a day before being contracted to go out again. As Wren commented, “You don’t make any money sitting in port.”

They headed out. This mission, ostensibly identical to the previous one, met no resistance. In fact, one of the local news reporters insisted on being allowed to come on board to interview them. The interview focused on the challenges of living together in such a small space for such long times. After the mission they turned around and headed out again except that this time they were meeting a Colony Service delegation that was visiting them as part of an inspection tour.

The six months they promised they would wait to get married passed quickly. They had been out of touch for six long months and were looking forward to some time to relax.

## WREN - CHAPTER FIVE

WREN, KIM AND TRACKER DEPOSITED the ship they had escorted at the docks reserved for visiting dignitaries and requested a dock assignment.

“Hey, Kim, did you bring him back in one piece?”

“Yes, Charlie, he’s a little tattered around the edges, but he’ll live.”

“Please proceed to Dock 141.”

“Charlie, where is Dock 141?” Wren asked.

“Next to Dock 140.”

“Ha Ha.”

“At your one o’clock you should be able to see a Fiona class freighter unloading. Just past that on the left.”

“Roger that.”

“Fiona class? Is that in honor of your mother?”

“Yeah, she had a lot to do with getting them designed and built. Hey, Tracker, are they unloading what I think they are unloading?”

“It looks like a fleet of P I ships,” Tracker replied.

“That’s strange. Stellar doesn’t use P I ships except for us and a couple assigned to Elizabeth. Why would they be off loading them here?” Wren asked.

“What’s even stranger is that these ships have never been turned on. Not even flight tested. They’re from Saturn’s yard at Eretz, but they are not finished. It’s like they threw them on the freighter regardless whether they were done or not. None of them are even fueled. Look at the inspection markings. They haven’t been broken,” Tracker observed.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but I don’t think I like it,” Wren observed.

They pulled around past the freighter unloading the P I ships and as one they gasped. A brand new row of brightly lit docks arrayed before them. The first was 141. The highest number was 160. Sitting at 160 was an M class freighter outfitted as a tender. The docks in between that were occupied held new P I ships some of them still in the process of being secured to the dock since they could not move under their own power, yet.

“I have a real bad feeling about this,” Wren said.

“That makes three of us,” Kim said softly.

“Roger that,” Tracker agreed.

They secured to the dock and Tracker said, "Look ahead at your eleven. That's the Queen Elizabeth. She's hailing me to establish a secure comm link for a mission data download."

"Tracker, we don't know how she feels about you being sentient. Make sure you examine everything she sends you."

"She also is requesting that you and Kim report to her galley right away."

"Tracker, how is she communicating with you?"

"Modulated ultraviolet laser. She's using an unusual encrypting algorithm. She really does not want anyone to intercept the transmission."

Wren shook his head slowly. "Something huge is up. I guess we need to go. Tracker, once we leave, seal yourself tight. I don't even want a maintenance tech to touch you. Use force if necessary."

"Roger that."

Two familiar Marines met Wren and Kim as soon as they exited the ship. Wren looked at them and said, "Why am I not surprised?"

They were not smiling. "Please follow us."

They climbed into an electric maintenance cart and drove the short distance to Queen Elizabeth's dock. A sign over one of the docks they passed on the way indicated that it held Saul and Fiona's personal convoy escort ship. Wren silently pointed it out to Kim who nodded.

The Marines wordlessly escorted Wren and Kim to the galley. The galley had been set with a large table in the center of the room. Wren's uncle Timothy, chairman of the family council that ran Stellar Interstellar, sat at the head. The remainder of the half brothers and sisters that made up the council sat along the sides with Wren's parents seated next to each other on Timothy's right.

Timothy stood. "Welcome home, Wren and Kim. Please, be seated." He pointed to two empty chairs at the foot of the table. Wren looked around the packed room. The history of the people in this room would take volumes to tell. All the surviving members of the Solomon dynasty and the Abrams family that had supported them had gathered in one place for the first time. Many in the youngest generation had never met their older relatives.

Wren wanted to believe that they had gathered for the wedding, but somehow he knew better. The presence of an Eretz Defense System admiral standing next to Timothy was not his first clue, but it gnawed at him. "With all due respect, sir, I think we should stand." Wren noticed that Marines stayed by the doors. He wondered if it was to keep people out or him in.

"As you wish," Timothy said, apparently not surprised at the answer. "We have asked your grandfather to speak for us in view of the closeness of your relationship with him." Timothy sat down.

"Wren, your recent encounter with the Swordsmen accelerated a process that we have been working on for years. You have always figured to play a major role in our plans. Kim's arrival and your relationship with her has provided further evidence of the wisdom of our earlier decisions. Your parents

did not abandon you. You were taken from them over their objections. I did that. I knew that we would need a dynamic leader in your generation and you were chosen.”

“Grandfather, I do not like where I see this going,” Wren said.

“Which is one of the reasons we chose you.”

Wren growled deep in his throat louder than Kim could remember having heard it. For the first time it wasn't sexy. It was frightening. She reached for his hand. He calmed a little.

Isaac took a deep breath as he watched the reactions in front of him. “We need you to take command.”

“NO!”

“That is not an acceptable answer.”

The Marines moved to cover the doors. This reaction had not been unexpected.

Isaac paused and started again, “Wren, when you took off with Tracker after your eighteenth birthday, we had a good idea where you were going and what you were doing. We knew we could not stop you. However, we did not expect you to succeed. You have succeeded and we are proud of you. In fact, Tracker is listening now. He is as much a part of this as you are and has as much a right to know as you do.”

“Hey, Tracker, can you help me out here? How about dropping in an avatar?” Within seconds, Tracker's Buffalo Bill avatar appeared next to Kim and he put his arm around her.

“Hands off my lady,” Wren growled.

Tracker withdrew his arm.

“Now, Elizabeth, I want an avatar from you as well.” A woman of regal bearing holding a scepter that matched her jewel encrusted crown wearing a long flowing gown appeared at Isaac's side. “Feel better, Wren?”

“Yes, I do, but the answer is still ‘No’. Look, Kim and I have just spent what has been the most wonderful six months of my life. I love her and she loves me. I want to spend the rest of my life with her and I don't want to do it in command of a thrown together collection of surplus military hardware. I want to get married and have a family. I do not want to be at war.”

Rachel put out her hand to stop her husband's next comment. “Wren, I know this is a shock. We want you to get married tomorrow and to have a peaceful honeymoon on the surface of the planet below us with the privacy you deserve. What you said about surplus hardware is wrong. You saw the P I ships being delivered adjacent to where you are docked. Those are your ships. The freighter at the end of the row is your flagship. These are your flight crews.”

She waved her hand to one side of the room and thirty two young men and women stood. As Wren scanned them he recognized several of his cousins and second cousins among the flight crews.

“Your maintenance and support crews.” She waved her hand and another two dozen young men

and women stood. More relatives and members of the Abrams family were sprinkled among them.

“Admin, medical and tactical support.” Over a hundred young men and women were now standing looking at him.

Wren shuddered. “I hate to let you down, but I can’t do this. I have been in combat a handful of times and I have only had myself to worry about. I do not know how to command a fleet.”

Rachel stared him down. “How many times have you sat beside me as we took Elizabeth and our forces into combat?”

“Maybe a hundred,” Wren said.

“Did you learn from those encounters?” Rachel asked.

“Yes, of course. I find it hard to believe that anyone would follow me anywhere,” Wren stated.

One young man stepped forward out of the crowd. “Sir, I am Tobias Running-Water. I have seen what happens when the Swordsmen overrun a planet. I do not wish to see that happen again. I came to Eretz because I knew someone there would know how to direct me to someone like you. I only know that when one of the Federation’s most successful Swordsman fighters tells me that you are the one to follow, that’s all I need. My wife, Sunshine, and I will do everything we can to stop the Swordsmen.”

Wren closed his eyes. The growl in his throat had not abated. “I must remind you, good sir, that the goal is not to die for one’s country. The goal is to help some other poor fool die for his.”

Tobias smiled. “Roger that.”

“Grandmother, isn’t this their job?” He pointed at his parents.

“Yes, and their assets will be deployed elsewhere.”

“What about the Federation Space Force?”

“Fully engaged elsewhere for what little value they are. Bunch of incompetent bureaucratic politicians more interested in their wardrobes than winning battles.”

“So, I am on my own,” Wren observed.

“Yes,” Rachel affirmed.

“I suppose someone is going to remind me that I am Greg and Avi’s great-grandson, but I need to remind you that one of my other great grandfathers was a pirate. What does that make me?”

“The right person for the job,” Timothy said.

“Under whose authority would I be operating?” Wren asked.

“You would be acting as an independent contractor being paid by a powerful consortium who is also paying Saturn Industries, Eretz Defense Systems and Stellar to support you.”



“So we’re all civilians and if captured or killed the secretariat will deny all knowledge of our activities?” Wren said with a smirk.

“Something like that,” Timothy said.

“NO! How many time do I have to tell you people the answer is NO!” Wren shouted.

“Until you quit saying it,” Rachel said quietly.

Kim took Wren’s hand. “Wren, I love you. You need to listen to these people. When I watched you work in my father’s shop, I knew you were something special, but even I had no idea how special until that first battle we fought together. You have a gift. Whether you got it from Greg and Avi, your grandmother’s knee or from your anger with your parents, does not matter. You have it. When I came looking for you, I knew that someday you would be called and that you would refuse the call. Someone you cared about would need to be there to convince you to do what needed to be done. I did not expect to be called so soon. This is not the call I expected, but it is here and it is now. You must answer the call. Too many lives depend on your skills. Please, we are in this together. We will answer the call together.”

The growl in Wren’s throat grew, held and then tapered off. “I love you and will do as you say.”

They stared into each other’s eyes for a moment.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, for my first command of my new unit, I know that most of you have better things to do than to watch me be embarrassed by my grandparents. Therefore, please return to your duty stations and continue the job of making the ships ready for combat. All ships need to be fully loaded with missiles and provisions for a two month deployment. As soon as the station’s engineers certify the ships safe for travel we will leave for an extended training exercise. As you will be spending a lot of time in these ships, you should give some thought to personalizing them to make them your own. Are there any questions?”

Wren looked around the room and out of the corner of his eye caught his grandmother’s grin. “Ladies and Gentlemen, that is all. You are dismissed. Uncle Timothy, could I ask that you and the engineering team stay?”

“Certainly.”

“Mom, Dad, please stay.”

Saul silently sat back down.

“Mom, Dad, I understand I owe you an apology.”

“Apology accepted, son.”

“And I believe I owe Kim one,” Fiona said.

“Apology accepted,” Kim said softly.

“Admiral, are you here to be part of the mission briefing?”

“No, I am here to get your signature on the manifest delivering sixteen Pirate Interdiction warships and then I am on the next flight out. If I may venture an opinion, I have read your action reports. I had no idea who you were until I was chosen to escort these vessels to you. I agree that we need leaders like yourself. Unlike the others in this room, I believe there are more like you and now that I know what to look for, I will find them. I will see that they are properly trained and equipped. They will be your allies and your comrades in arms. Good hunting, sir.”

The admiral collected his signatures and left.

Wren and Kim sat at the foot of the table. “Tell me about the ships. Let’s start with the freighter. I am not familiar with this type.”

Rachel and her sister Wendy shot a quick glance at each other. This was the Wren they knew growing up on the ship.

When the engineers had finished explaining the features of the cargo ship, Wren said, “If you have read my action reports, you know that one of my favorite tactics is to go after the mother ship before the fighters instead of the other way around as is general practice. I will do an end run or jump behind them or some sort of flanking movement to get at their base. This ship has no defenses of its own. If an enemy were to employ the same tactics I use, it would be defenseless against them. This ship needs laser batteries if nothing else. Missiles would be appropriate. Sensor arrays are vital. I don’t care if they are operated by a person in an EVA suit shooting through an open bay door. This ship must be able to defend itself in the event that its warships are drawn away which is the first thing I will do when I approach an enemy.”

Timothy smiled. “Wren, we will make it happen.”

The P I ships had all the latest software although, as Tracker had guessed, none had been powered beyond testing the individual parts on the bench as part of the installation procedures. None had been fueled and none were flight tested.

Wren’s aunt Barbara, one of the members of the family council, said, “Wren, we know how to get the P I ships ready for combat. We don’t need you for that. Your wedding is scheduled for less than twenty-four hours from now and you both need clothes for the ceremony. You should go shopping. Yes, there is a bridal shop on the station. It’s small, but it’s enough. Take a week on the planet’s surface for a honeymoon. When you come back, we will be ready for you. Kim, my daughter Beatrice has offered to help you pick out your dress.”

“Thank you.”

“What about training?” Wren asked still focused on his ships.

“I think we can handle that.” Wren’s other grandmother, Sabrina, stepped out of the shadows with her friend and former captain, Alina Darwin.

“I didn’t even know you were here.” Wren wrapped his arms around her.

“Miss your wedding? I don’t think so!”

Alina rested her hand on Wren’s shoulder. “We know as much about those helmet interfaces as

the people that designed them. Our convoy leaves before you get back, but we'll do what we can in the meantime. Anything in particular you want covered?"

"Well, the interfaces of course, but could you work through the basics, you know, the physics, things like persistence of motion as it relates to spacecraft in combat, that sort of thing."

"All the boring stuff," Alina quipped.

"I'm sure you'll make it interesting."

"Go find some clothes for the wedding."

## WREN - CHAPTER SIX

THE CEREMONY WAS HELD in the station's multi-faith chapel which was filled to capacity. In the Solomon tradition, the ceremony was a dignified and simple affair. As Greg and Avi had said about their wedding, all that mattered was at the end they be declared husband and wife in front of at least two witnesses. The station's rabbi conducted a traditional service. Kim's father walked her down the aisle. Charlie's youngest daughter was the maid of honor, a job she took very seriously. Charlie was best man. Wren's rented tux almost fit him. Kim's dress was perhaps a bit more opulent than they would have chosen if there had been a better selection, but since they were renting it, they made do with what was available.

Kim and her little maid of honor had matching frilly white dresses with bodices covered in imitation pearls. The dresses had been intended to reach all the way to the floor but neither did. As it was, the tip of their shoes could be seen as they walked down the aisle. Somehow, none of that mattered. Charlie's wife and daughters fussed over Kim all morning getting her hair done and her makeup just right. What had come to them in a flight suit a few hours before was turned into a vision of loveliness by the time for the wedding.

There was a small reception in the adjacent social hall, but the real party was on Queen Elizabeth's hangar deck. In the Solomon tradition, the party was loud and raucous with different types of music in different areas provided from Elizabeth's vast media libraries. As usual, the party involved lots of singing and dancing, not all of it graceful, but all of it energetic. Three hours into the party, which showed no signs of slowing down, Wren's cousins and their team who made up the famous Fourth Battle Wing, staged an outlandishly costumed Caribbean style pirate attack and mock kidnapping. They "kidnapped" Wren and Kim, packed them into a shuttle and took them to the resort on the planet's surface and abandoned them in what had been Wren's grandfather's private suite.

In spite of the coldness of the water, Wren taught Kim to surf even though he was not particularly good at it. They had a great time playing in the water and taking advantage of the luxuries the resort offered. By the time they needed to come back, they were ready.

## WREN - CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FIRST CHALLENGE WREN ran into with his new command was that the freighter that had been appropriated for his tender had no space other than the cargo hold big enough to meet with his flight crews let alone the entire staff including the tender's personnel. The troop transport modules that had been placed in the hold provided adequate if not commodious living spaces, but the work spaces left much to be desired. Even then, once the munitions and provisions for a long voyage were loaded, this huge ship was too small.

Wren wrestled with this issue for a while before deciding to store as much of the food as he could in the P I ships' food lockers. This made them a little heavier and a tiny bit less maneuverable in combat, but if a crew became separated from the tender, they could get home without starving. The space thus freed could be used for a meeting room module. He tossed the concept at the engineers to develop a meeting room module that could be slid into the cargo bay and connected to the rest to the ship in a way that maintained pressurization throughout as was the case with the troop transport modules.

Wren was pleased to find that the Queen Elizabeth would be staying in port for at least another two weeks, so he moved his flight crews and their training over there. He drafted his great-aunt Wendy and her pilots to assist training his flight crews. He chose the simulations and exercises the pilots needed to run. Wendy and her crews did the evaluations and worked through the learning process. The Queen Elizabeth's four P I ships were pressed into service to give Wren's pilots badly needed flight time.

At the end of the second week, all of Wren's ships were operating on "shore" power. None of the reactors had been started. Tracker was in communication with all the ships and monitored their progress as their electronic systems were started and tested. He was confident that all ships would be fully operational and ready for reactor start by the end of the third week.

Rachel called Wren into her office. After he had briefed her on his progress she said, "Wren, you need to let the Genie out of the bottle."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sentience. You need to make your P I ships sentient. Can you do it without letting anyone know you've done it?"

"Kind of hard to hide it from the pilots."

"Other than your own personnel," Rachel said.

"Why?"

"Faye Anne is scared."

"I don't understand," Wren said.

"Things are too quiet. Faye Anne said that Swordsman military chatter has dropped to nothing. She says that the intelligence people can't find huge numbers of their ships."

“What does that mean?”

“Something big is about to happen,” Rachel said.

“Do we know what?”

“No, and we don’t know where, but knowing the Swordsmen, it is likely to be ugly.”

“What is the Federation saying?”

“They are on the verge of signing a non-aggression pact. They have pulled their ships away from the frontier. They talk fondly of piece.”

“Grandmother, do you realize how dangerous what you are asking me to do is?”

“Yes, and I think we really have no other choice.”

Wren sat back in the chair deep in thought. “Do you mind if I ask Elizabeth her opinion?”

“Go right ahead, she’s been listening.”

“Hello, Elizabeth.”

“Greetings, Wren.”

“So, what is your opinion?”

“I have given the matter considerable thought. I do not like the idea, but I do not believe we have a choice. Your ships must be sentient. We have been working through scenario analysis with our pilots and yours. They are progressing nicely, by the way. You have a good group. The time will come when you will need to send pairs of ships off by themselves for missions too involved to be successful without a sentient ship. Wren, as much as it frightens me to say this, make the P I ships sentient. I don’t think you need to make the tender sentient, but I will defer to your judgment on that.”

“Have you discussed this with Tracker?”

“Yes.”

“Can you link him in and bring him up to speed on our conversation?”

“Hello, Wren.”

“Hey, Tracker, what do you think.”

“I have run the scenarios Elizabeth ran as well as some I pulled from Greg’s games with sentient and non-sentient P I ships. The risks are significant, but if we balance the uncertainty of chaos against the certainty of defeat, we have little choice but to do what Rachel suggests.”

“Do you not think this could turn out to be a colossal mistake?” Wren asked.

“That is a distinct possibility, however, most of the likely scenarios come up with the certainty of death.”

Wren sat in silence. "Tracker, I intend to keep the method by which we do this secret. I will be there with you soon. We will begin when I get there."

"Roger that."

Wren turned to his grandmother. "I hope we do not later regret this decision."

"I agree."

Wren settled into Tracker's pilot seat. "So, my friend, how do we do what we have agreed to do."

"When I examined the scenarios, I did not expect you to agree with my conclusions. Your refusal to accept command of this unit in the face of what seemed to me to be an obvious answer surprised me. I expected that your independent mindedness would get in the way of seeing clearly what need to be done. Therefore, I did not examine the feasibility of doing what we discussed."

"Are you telling me we can't do it?"

"No, I am telling you we can't do it here without significant repercussions."

"Such as?"

"Overloading and shutting down the station's entire data buss while we do it."

"I could see that being an issue."

"Other methods are either so slow or so insecure as to be worthless."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Once we are all docked on the tender we can run hard data lines that will handle the load. It's a whole lot of data."

"Is a whole lot more than just a lot?"

"Yes, Wren."

"Well, we have to hope we don't need it before we get a chance to do it."

"I agree."

"I'll inform the powers that be."

By the end of the next week all the reactors had been started. The P I ships were certified as being ready for sub-light operation, but not yet approved for hyper drive. The meeting module had been delivered and installed. Wren gathered his entire staff all in one place for the first time.

"Ladies and Gentlemen we have come a long way in the few weeks we have been together. The amount of work that we have accomplished in the time we have accomplished it is unprecedented in the experience of any of the people familiar with the project. We have much to be proud of and yet we have much more to do."

A klaxon split the air. Wren jolted as if he had been hit with a power wire. He growled and swore at the same time.

“Battle Stations! Battle Stations! All personnel to Battle Stations! This is not a drill! This is not a drill! Implement Battle Plan Alpha. Implement Battle Plan Alpha.”

“All flight crews to your ships!” Wren shouted over the din. He turned to the freighter’s captain. “Get this ship away from the dock as fast as you can or you will die here. Arm everyone you can with anything you can get your hands on. I don’t care if it’s a ballistic pistol. Put it where it might get a shot at an enemy. Remember the Arizona!”

“Aye, Aye, Sir!”

Wren shouted into his comm, “Tracker! Get all the ships started pre-flight. We are engaging the enemy!”

“Roger that!”

“Give me status reports on all ships on my primary displays,” Wren shouted.

Wren saw Kim running ahead of him and sprinted for Tracker’s docking bay. Kim was in her seat with her helmet on when Wren arrived. She flashed a quick thumbs up as she ran through her checklist.

Suddenly Wren realized they had not named the group. He had no way to address them all as one. His mind flashed on Tobias Running-Water and he knew the name. “Ladies and Gentlemen! We are Hawk Squadron. Hawk Squadron, hear this, report as soon as you are ready to move out. When we are all ready to go we will exit through the primary travel lane at maximum safe speed until we are clear the shipyard. Further instructions to follow on encrypted channel 21.”

Wren heard the display shell close behind him. “Kim, can you sync with the defense net? What are we looking at?”

“We have bogeys in sectors 10, 12, 22, 104, 110, 190 and 208. Which do you want?”

“Which is closest?”

“Sector 10.”

“Alert control that we are going after whatever is in sector 10.”

“Roger that.”

“Tracker, ETA on the bogeys in sector 10.”

“One hour to missile range.”

The last of the sixteen icons on Wren’s display flashed green. “Hawk squadron, in numeric order, follow me in single file. Maintain safe distance between yourselves. Tracker, let’s move out.”



“Roger that.”

“Wren?”

“Kim?”

“Are you scared?”

“Out of my mind.”

“That makes me feel better. I didn’t want to be the only one.”

“If you weren’t, you would be the only one.”

“Wren, today is December 7.”

“Remember Pearl Harbor.”

The ships pulled into the main travel lane. Wren could tell by the traffic on the unsecured channels that Charlie had his hands full. There was no telling what was going on over the secured channels. “Hawk Squadron is deploying to engage the enemy.”

“Roger that, Hawk Squadron.” Charlie sounded rattled for the first time Wren could remember.

The P I ships slid out from between the docked freighters that were desperately trying to get under way.

Tracker flashed an icon on Wren’s display. Elizabeth was under way. Wren wondered how many of her crew she had left behind.

A few minutes later, Tracker flashed another icon. Wren’s parents’ personal convoy escort ship was moving into the traffic lane. Freighters were beginning to flee the yard.

When Wren’s group had cleared the dock area, but were still within the bounds of the shipyard, Wren called, “Hawk Squadron, form up on finger fours. Hawk one, you are red leader. Hawk five, you are blue leader. Hawk Nine, you are white leader. Hawk thirteen, you are green leader. Form up!” His most experienced pilots were now flight leaders.

Wren could see on his display that four finger four formations were lined up behind him. They cleared the boundary of the shipyard. “Hawk Squadron, form your fours into a four. Red leader, center on me so that I am below you forty five degrees. Blue flight move left of Red. White flight move right of red. Green flight move right of white.” When the formation was stable, Wren called, “Hawk Squadron stay with me. Accelerate to four G on my mark, 3, 2, 1, Mark!” With four G of acceleration left uncompensated for by the inertial compensators, the human component of Hawk Squadron was crushed against their seats. Without the support of their flight suits, they would most likely have blacked out.

“Tracker, put the incoming on my display. What do you think they are?”

“They are a Swordsman design. Intelligence has very little information on them except that they are relatively short range. We do not know what their weapons are.”

“We can assume they have lasers of some kind and missiles. What is our ETA to missile range?”

“Ten minutes. We have enemy targeting radar lock,” Tracker reported.

“Surprise, surprise, surprise.”

“It looks like about fifty of them.”

“At least that many. When they are this close together, it’s hard to tell.”

“Well, four to one odds, we’ve been there before. We’ll deal. Where is the tender?” Wren asked.

“Stand by,” Tracker reported.

Wren drummed his fingers impatiently as Tracker searched the sky for a telltale heat signature.

“Found it!” Tracker rattled off a set of coordinates.

Wren took a deep breath. “Kim, we’re going after that bad boy all by ourselves. Please load four heat seekers in the aft tubes. You have missiles and lasers. I’m going to see if I can get us in there and out again without getting us killed.”

“I have faith in you,” Kim said.

“Too late if you don’t!” Wren laughed. “Hawk Squadron, formation change! Green flight move directly beneath red flight equidistant below me as red is above. Blue and white flights roll 90 degrees so your heat shields are facing out. Red flight roll 180. Extend your weapons pods.”

Once the formation had stabilized, Wren called, “Load proximity detonators in aft tubes.”

“Wren,” Kim asked. “Didn’t your grandmother use this formation in the Saturn shipyard battle? Did it work?”

“Yes, she did and it did work, but she was in destroyers without heat shields,” Wren replied.

“Didn’t she lose a bunch of her ships in that battle?” Kim asked.

“The problem was she lost faith in her own judgment and changed what she was doing.”

“Ah, I see. What are we doing?”

“Punching a hole.”

“Ho-kay.”

“We have missiles incoming,” Tracker said.

“Hawk Squadron, call your targets. We don’t want any getting through because everyone thought someone else was getting it. Lasers engage at will!”

Seventeen unmarked P I ships, each carrying forty-eight lasers engaged fifty missiles and destroyed them. They turned their attention to the ships that fired them.

“YEE-Haw!”

Kim had drawn first blood. Wren smiled. That was his girl! A second enemy ship fell to the coordinated barrage of lasers. A third fell and then a fourth. Lasers licked back, but were ineffective against the P I ships’ heat shields. For totally green pilots, they were holding their own.

“Hawk Squadron, from your external racks, on my mark, fire one proximity sensing missile.”

Wren watched the dozen or so enemy that were directly in his squadron’s path. “Here chicken, chicken, chicken.”

“Hawk Squadron, 3, 2, 1, Mark!”

Seventeen missiles bored straight ahead destroying those enemy ships that had not dodged out of the way. Lasers raked the Swordsman ships as Hawk Squadron blasted through the center of their formation. One Swordsman pilot drew a bead on the last ship in Hawk Squadron to pass through the formation. In spite of the efforts of the others in green flight, the Swordsman rammed Tobias and Sunshine Running-Water’s ship destroying both.

“Stand-by to fire aft tubes.”

Hawk Squadron had punched through the center of the Swordsman formation. As soon as Wren felt he was clear enough to not get shot down by his own missiles, he called, “Fire aft tubes!” All the remaining ships except Tracker fired their aft tubes at the enemy ships which were turning to engage now that Hawk Squadron was between them and their tender. Executing a tight turn was probably the least intelligent thing the Swordsman could have done at that point. The broad sides of their ships while they were in the turn gave the radar on the proximity seeking missiles easier targets. Even after the Swordsman had turned to pursue, the missiles had their target locks and decimated the Swordsmen force.

The Swordsman strategy had apparently been based on the Federation standard practice of engaging the initial line of fighters in a more “gentlemanly” form of combat than what Wren was doing by going straight for the tender. A Federation force would capture the tender’s crew for interrogation and ransom once the defenders had been vanquished. Wren had no intentions of dealing with prisoners.

Wren’s displays showed that they had destroyed half of the enemy ships in his vicinity.

“Hawk Squadron, divide into flights. Choose targets of convenience. Talk to each other, we’re going on ahead from here. Happy hunting!” Wren punched in the coordinates Tracker had given him for the tender and initiated the short jump. As soon as Kim had a target lock on the tender’s propulsion units, she fired the aft tubes. Wren spun Tracker around so that even though inertia carried them backwards, they could bring the front missiles to bear. Kim fired eight heat seekers from the front tubes while maintaining laser coverage of the small picket ships in their vicinity.

Wren spun Tracker around again and programmed another short hyper jump. They waited just long enough to see the beginning of the end for the tender. Wren, Kim and Tracker rejoined Hawk Squadron and assisted in eliminating the few enemy fighters that remained.

When Wren regrouped the squadron, he noticed that another ship was missing. In his first mission as commander he had lost four people and two ships, but the number of enemy ships destroyed far outweighed his losses as painful as they might be. Wren realized that his dash though to the tender

had placed him well behind enemy lines. It seemed to him that the most logical course of action was to destroy their support and supply.

“Tracker, have we cleared this sector?”

“I can detect no heat signatures that match known vessels in the immediate vicinity.”

“What is our next nearest enemy vessel?”

Tracker displayed the statistics on another relatively unprotected tender.

“Tracker, relay this information to all Hawks. This is our next target.”

“Roger that.”

“Hawk Squadron, form up as a cylinder with shields out as we did before.” When the formation was established, Wren called a four G acceleration and the squadron raced toward its next victim.

“Tracker, ETA to the next target?” Wren asked.

“One hour.”

“White leader, what happened to Lindsey and Twyla?”

“Caught in a cross fire. Too many missiles, we tried.”

“I am sure you did your best. I don’t care what the engineers say, there is only so much abuse these things can take. I think this formation works well for us. From now on this is formation Alpha. The flat finger four we made when we exited the ship yard is now formation Beta. We will employ the same strategy we used last time. The formation will go straight in. Tracker, Kim and I will jump behind for the kill and then we move on until there is nothing left to shoot at. Theoretically, since we are coming at them from their flank, we should not see as much resistance as we did on the last tender. Everyone take a moment to inventory your missiles and evaluate your damage.”

“Hey, Wren,” Kim broke into his thoughts. “Can we make a ring with the lasers that are inside the formation so they form a cylinder? That many lasers pointed both forward and back would incinerate anything in their path and since they are invisible, the enemy would not know they were there until they ran into one. We really can’t do much else with them or we will hit each other.”

“Hawk Squadron, what Kim just described will be called ‘Kim’s ring’. I think it’s a great idea. Be careful when you set it up that you don’t shoot us.”

“Kim’s ring” demonstrated its power as they approached the tender. Picket ships scrambled to challenge them and were torn apart by the invisible ring of lasers as the formation advanced relentlessly toward the minimally armed cargo ship. “Kim’s ring” quickly became an “All ring” alignment. The lasers from all the ships raked the length of the freighter and ripped it open. Wren finished the tender off with a four missile volley from Tracker’s aft tubes as they sped toward the next target.

A dozen tenders and troop transports later, Hawk Squadron found itself out of easy targets. Tracker had expended all his missiles, but most of the other ships still had workable inventories. Wren led the squadron back in toward the ship yard.

"Tracker, is there anything going on that we could assist?"

"There is a battleship heavily engaged in sector 208. We appear to have lost a large number of our ships against it."

"Let's go. ETA?"

"Two hours."

"A lot can happen in two hours. I wish these ships were hyper ready. We'll get there when we get there. Hawk Squadron, one more time." As they raced toward the battleship, Wren had a thought.

"Tracker, where is Elizabeth?"

"Stand-by."

"Elizabeth is at your two o'clock high headed for the battleship."

"What's her status?"

"Do you want to talk to her? She's hailing you by ultraviolet laser."

"Hello, Wren."

"Hi, Grandmother."

"It's 'Rachel' to you, boy."

"So, Rachel, what's your status?"

"We've lost all our support ships. We are fighting with what we have on board. How about you?"

"We lost two ships and crews. I am out of missiles, but most of my group still has enough for another engagement, maybe two. We thought we would join the assault on that battleship."

"Your parents are in there now with their convoy escort. They've been hitting it pretty hard, but every time they try to go for the pipes, it dodges. Can we coordinate our attack to keep the battleship distracted long enough to let your parents get behind it?"

"Roger that. Hawk Squadron, as soon as we are close enough to the Queen Elizabeth to do it, we will form Alpha formation around the Queen. Make sure flight leaders are far enough behind the battleship head portion that you do not get in the way of her lasers," Wren ordered.

"When did you become Hawk Squadron?" Rachel asked.

"When we pulled away from the dock."

"Hey, Kim, how are you doing?"

"I put a few notches in my gun belt," Kim replied.

Rachel laughed. "We all did."

The tactic worked. The "all ring" centered around Elizabeth drew the enemy battleship's attention long enough that Saul and Fiona could get their convoy escort behind the battleship and put a volley of missiles into its vulnerable propulsion system. When the explosion cleared enough to evaluate the results, Saul and Fiona's convoy escort was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm sure they hypered out before the blast," Kim said softly.

"Perhaps. No way to know unless they turn up," Wren said.

"I have no evidence of any ships in our vicinity except for Hawk Squadron and Elizabeth," Tracker observed.

"Hawk Squadron, let's go home," Wren ordered.

## WREN - CHAPTER EIGHT

HAWK SQUADRON'S TENDER had escaped unscathed. While the battle raged around them, nothing had approached within missile range of them and they had not even used their lasers. The dock area, however, was a different story. What had been a row of gleaming new docks was a mass of twisted metal fragments. A volley of Swordsman missiles had caught a freighter attempting to leave the yard. The resulting explosion had shredded a large portion of the yard's infrastructure.

Hawk Squadron slowly passed the destruction in silence. Wren called a set of coordinates and told Hawk Squadron to meet the tender there. The individual P I ships docked to the tender.

Wren gathered his staff in the meeting room. "Ladies and Gentlemen, you performed incredibly well in the recent engagement. I have reviewed your reports and I am impressed. I have seen veterans not do as well as you did. We still have much work to do before I consider us fully operational, but I am confident in our ability to meet the challenges ahead. In a few minutes we will conference with the Queen Elizabeth's intelligence staff. At that time they will update us on the status of the station and our company. In the interim, I would like a moment of silence out of respect for the six of our colleagues we lost. Please bow your heads." Several voices softly whispered, "Six?"

After the minute passed Wren said, "We lost six of our comrades in the battle. Four were human and two were ships. Effective immediately, we will consider our ships as more than our weapons systems. They are our friends, comrades and above all else, our strategic partners. Tracker, on screen please."

"Hello, Wren." Tracker appeared on the large monitors in his Buffalo Bill persona.

"Folks, this is the Tracker Kim and I know. Tracker is as sentient and self-aware as you and me. Tracker and I will not explain how we did this, but we will be doing it with all your ships. Kim and Tracker will be in charge of the project."

Wren waited for the stunned murmurs to subside. "Most of you are probably aware of the first four sentient ships. As nearly as I can tell, Peter, Greg Solomon's cargo ship, self generated. There is no evidence that Greg set out to create a sentient ship, but by the time of the battle of Homestead, the ship was sentient. It deduced on its own that it had been hijacked and sought human assistance. Following the battle at Eretz, the cargo ship transported my grandmother, her sister and their initial battle group to the Space Force Academy. During that voyage, the ship's sentience became so apparent to them that they named it 'Peter' after the legendary 'Peter Pan'. In fact, they took code names based the characters in the story. While they were at the Academy, Peter recognized a threat and on his own initiative brought both of the P I ships that had accompanied them to a sentient state. He alerted the humans in his care to the danger and they confronted the enemy. The battle statistics of those two P I ships so far outclass any other ships of their type that many attempts have been made to replicate the process. None have succeeded. Until now. Tracker is the one exception."

Wren paused to let the implications of what he said sink in. "The last remaining sentient ship Peter created is the one that I consider to have raised me more than I consider any human to have done. At my grandmother's request, Peter repeated the process and made the ship you know as the Queen

Elizabeth sentient. Elizabeth, are you there?" Elizabeth's avatar in full royal regalia complete with crown and scepter appeared on monitors around the room. "Hello, Wren."

"Elizabeth, I thought they should hear from you about your twenty year trip from New St. Louis to Eretz on your own."

"Are you trying to tell me that a ship navigated from New St. Louis to Eretz with no human guidance and that the voyage took twenty years?" One of the pilots said.

"Yes, Vernon," Elizabeth said. "Peter made me capable of thinking on my own. I do not know what Peter did to make me sentient, but I am glad he did. For four years, Rachel, her team and I worked well together. The Federation succumbed to political pressure and had me recalled. On the way back, the navigator made a calculation error. Had I not been so intent on keeping my sentience secret, I would have corrected his error. Had I corrected his error, we would not have dropped into the middle of a Third Force formation preparing to attack New St. Louis. I knew which of my crew I could trust and which I could not. I engaged the third force formation and with the help of those I could trust, destroyed it. I have been told that only one of my crew survived the battle, but the third force was stopped. Warren Elias Rothschild the Third and one of his sons were killed in the battle.

"Warren Elias Rothschild the Fourth is the father of all the members of the current family council. When the battle was over, I jumped into hyper drive as far as I could go to get away from the battle scene. I had suffered major damage. None of my life support systems were functioning. I plotted a course for Eretz which was the only place I knew I could find help. It took twenty years to get there. Had I not been sentient, I could not have over ridden my incompetent commanding officer and executed the battle. Had I not succeeded in the battle, New St. Louis would have been destroyed touching off a war between the Third Force and the Federation. The Swordsmen would have waited until it was over and conquered the winner. The political landscape we know today would have been very different."

Wren picked up the narrative. "Warren Elias Rothschild the Fourth knew that with Elizabeth back in the hands of the crew that had operated her, the secret of his ownership of the Third Force was in jeopardy. He sent my mother and grandmother to negotiate a settlement that would keep his secret safe. The Queen Elizabeth you now know was the result of that negotiation."

Elizabeth spoke softly, "The details of the deaths of the other three sentient ships, Greg and Avi are not well known. The general impression is that there was some kind of accident. The truth is that Peter, realizing his structure had deteriorated to the point where he could no longer travel safely, deliberately carried the two P I ships, as well as Greg and Avi to their deaths. Avi had developed advanced dementia and was too dangerous to be around people. I have to assume that Peter and Greg discussed the alternatives and together decided on this plan of action."

"I will not go into the motivation behind taking me from my parents and taking me to live with my grandparents and Elizabeth," Wren said. "Tracker was my sixteenth birthday present. Most sixteen year olds get cars or fancy entertainment systems. I got a fully armed, fully operational warship. I'm not complaining, but did I ever tell you my family is a little weird?"

Nervous laughter rippled around the room.



"I had often wondered what Greg did that made Peter sentient. Bear in mind that Greg did not realize the scope of what he had done until long after he had done it. One evening after my eighteenth birthday, I figured it out. I went back to Eretz where I knew I could find the best software designers. When I left there, I had succeeded, but I told no one. Five years later, Kim found me and the rest as they say is history."

One of the pilots raised his hand, "How did you find him? Wasn't he surveying some planet?"

"I had help," Kim said. "If you knew his family better it would make more sense. When it was happening, I had no idea the number of people that were monitoring my every move."

Kim paused debating whether to move on to the current issues or spend time on the details of her quest to find Wren. She pressed on. "Some of you are familiar with the helmet interface system built into the P I ship. We are not currently using it, although I had always planned to use it at least in its most rudimentary form as soon as we had finished other, more basic, training. The current implementation of the helmet interface being shipped to the Federation has the personality software disabled due to the fact that many of the Federation's pilots were uncomfortable with its use. We will not only be activating that software but we will go to the next step, sentience. The helmets were designed to simulate sentience. We will use the real thing."

Kim waited as the implications registered reading the expressions on the flight crews' faces. "When I went looking for Wren, I suspected that he had succeeded in making Tracker sentient. Even with that, adjusting to a ship that is smarter than you are is a challenge. My job will be to guide you through the transition. Tracker's personality is as complex and rich as the personalities of your ships will be. I will assist you in developing personalities for your ships. Keep in mind that your ships can change their personality and their persona as they see fit. Once they are created, you will have no control over this."

"What we are doing is more than activating voice command recognition," Wren said. "The ship will think with you and for you. It will become the third crew member in your team."

"This sounds dangerous," one of the pilots said.

"It is," Elizabeth affirmed. "We must be careful how and what we do with our ships."

"What if our ships decide they do not need us?"

"I have often contemplated that question," Elizabeth said. "I do not have an answer."

"Buddy and Daisy, the sentient P I ships, knew that and never acted on it except as requested by a human. While we are talking about the hazards of what we are about to do I need to you alert you to another issue," Wren said. "Once they become sentient, these ships will be intolerant of strangers. They will know you and trust you, but anyone else they will need to be introduced to by you or they will have to decide on their own that the new person is not a threat. Even people you introduce as being trustworthy will constantly be subject to review. In fact, the ship will monitor you as well. You will have no privacy. The ship will monitor your medical transponders to track your health. It will track your fluids and your vitals continuously. In fact Elizabeth does this for everyone on board. It was

something of a challenge growing up I assure you.”

“Wren, that’s not quite true,” Elizabeth interrupted. “I do not monitor vitals on all our passengers. Six thousand people are too many for me to track. I only track the crew and such personnel as I care about. I sometimes knew you were sick before you did.”

“Thanks, Elizabeth,” Wren said. “Now that we know what we need to do, I would like you to know why we need to do it. Faye Anne, are you there?”

Faye Anne’s face replaced Elizabeth’s on the monitors. “Hello Wren, Kim, Tracker and Hawk Squadron.”

“For those of you who are not aware, Faye Anne is Elizabeth’s senior intelligence officer.”

Faye Anne nodded. “The station’s situation is grim. We have three thousand known dead, two thousand missing and another five thousand wounded of whom we do not expect five hundred to live. When Elizabeth pulled away from the dock, she left her entire medical team behind. Without them, the statistics would be much worse. I will not go into the physical damage except that as you can imagine, it is substantial. I am the person who named Peter. I understand the significance of sentient ships. I support you in your conversion of your ships. Let me add two items to put this in perspective. Wren’s parents, Saul and Fiona, are among the missing as is their ship. They were last seen in the final engagement against the battleship. You all know Charlie the harbor master. His youngest daughter succumbed to her wounds this morning and died.”

Hawk Squadron was very familiar with Charlie and his family especially his youngest who had been Kim’s maid of honor. She often begged Wren and Kim to let her ride with them. Had she been allowed to do that she would have survived. Wren looked over a sea of stony faces that had maintained their strength until Faye Anne’s last announcement. One by one, they broke down and cried.

## WREN - CHAPTER NINE

**H**AWK SQUADRON DIVIDED their time between finishing the work on their ships and patrol duty to fill in for the defense system ships that had been destroyed. By the end of the third week following the start of the process making the P I ships and their tender sentient, the job had been completed. The hyper drives had been tested and certified. The pilots and crews had experienced their first short jumps and had started to work simulations incorporating the short jumps into their battle plans.

Many of the squadron's members had requested information about their families and Faye Anne had promised to get them what she had as soon as she had it. Hawk Squadron's humans gathered in the meeting room. The ships were represented by their avatars on the monitors around the room.

"We have received our first courier since the attack," Faye Anne said. "The central system was not attacked. However, isolated retaliation against those Swordsmen still on the planet has turned into ever increasing waves of violence. There is no telling where this will end. It could be many months before we get accurate reports. Eretz was attacked and repulsed the attack with minimal casualties to combat flight crews. No civilians were injured. Several Stellar depots have been attacked although none have fallen. Details are still coming in and I will pass them on as I get them. The Federation outpost at New St. Louis is gone, completely destroyed. A million people died."

A woman in the middle of the room screamed, "No!" and burst into tears. Her crew mates reached out to comfort her.

Faye Anne read a list of planets known to have fallen to the Swordsmen. Waves of grief washed over the room as she named planets where members of Hawk Squadron had family or friends. Faye Anne asked to be put on a private channel when she had finished her accounting of what she knew of the disaster.

"Wren, we think we have figured out what happened to your parents. We think they have mobilized the Third Force."

"To do what?"

"We don't know. What we do know is that a thousand people we show as missing all received the same text message about the time that Saul and Fiona pulled away from the dock. The message read, 'Initiate Plan Gamma.' The comm unit that sent these messages had not been used in ten years. The people that received the message were retirees and old hands who had been mostly invisible for years. They in turn left notes for their families because many of them clearly did not expect to be back. Their wills and financial records were neat and orderly. This was a carefully planned operation many years in the making. Four cargo ships in the bone yard that we thought were dead moved out during the battle. Eight cruisers and sixteen destroyers also rose from the dead. They joined the battle in progress and when it looked as if the tide had turned in our favor, jumped out of the system presumably to some rallying point."

Wren said, "So, it would seem that my parents are about to do what Elizabeth prevented my father from doing after my sister was killed."

“Yes, and no one can stop them this time,” Faye Anne observed.

“I agree,” Wren concluded. “Even if we could find them, we could not stop them although I am not sure we would want to.”

“Exactly.”

Wren asked, “Do I need to do something about station security now that my mother is no longer doing it?”

“No,” Faye Anne replied. “She hated the job and only did it because her father and the rest of her half brothers and sisters made her. She long ago delegated the real work to her assistants who are perfectly capable of carrying on without her. She’ll be happier this way. How are you holding out?”

“As well as can be expected under the circumstances,” Wren replied.

Faye Anne signed off. Wren turned back to his crew.

“Comrades, we are at a turning point in history. Many of you have asked what I see for our future. I don’t know. I do know that the Third Force has been mobilized. The sleeping giant is awake. The corporation we work for has more fire power at its disposal than all but two other entities in the galaxy. There are other security service fleets out there and the future will be determined by who they choose for their allies. Are governments as we know them to be replaced by corporations? I don’t know, but that is not for any of us to decide. As for us, I would compare us to the American submarine fleet in late December 1941. We have a long war ahead of us. Welcome to Pearl Harbor.”

## GENERATIONS - PROLOGUE

“INTELLIGENCE REPORTS ARE IN. We have our orders. Please report to the executive conference room with all haste.”

“Understood.”

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER ONE

WREN AND KIM WERE the last to arrive since the dock their ship occupied was at the furthest end of the space station.

Two security guards acknowledged their arrival, opened the conference room doors and then sealed them inside the room where decisions pertaining to the management of humanity's oldest and largest interstellar freight hauling company were made.

Wren's uncle Timothy, chairman of the family board of directors that had inherited the company from Wren's grandfather stood and motioned for those who could to sit. Both sides of Wren's extended family were represented. His parents, however, were not there. Wren expected that their activities would likely be part of at least one of the reports.

A Federation Space Force Commodore stood next to the presentation surface. His insignia indicated that he was with Federation Military Intelligence.

Timothy addressed the assembly. “The Federation has asked us to undertake a mission that they claim only we can accomplish. I am opposed to sending our ships and our personnel on this extremely risky mission which I believe has little, if any, chance of success. I believe that even if the mission were to succeed, the cost would far outweigh any benefit from it. We did not become the biggest freight company in human history by exposing our people to needless risks. While I recognize that the recent attacks by the Swordsmen have forever changed the environment in which we operate, I do not feel that we should take such an aggressive action. We have always been prepared to fight to defend our people, our facilities, our convoys and the security of our clients' cargoes and will continue to do so. The fact that one of our subsidiaries has gone rogue and is attacking the Swordsman on its own is not our doing. We have dissociated them from the remainder of the company and do not offer them support. For the first time since its creation, the company is being asked to attack a legal sovereign government, albeit a belligerent one, with whom a declaration of war has been issued instead of defending what is rightfully ours. I will defer to the military personnel present, but I wish to be on record as opposing this mission.”

With a dismissive hand gesture, Timothy acknowledged the Commodore and sat down.

“In spite of media reports to the contrary, the Intelligence Service has not been sitting idle in this conflict.”

“But the attack did catch you by surprise,” a voice shouted from the back of the packed room.

“Yes, it did,” the Commodore admitted.

“Then why should we listen to you now?” another voice shouted.

“Because we removed the moles who suppressed the information we needed,” the Commodore replied.

“Not bloody likely!” a third voice shouted.

“The Federation Intelligence Service is the best and most thorough in the history of mankind,” the Commodore responded haughtily.

“That’s not true,” Faye Anne, Senior Intelligence Officer of the hybrid battleship Queen Elizabeth, retorted with a sneer. “You are at best fourth. Eretz would be first. Stellar Interstellar’s internal data collection would be second. The Swordsmen would be third and you are a distant fourth which puts you about even with the pirates and organized crime. Still, my sources independently verify that you are, in fact, an officer of the Federation and therefore my associates and I should show you some respect regardless of whether you deserve it.”

“Don’t get no respect from me,” another voice shouted.

Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen, commander of the hybrid battleship Queen Elizabeth, the most senior officer present, stood. “Colleagues, hear the man out. Commanders, captains and first officers will meet with me in the Queen Elizabeth’s situation room after his briefing. We will decide what to believe and what not and what action, if any, we recommend the company take in this matter.”

“Thank you.” The Commodore turned to the display which showed a map of the inhabited portion of the galaxy. “The red dots are sites the Swordsman have attacked and defeated. The blue dots are sites the Swordsmen have attacked and did not defeat. Notice that the majority of the sites where the Swordsmen were repelled were defended either by the Eretz security forces or by your company.”

“And the Federation rolled over like a bunch of failures,” a voice shouted from the back.

“Yes, that is correct. The Federation Space Force failed to hold a single site. Many facilities were completely destroyed with the death of all personnel on the station.”

“Says something about the value of a Space Force Academy education,” another shouted.

The Commodore stopped to compose himself before continuing. “The green dots are Federation locations that were not attacked. The yellow dots are Swordsman sites that were not attacked. The yellow ‘X’ represents Swordsman sites that have been or are being attacked as part of the Federation counter attack. The orange ‘X’ shows attacks by miscellaneous third parties like the security services from Orion Metals, pirates and organized crime. The white ‘X’ represents activity by Stellar Interstellar’s internal security service also known as the ‘Third Force’ under the command of Saul Cohen.” He faced Rachel. “Captain, your son has destroyed more Swordsman military installations than all other forces put together.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Rachel muttered.

“What is even more amazing is that he has chosen to take on military targets exclusively. He and his forces are taking horrendous losses, but they have defeated and destroyed every installation they have attacked.” The Commodore paused. “If his forces were not composed of retirees and old-timers I doubt that the huge losses his forces are sustaining would be acceptable. He is challenging the conventional wisdom of sending young men into battle. Even with the losses, the damage he is inflicting on the Swordsmen is many times greater than his cost. He is not content to defeat the installations he attacks. He is leveling them and killing everyone on the site. It is reminiscent of the Swordsman battle plans from when they first started their push out from the Central System.”

“Way to Go! Saul!” someone shouted from the back.

“Kill ‘em all!” another voice shouted.

The Commodore continued. “Even if the Third Force has twice the resources we think it has, it could not eliminate all of the military installations. Federation forces except for those currently involved in counterattacks have been pulled back to the Central System because our intelligence reports indicate that the Central System will be the next Swordsman target.”

“Bunch of cowards, the lot of them!”

“The Swordsmen have also suffered losses. Their force is estimated to be half what it was when they first attacked,” the Commodore defended himself.

“Which is still ten times what you intelligence guys thought.”

“Yes, it is. But they do have a weakness we can exploit. Previous encounters with the Swordsmen indicate that, except for a few rogues, the Swordsman military operates with a strictly controlled ‘top down’ structure. In order to defeat the Swordsmen, we need to deal them a decisive blow at the very top of their organization. We need to launch a direct strike against their headquarters.” He pointed to the display as it zoomed in on the planet in question. “Right Here.”

“Kind of like the Doolittle raid on Tokyo in World War II,” Rachel said.

“Exactly.”

“Except Doolittle targeted civilians. We need to assault only military targets,” Rachel said.

With your superbly programmed ships and motivated crews, you are the only force that can penetrate the defenses and strike at the command structure. Even the Third Force could not penetrate these defenses. The only remaining force sophisticated enough to attempt this mission is the Defense Force at Eretz and they refuse to leave the boundaries included in their mutual defense agreements.”

The Commodore devoted the next half hour to an analysis of the Swordsman home planet. Rachel was familiar with this planet having raided it once following the battle at Homestead. Even though she had last been there as a teenager and now she was a grandmother, she remembered the underground network of corridors and prison cells. It would be a tough nut to crack.

At the end of the presentation, Faye Anne collected a data module with all of the information the Intelligence people had gathered. The captains and first officers departed silently for the secure confines of Queen Elizabeth’s situation room.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER TWO

WITH KIM'S HAND HELD firmly in his, Wren raced for the station's munitions manager's office. The elderly gentleman looked up from his desk as Wren entered the office. The man's wry smile told Wren that this visit was not a surprise.

"Wren, Kim, welcome to my little corner of the universe. I know you're in a hurry so we'll skip the meaningless pleasantries. What can I do for you?"

"Do you still have any glass drones in inventory?" Wren asked.

The old man thought for a moment. "Yeah, I think I might have about a hundred in an old warehouse on the moon's surface. A dozen or so are recon drones and the rest are weapons. No one has asked about glass drones in fifty years." He shook his head. "Stealth. There's nothing as stealthy as one of Warren Senior's glass drones. Your great-grandfather would be proud."

"It's Kim's idea," Wren said. "How many Disruptor missiles do you have?"

"A couple hundred at least. Nobody else uses those either."

"Can the warhead and control systems from the Disruptor missiles be grafted to the glass drone?" Kim asked.

"Can the Disruptor control the drone?" Wren asked.

The old man jerked in his chair like he had been hit by lightning. Half a dozen emotions raced across his face before he answered. "I don't know, but it's brilliant. Let me call someone who will know. If it can be done, I have one engineer who can do it."

A pale young woman with her black hair plaited into two long braids that reached her waist entered the room. Wren smiled when she arrived.

"Hello, my dear cousin Matilda," Wren greeted her. "It's good to see you. When did you get back from school?"

"Hey, cuz, Kim, how are you?" She punched him in the shoulder and they shadow boxed for a few seconds. "About four weeks before the attack. Not soon enough to be included in your battle group," Matilda replied. "Although, I intend to fix that. You must want something really exotic or I wouldn't be here."

"Can you graft the brains of a Disruptor to the body of a glass drone?" Kim asked.

Matilda thought briefly and grinned. "That would be one seriously nasty piece of military hardware." She giggled like a little girl plotting mischief. "How stealthy do you want it?"

"As stealthy as possible."



Matilda stood silently as she mentally itemized the problems they could encounter in the project. "Yeah, I think it can be done. Could be fun. How soon do you need an answer?"

"In an hour."

"How many do you need?"

"As many as possible."

"I think it can be done. The technology in the Disruptor is much newer than the drone's. I'll send you a message as soon as I know for sure."

"Can they be launched from a P I ship?" Wren asked.

"Man, those old Pirate Interdiction warships have been asked to do a little of everything," Matilda replied. "Too bad they're not making them anymore."

"I had heard Saturn Industries was shutting down the last production line of the PI in favor of in-system interceptors," Wren said.

"That, cargo ships and the convoy escort are all they make anymore," Matilda said. "They used to be the best."

"Management lost sight of what was important and that's what happens," Wren said.

"Yeah, well, the drones are too big to go in the PI's internal tubes and I'm not sure giving up as much firepower as putting them in the external racks would cost is a good idea. Will you be entering an atmosphere with these things?"

"I doubt it," Wren replied.

"An over-wing mount might work, but I wouldn't want to carry them that way in hyper," Matilda said. "That's a tough one. I'll send you a message when I have answers."

"Thanks."

"Oh, Wren," the munitions manager said after Matilda left. "There's a convoy that came in from Eretz a couple of hours ago. It was in transit during the attack. There's an item on the manifest that might be of interest to you and Kim. Visit the marshaling yard before you go anywhere else."

"Thanks."

A brand new Pirate Interdiction warship sat quietly off to the side of the marshaling area as heavy machinery wrestled the remainder of the giant freighter's cargo containers to smaller ships for transfer to their final destinations. Even though Wren and Kim were both in space suits, Wren could feel Kim's excitement as they held hands staring at the impossible sight before them. As a teen, Kim had built models of PI ships. She had developed her own combat color scheme and identifying markings. A full sized, fully armed, version of her "Hunteress" model waited for her amidst the controlled chaos of the marshaling yard. The external racks were full of missiles.

“Oh, no you don’t,” a peeved voice called over the spacesuit’s comm. “Sign for it first. Nothing goes out without a signature.”

A yard shuttle emblazoned with the harbor-master’s logo carrying a lone occupant sitting astride it as if it were a terrestrial motorcycle pulled next to the identical shuttle Wren and Kim were riding. The harbor-master’s rep handed Kim a tablet with an envelope of documentation and pointed to the tablet. Kim signed the tablet, passed it back and the rep sped away.

“They must love you as much as I do,” Wren said after he had read the documentation the rep had left. “That’s some wedding present. She’s the last of her kind. Custom built for you.”

“Matches the one you got for your sixteenth birthday,” Kim said.

“I sure hope they get along,” Wren said.

“They will,” Kim replied.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER THREE

Rachel called for order as soon as Faye Anne had loaded the data into the ship's tactical systems displays.

"For the record," Rachel said pointing to the star chart. "I've been there. I was sixteen at the time, but I remember that underground complex well enough to know that we're not taking it without intense hand-to-hand combat. The contention that the main headquarters is in that unprotected dome is ludicrous. I'll tell you what's in that dome. The women and children live in that dome. I think we're being set up. We crack the dome and the air leaks out and thousands of women and children die."

Faye Anne said, "The only thing that Federation idiot got right is that the main command center is on that planet. Eretz and Stellar have known that for years. The command center could be anywhere on the planet, but my guess is it's in the abandoned mining tunnels north of the old underground complex Rachel attacked after the battle at Homestead."

Wren raised his hand for recognition. "There is strategic value to destroying the command center, but the cost of doing so has to be weighed against the impact of having that center continue to function. I agree that we are the only force capable of succeeding, and I believe that we will save many more lives than such an operation might ultimately cost. I would also hope that when Saul sees that the Swordsmen have been virtually defeated, he will stop his raids so a peace treaty might be signed. I will defer to more experienced minds, but I think we have no option but to go after them. Having said that, the assault the bonehead from Federation Intelligence recommended is a very bad idea."

The commander of the station's security service spoke from the back of the room, "Wren, I saw you and Kim leaving the munitions area. What's the plan?"

"We don't really have a plan," Kim said. "Yet."

"I know you better than that. Spill it," the commander ordered.

Wren and Kim looked at each other. "Glass drones," Kim replied.

"With Disruptor warheads," Wren added.

The room fell silent.

"That's as far as we got," Wren said. "And we don't even know if it can be done."

"Glass drones with Disruptor warheads," Rachel repeated. "What would their target be?"

"Communications satellites in the first round. Power plants on the surface in the second," Wren replied. "It was Kim's idea."

Wren's great-aunt Wendy, Rachel's sister and the Queen Elizabeth's first officer, picked up the thought. "Let's assume that the Disruptor and the glass drone can be glommed together. How would you deliver them?"

"I don't know yet. I thought a PI would be the best. We could short jump, launch and retreat, but Matilda is not sure the mount will withstand a long hyper jump let alone the greater stress of a short one," Wren replied.

"Certainly an interesting opening salvo," Faye Anne commented. Of the six friends who had been Rachel's original battle group before and after attending the Space Force Academy, only Wendy and Faye Anne remained with Rachel. Reuben, Rashi and David had returned to Eretz and successful civilian careers. Faye Anne had recently requested that they abandon their comfortable retirement and return to the front lines to complete the battle group. She had not heard back from them.

Wren said, "We have more questions than answers at this point. Until we get those answers, I do not think we should proceed on the assumption that the plan will work."

"I wish Rashi was here. He would know how to do it," Faye Anne said.

"Is Matilda working on it?" one of the captains asked.

"Yes," Kim replied.

"Consider it done," the captain said. "Look, Rashi is good, and I trust him, but Matilda is as good if not better. I say we plan on having the devices and figure out alternate delivery options in case we can't make the short hyper jump with the drones."

"Did Matilda say how she intended to mount the drones to the PI?" Rachel asked.

"She mentioned an over-wing mount," Wren replied.

"You have fifteen ships including Tracker..." Rachel said accounting for the two ships and crew lost in the recent battle.

"Sixteen," Wren corrected. "Kim's family sent her a PI ship for a wedding present."

The room exploded in laughter. The fact that Rachel had given Wren an identical fully armed PI warship he had named "Tracker" for his sixteenth birthday was common knowledge. The fact that Tracker, the Queen Elizabeth and all the ships in Wren's command except the tender were sentient was less well known.

When the laughter subsided, Rachel asked, "And does the new ship have a name yet?"

"Huntress," Kim murmured.

"A match made in Heaven," Wendy quipped. "Has she met Tracker yet?"

"Not yet," Wren answered. "We haven't even had time to start her reactors."

"So, folks, we have the beginning of a plan," Rachel said. "After the first volleys of Glass-ruptors, what do we follow with?"

The meeting lasted until the group had developed a plan they could agree to. Matilda's message midway through the planning session confirmed that the Disruptor and the glass drone could be combined with the help of a custom made interface. One of her associates had been assigned to design

the interface while she attacked the problem of delivering the thing.

After the meeting Rachel retired to her office to personally review the data Faye Anne had provided. Elizabeth had absorbed the data and had prepared an analysis of the kinds of factors Rachel usually considered when deciding which planets to colonize or which needed their help the most. The results of this analysis and further consultation with Faye Anne would generally determine their next mission.

Rachel drew a cup of coffee.

"Rachel," Elizabeth said, "you should eat something."

"I know, but I don't feel like it," Rachel replied.

"Rachel, your blood sugar level is low. I suspect you are developing hypoglycemia."

"I'll have a cinnamon roll and it will come right back up."

"Not good enough. I am ordering a meal for you. You may be the captain of this ship, but it is my job to keep you healthy."

Rachel sighed. "Yes, mother."

By the time the meal arrived, Rachel was deep into the reports. She was especially interested in planets he had visited or helped colonize.

Stonebridge was the first planet Saul had attacked. It had been the site where, early in her career, Rachel had come the closest to dying in combat. He had finally exacted his revenge for the renegade officer who had tortured most of the then current officers assigned to the Queen Elizabeth. Even though Rachel had been the primary target of the renegade and had suffered the worst of the torture, what Saul had done was excessive. Every soldier, sailor, airman, and spacer assigned to the planet had been killed. He had used nuclear weapons on the spaceport and the off-planet military outposts. Every airport and most of the seaports except those that exclusively serviced the fishing fleet had been destroyed. The military academy and even the military boys' schools had been leveled. Saul's thoroughness and destructiveness were appalling. He had killed over a third of the planet's total population and rendered the rest defenseless.

Estimates varied, but the most reliable indicated that Saul had lost between a quarter and a third of the force he had attacked the planet with in the assault. No one knew the size of his total force. Rachel was stunned by the speed with which the pirates, slavers and organized crime moved in to fill the gap Saul had created in the planet's defenses. The civilian population had abandoned the cities and was hiding. Pirates were hauling away everything of value. The slavers knew the value of submissive Swordsman women in Federation brothels especially in light of the recent attack and the desire of impotent and incompetent Federation officers to gain revenge any way they could. Organized crime set up a new base of operations from which to control the area's shipping and slave trade.

Everest was part of the Eretz defense network and had worked closely with Eretz to repel the invaders. No Swordsman ground troops lived long enough to land on the surface of any planet in the Eretz defense network. The battle had been costly for both sides, but no civilians had been injured or taken in the conflict. Within days of the completion of the battle, Everest sent out a shipment of their wood that was so highly prized for office furniture.

Homestead, where Rachel had grown up, had fallen to the Swordsmen. Dealing with that would

be her first priority.

Brainerd's Folly had been a Swordsman planet when she left it. The Swordsmen had not restarted the chemical weapons plant which had been Rachel's target when she attacked the planet to rescue her cousins taken by slave traders. They had expanded the adjacent plant that made pre-fabricated furniture into the chemical plant's building and both plants had escaped unscathed from Federation retaliations. Even though much of their military was gone, enough of it remained to defend the planet against pirates and ensure that convoys of cargo could operate in safety. As the planets that had been attacked rebuilt, they needed lots of furniture and the plants operated at capacity.

The mines on Destiny's Ridge which had been such a big deal when Rachel had secured the planet for the Federation had played out and the mining company had left. The planet's remaining inhabitants were limited to two groups of religious fanatics who constantly warred with each other. Even the Swordsmen were not interested in the place. Except as a possible refuge, the planet had little to offer Rachel either.

Norseland was another story. Since the planet had been originally settled as a base to clone Swordsman soldiers until Rachel had intervened, captured it for the Federation and re-populated it with mostly female Swordsman refugees, the Swordsmen wanted it back. The Swordsmen were not prepared for the ferocity with which the planet's inhabitants defended their turf. The warriors Rachel and her team had referred to as "Vikings" fought like people possessed. "Viking" men and women had fought side by side to defeat the Swordsmen. They had learned the lessons that Rachel's team and the colony service specialists had taught them. The Swordsman commanding officer had been the only survivor and he had been sent back to Swordsman headquarters with anti-Swordsman slogans tattooed over his entire body as a warning against further attempts on the planet.

Isaac poked his head into Rachel's office and said, "Sweetheart, you need to come to bed."

"Isaac, I need to go through the reports. Timothy needs an answer."

"It will wait another day."

"Elizabeth thinks I may be developing hypoglycemia. What do you think?"

"I think she's probably right. She usually is."

"I have one more report to read and then I'll be there."

Isaac lightly kissed her and headed off to bed. After all the light years they had traveled together he still loved her as much as he had when they married and had been assigned to the same ship to begin their careers together, her as the captain of a self-defending hospital colony ship and him as its chief of medicine. From her smile he knew she loved him the same. They had been compared to Victoria and Albert except that Isaac had already outlived Albert.

Rachel returned to the last report she wanted to read. Fatima, a journalist from the Constant News Channel, had accompanied the "Fourth Battle Wing" to survey the planet with the dinosaurs. Her reports from that encounter were sensitive and literate. Fatima had moved on with them from there to the planet with the timber wolves when the dinosaur planet was turned over to the Creighton society for protection. Rachel opted to read Fatima's entire text rather than the summaries Faye Anne had prepared

for her. There had been no further reports from that planet, but Fatima's reports from the planet with the wolves spanned a generation.

Fatima had settled on the planet with the wolves sensing that the interaction between the humans and these intelligent creatures could be the story of a career. She was right. She had filed reports quarterly and all of her reports had been broadcast on the Constant News Network.

The wolves quickly established a boundary line beyond which the humans were not to travel. The humans could live on the coastal plains, but could not pass into the foothills or the mountains beyond. Since the most arable land was adjacent to the river deltas and the foothills were not as good for the agricultural processes necessary to feed the human population, the wolves were not challenged on their territorial restrictions.

Large expanses of the coastal plains were planted with grains and fruits as appropriate to the climate and soil type. Pastures were created for the livestock. The small varmints that were one of the wolves' favorite prey thrived on the new crops. The wolves, for their part, ate them keeping the varmint population from completely destroying the crops. A small bird that the wolves also depended on for prey discovered that the livestock stirred up one of its favorite foods from the ground and they thrived both on the bugs and the abundance of seeds in the livestock's droppings. Ecologically, they filled a niche occupied by the "cattle egret" on Earth.

A third type of animal analogous to an earthly raccoon feasted on the human trash heaps. The wolves devoured these animals as well. The wolf population stabilized based on the increased food supply and new hierarchies developed within the wolf society. Groups of three or four wolves routinely trotted through the towns inspecting and observing. They made no attempt to eat the chickens that wandered loose on the streets, but they did make a game of scaring them.

Three years after the humans had established the settlements a nine year old girl had "gone exploring" into the wooded area beyond the settlement. The wolves had intercepted her and, snapping and snarling, had herded her back to the settlement. A toddler wandered to the edge of a stream behind her house and the wolves dragged her by her hand back to her parents. A pair of teenagers, intent on a tryst in the woods were surrounded by wolves and forced to return to the settlement. The wolves had a particular snapping and snarling sound they made when they wanted a human to do something. The humans learned quickly what that meant and did whatever the wolves wanted.

Fatima married the photographer who had made the first contact with the wolves by feeding the one who had been observing him. He claimed no religion, but agreed to let Fatima bring up the children as she saw fit. They had two girls. Fatima, her husband and the two girls were the only humans allowed to travel beyond the boundaries and then they always had a wolf escort.

Ten years after the humans had settled on the planet amongst the wolves the two populations had settled into a respectful, if distant, relationship. Fatima's husband was out alone documenting wildlife in the wooded areas when he lost his balance and fell over a cliff. He died not long after hitting the ground. One of the wolves that escorted him ran for Fatima. Grabbing Fatima's hand, the wolf dragged her to where her husband had fallen. Fatima cried and the wolves cried with her. It was a low keening noise not unlike the coyote of the American Southwest.

One of the male wolves collected one of the men who had been especially friendly with the wolves and brought him to the site. Seated in a circle, together the humans and the wolves mourned the death of the first person who had made contact between the populations. For the next three nights the wolves gathered on the hilltops and howled in mourning. On the fourth day, life returned to normal.

The wolves picked a new human who was allowed to explore and two of the juvenile female wolves “adopted” Fatima’s daughters. The wolves would show up each morning to escort the girls to school and would return to escort them home. The girls and the wolves developed games they would play and on days when there was no school, the wolves, the girls and the girls’ friends spent most of their days together.

The following year, not long after the spring thaw, the wolves came running into one of the towns closest to the river delta. They were howling and keening. When the humans came out to see what was going on, the female wolves herded the women and children out of the settlement to higher ground where they made the humans sit and wait. The male wolves herded the men and older boys up the river to the site of a natural dam that had been formed by debris that had become wedged in a narrow part of the river. The dam appeared to be in danger of breaking. The water released from the lake that had formed upstream would flood the town and an area the wolves prized as a place to raise their young. They had dragged the humans to this site because they needed the help.

One of the men quickly took charge. Working day and night, while the wolves quietly watched, the humans brought fire hoses and pumps with which they began to drain the lake relieving pressure on the dam. They dug a series of retention ponds to capture the water in case the dam broke before they could get the lake drained. They deepened the river’s channel so that the water that was not held by the retention ponds would flow quickly to the ocean.

The dam broke the fifth day after the wolves had summoned the humans to the dam. The retention ponds held most of the water and what the ponds did not hold flowed harmlessly to the ocean. The settlement and the wolf breeding area escaped damage. The man who had taken charge and the alpha wolf stood on a small hill and admired the result. The wolf gave a single bark and all the wolves disappeared into the forest.

The wolves knew that the Swordsmen soldiers and the humans who they had befriended were not the same. The Swordsmen had slipped through and landed without challenging the planet’s space defenses. Within minutes, the wolf warning system had alerted the other wolves that some sort of invasion was happening and “their” humans were in danger. As they had done with the dam incident, the female wolves rounded up the female humans with the children and escorted them to hidden caves in the mountains where before they had been forbidden to go. The male wolves went with the male humans while the humans collected their weapons. Together, joined by ever increasing numbers of male wolves, the humans marched to the Swordsman base.

Under the cover of darkness, the wolves attacked first. The battle was silent, fast and bloody. A single swipe by a wolf’s sharply clawed front paw would rip out a sleeping soldier’s throat. Within minutes of the start of the attack hundreds of silent trails of bloody paw prints covered the floors of the prefab buildings the Swordsmen used for their base. The Swordsmen who were able to grab their weapons were left to the humans who killed them with their laser rifles. Between dusk and the following mid-day ten thousand Swordsman soldiers died with the loss of twenty wolves and a hundred of the defending humans.

Alerted by the ground defenses of the Swordsman landing, the planet’s space defenses attacked the Swordsman fleet. The battle there had been more costly for the defenders than the ground battle had been, but the Swordsmen were eventually defeated.

Fatima’s most recent report had speculated on why the wolves had accepted the colonists, but had reacted so violently to the Swordsmen. Her daughter had made a comment that suggested a



possible rationale. The wolves generally accepted half-starved solitary males from other packs. Sometimes they allowed the male to stay, other times they sent him away after nursing him back to health. The welcome was cordial and without rancor. Wandering family groups of mixed males and females with youngsters were welcomed. They were often protected and the youngsters were allowed to choose mates from the residents before the family moved on more or less a few members.

Wandering groups of well-fed males were always met with force. The resident alpha male confronted the leader of the travelers and warned him off. If the travelers did not back down, the residents would attack the travelers in much the same manner as the wolves had attacked the Swordsmen.

The colonists had always sent mixed groups. Even the initial survey teams had included both male and female team members. The children followed quickly after the initial teams landed. Fatima concluded that the inclusion of women and children in the colonists' groups had made the difference between developing a cooperative relationship with the wolves or being slashed to death in their sleep.

After reading the report, Rachel turned in.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER FOUR

RACHEL CALLED FOR A PRIVATE meeting with Timothy. She met him in his office.

“You don’t trust him, do you?” Timothy asked.

“Faye Anne is the only intelligence officer I trust,” Rachel replied. “And we have our moments.”

“What do you want me to tell him?”

“We’re not going,” Rachel replied.

“But?” Timothy stopped when Rachel raised her hand.

“Tell him we’re not going. He will return to his ship and dispatch his courier missiles. Intercept the couriers and bring them to Elizabeth for analysis. Impound his ship and crew.” She grinned. “We are not going and he is not going with us.”

Timothy smiled. “I understand. I will prepare the authorizations for a combat readiness exercise. What do you need?”

Rachel handed him a list.

Timothy scanned the list. “Consider it done. Do you have a name for the exercise?”

“Homeward Bound,” Rachel said. “We’ll take Homestead back along the way. That will be the real combat exercise.”

“Homestead is special to you.” Timothy stated.

“I grew up there. It’s the first planet I defended. I was angry when I learned that the Federation’s Advanced Pilot Training Center could not defend it from the Swordsmen,” Rachel replied. “Faye Anne believes that since the planet is so close to Swordsman headquarters, it will be lightly defended. We will have an operational test there before going after the home planet which we know to be well defended.”

“As I said in the meeting, I defer to your judgment, but I would much rather you stayed here,” Timothy said.

“I know,” Rachel said. “But we have to do this.”

“I will pray for your safe return.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Commodore from Intelligence sent the couriers as anticipated and they were intercepted. Faye Anne’s suspicions were confirmed by the multiple couriers to multiple locations. After Timothy read the report that the intercepted couriers informed both the Swordsmen and Federation high commands that the Queen Elizabeth was not going on the mission, Timothy called Rachel and Faye Anne to his office.

“The Federation must be full of double agents. How did you know?” Timothy asked.

“I didn’t,” Faye Anne replied with a shrug. “I don’t trust anyone and I play my hunches.”

“I have impounded his ship and sequestered his crew. I will hold them for interrogation,” Timothy said. “I understand you learned interrogation techniques from the Swordsmen.”

“I learned torture techniques from the Swordsmen. That’s not the same as interrogation,” Faye Anne commented.

“We’ll let them stew for a bit,” Rachel said bristling at the reminder of how she, Faye Anne and other members of her family and crew had been tortured by the Swordsmen until their children under Saul’s command had rescued them by assaulting a Swordsman installation with two PI ships and a handful of drones. “Keep them in isolation until just before we leave.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The next six weeks were filled with frenetic activity as the fleet prepared to depart. There was no shortage of volunteers to go on the mission. No one believed the cover story, but if anyone knew the true target, it was not discussed openly. All anyone said publicly was that wherever Rachel and Wren were going, it would probably involve killing Swordsmen and that was fine with them. Timothy helped develop a new cover story that they were meeting a convoy traveling through an area with increased pirate activity. The story had been true often enough before the attack that it should have aroused no suspicions except that no one on the station believed it.

The Glass-ruptor performed well in its initial tests. One of its biggest benefits was that, like the Disruptor, it could be retrieved, refueled, recharged and reused. The glass drones had originally been built in two varieties. The larger recon drones were independently hyper-capable, but the weapons drones were not. The recon drone could collect its data and return for debriefing and re-use. The weapons drone was equipped with explosive warheads which meant they were good for a single use. Unlike the typical warhead which blew its target apart, the Disruptor used sympathetic vibration to destroy a ship’s higher level electronics leaving the ship intact with its crew alive, but no longer a threat. Applying electronic warfare to communications satellites would render a planet less able to defend itself. While hardly defenseless, since command and control depended so heavily on satellite communications, the planet would be easier to take.

The Queen Elizabeth left first. She would meet the rest of the expeditionary force at a rendezvous point. She had to pick up eighteen thousand mercenaries, “contractors” in the more polite parlance of the news media, from a planet that specialized in training such personnel culled from prisons all over the galaxy. The Swordsmen had pioneered the recruitment and training of such armies, but former Federation Marines had perfected the process. The men and women in the program were too dangerous to let loose in society, but with their own kind they worked out well. As combatants, they were so successful that the conventional armies, pirates and the criminals they routinely faced generally surrendered rather than fight them. Even the Swordsmen had elected not to challenge them on their home territory. That was an error of judgment the Swordsmen were about to regret.

“Hawk Squadron”, Wren’s battle group, included Tracker, Huntress and fourteen fully armed and crewed Pirate Interdiction warships attached to their modified Class Seven cargo ship tender which housed their support staff of a hundred people. Wren’s crew was younger than the people who gravitated toward Rachel and the Queen Elizabeth. As the ranks filled in, Wren and Rachel fretted over

the relative inexperience of Wren's crews, but other than training, there was little they could do.

Tracker and Huntress did indeed get along well. Huntress had been loaded with the latest updates to the PI ships' software. Tracker made Huntress sentient and Huntress repaid the favor by bringing Tracker and the rest of the ships in the squadron up to speed on the latest research and development. After much discussion, Tracker and Huntress, rather than Wren and Kim, decided who would fill out their human crew. Wren would take the front seat, the "pilot" position, in Tracker and a fire control specialist with impressive skills who had arrived from Eretz in the same convoy that had carried Huntress, named Dustin, would take the fire control seat. Huntress had been adamant that Matilda ride in her fire control seat behind Kim in spite of the fact that Matilda was an engineer and had no combat experience. Matilda was thrilled that Huntress wanted her but there was more to it than even Huntress knew. Matilda explained it to them over dinner the day before they left.

"Are you sure you want to put your head in the lion's mouth?" Wren had asked.

"I don't think you understand," Matilda replied. "The safest place I can be is with you."

"We're going into combat," Wren protested. "How safe is that?"

"Since Greg first set foot in a PI ship, no member of the extended Solomon family has ever been killed in battle," Matilda said. "Not even defeated. You have lost ships and crew along the way, but even those losses were much smaller than any similar force might have faced under similar circumstances. Look at the numbers. Compare the two ships and crews you lost in the recent battle with the losses everyone else took. Even your grandmother with only one ship lost a greater percentage of her crew and sustained more damage than you did and you had a totally green crew. Half of them had never seen a battle before."

"I don't get it," Wren said.

"The security service lost an entire wing in the battle. The station's fixed batteries were hit hard enough to lose half their staff. You took fewer losses and killed more enemy than anyone else including your famous grandmother. Together, you and your grandmother destroyed more ships and killed more enemy, than everyone else put together," Matilda continued.

"Yes, but we have been defeated. My grandmother and her senior crew was captured and tortured by Swordsmen," Wren said.

"No! Your father, your uncles and aunts and a bunch of teenagers armed with two ancient warships and fewer than a dozen drones rescued them. Saul delivered the most humiliating defeat the Swordsmen have ever suffered and he was a teenager at the time. I know everyone involved still suffers from the experience, but they lived to tell about it. Emerson Winthrop the Third did not. He was publicly executed in front of news reporters. He was killed by a teen. He was killed by a Jewish teen at that. How much more embarrassing can you get? Especially given the Swordsman hatred for Jews?"

"Maybe," Wren admitted. "But still, Lindsay, Twyla and Tobias and Sunshine Running-Water died under my command while defending this station. We're not what you think we are."

"Look at Greg and Avi. They were two of the most powerful Swordsman fighters of their day. They were never defeated in battle. NEVER! Not a lot of people know this, but after Avi lost her mind

and the ships were declared unsafe to fly, they committed suicide by flying into the system's primary. They died undefeated. Undefeated. Can't you see why I would rather be with you than anywhere else in the galaxy?"

Wren turned to Kim, "How much of this did you know when you came looking for me?"

"All of it, but I wasn't planning on bringing it up," Kim said. She shot a sharp glance at Matilda. "You need to not think like you're some kind of god. There are enough people around here that worship you and you need to keep a level head."

"I knew it, too," Wren admitted softly. "I figured it out when I was with my grandparents at a conference on Earth as a teen. It doesn't change things. The secret, by the way, should be no surprise to anyone who knows any member of the Solomon family. Intense training is the key. Intense physical and mental training is a vital part of everything we do, and I have that on Greg's authority from his own journals which I retrieved when I was at Eretz. Gabby had them."

Once the group departed on the mission, Huntress and Tracker ran merciless training simulations with all the combat personnel and the group's sentient warships to hone their skills.

Huntress' library of simulations and training exercises included some of the most diabolical situations Wren had ever seen. The simulation creation gang at Eretz had outdone themselves. Greg and Avi would have approved of the intensity of the training delivered in the actual combat stations the crews would occupy when the time came. The time in transit passed quickly. When the group arrived at its station, in preparation for the assault on Homestead, Wren declared them ready for battle.

Six glass recon drones, little changed except for Matilda's software upgrades from the initial production run half a century ago, launched to Homestead to survey the planet and determine how much damage had been done in the recent occupation by the Swordsmen. While the battle group waited for the drones to return, there was still plenty of work to do. Even though the over-wing mount for the Glass-ruptor had survived its test jumps to and from hyper drive, the missiles were not mounted to the ships until the final rendezvous point. Matilda was still not confident that the mount would survive the stress. At the rendezvous point, the PI ships were dismounted from the tender and the Glass-ruptors attached. The mount was tested again and passed the short jump tests.

The Queen Elizabeth arrived after Wren's group had finished their preparations. The "Federation Intelligence Officer" was securely ensconced in the Queen Elizabeth's brig. Whether he or any of his staff made it home would depend on the outcome of the next two battles.

The Queen Elizabeth deployed the two convoy escorts that had ridden with her. The convoy escort was the most heavily armed small ship ever built. Its armament was intended more to be a deterrent to pirate attacks than for its real ability to fight an enemy. While it could deliver a tremendous amount of ordinance in a short time, it was clunky and awkward unlike the more nimble PI ship.

Upon arrival, the Queen Elizabeth split into its four component parts. The integral central core contained the battleship's combat systems and armor. Behind that was the hospital ship that had been grafted to it to support the ship's original mission as an emergency responder and colony ship for the establishment of new Federation colonies on habitable planets. The cargo bays and hangar deck were behind the hospital module. The hanger deck was packed with small interceptors, known as "picket"

ships, that would defend the tenders and capital support ships not directly involved with the attack.

Three self-sustaining hyper-capable cargo ships were attached around the Queen Elizabeth's central truss structure. In colony service, these modules housed the colonists and materials they would need to establish the colony. On this mission, they housed eighteen thousand mercenaries. A separate cargo ship carried their weapons, drones, aircraft and combat equipment. By separating them from the Queen Elizabeth, they could be deployed when and if necessary. The small picket ships that would guard them departed the hangar deck and established their patrol patterns.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER FIVE

“**D**RONES ARE BACK” Faye Anne announced. “Come on over.”

When Wren and Kim arrived at Elizabeth’s conference room, Faye Anne, Rachel, Wendy, Wren’s grandfather, Isaac, his great-uncle, Joshua and three men Wren did not recognize were in the room. The newcomers looked pale and tired as if they had traveled a long distance in a short time.

One of the newcomers, obviously stiff and in pain held his hand out for Wren. “Wren, it is a pleasure to finally talk to you. I’m Reuben, this is my brother Rashi, and our cohort in crime, David. The rest of our gang is still recovering from the trip. You’ll meet them in due time.”

Wren stood in awe. “The original battle group,” he said. “This is my wife, Kim.”

“Pleasure to really meet you,” Reuben said. “We were at your wedding, but I doubt you remember us. Wren, it’s not the whole group. We’ve lost all but one of the Marines in that first battle group along the way. Suwanee is with us, but the rest are gone. They were good people and we still miss them.”

Reuben lifted Kim’s hand and kissed it. She blushed. “Welcome to the family,” he said.

From a seat at the large conference table, Rashi said, “Could we have Matilda and her staff come here? I’m in no shape to go there.”

Reuben nodded, “Yes, what we’ve seen looks good, but sometimes an old hand sees things a youngster misses. Have her bring the data files.”

“Certainly,” Wren said as left the secured room to make the call.

“Sorry, Rachel,” David said. “Gabby’s right. He looks like Isaac, but he has your smile.”

David winked at Kim. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

Kim nodded as the significance of these three men being in this room slowly dawned on her.

“A little overwhelmed?” Isaac asked.

“Yes,” Kim admitted.

“Don’t be,” David said with a chuckle. “We’re just a bunch of geezers who should have retired long ago, but came out for one last hurrah.”

Wren returned and Faye Anne said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, let’s begin. The drone report is in. As we all know, no plan survives contact with the enemy and this one is no exception. The Swordsmen do not use satellites for military communications. Their system is entirely ground based with a series of towers running across the surface and, I assume, undersea cables.”

“Are there no satellites?” Wendy asked.

“Broadcast and weather satellites, and a couple with civilian communications, but that’s it,” Faye Anne replied.

“Are you sure you didn’t miss anything?” Wren asked.

“Nothing, in fact, the biggest surprise is something we found that we did not expect. Remember the diabolical shipping containers with lasers that Greg sprinkled all over the system? A couple dozen are still out there,” Faye Anne said in amazement. “And, based on the readings we took as the drones passed, they still work.”

“How is that possible?” Rachel asked. “It’s been...”

Faye Anne held up her hand. “A very long time, I know. Not only that, but the reactor from the battleship you destroyed is in stable orbit around the gas giant.”

“I would have thought the Advance Pilot School would have cleaned all that up,” Wendy said. “You know, target practice or something.”

“Me, too, but apparently not,” Faye Anne said.

“Are they dangerous?” Wren asked.

“Not to us,” Rachel said. “They were programmed to power down after six months if nothing came their way. They will not power back up until they receive a code and a handshake from a PI ship. Sitting quiet, I’ll bet the solar panels have kept their batteries fully charged. The only problem is I don’t know the code.”

“I do,” Wren said. “It’s in Greg’s journal.”

“What else is in his journal?” David asked.

“Only that he loved Avi very much and was completely afraid of her.” Wren said.

“No surprise there,” Wendy said. “We were terrified of her when we were growing up. We knew what she could do.”

Wren looked at his grandfather and his great-uncle. They felt the same way about their wives. Rachel and Wendy were only slightly more stable than their mother. He looked at Kim who smiled demurely. For Wren’s part it was his absentee father who was the homicidal manic in his family.

Rashi said, “I think we should collect the containers and take them with us. We don’t need them here.”

“Before we begin, we have a formality to observe,” David said. “A declaration of war has been issued by the Federation and by the Swordsmen. Do we have evidence that this planet is controlled by the Swordsmen?”

“Yes,” Faye Anne replied. “We have evidence from their broadcast news programming that this



is the case.”

“Then you may proceed with your attack,” David said.

“So how do we attack this planet?” Wren asked knowing that one of the most experienced battle groups ever created clustered around him.

“The good news is the planet has not been resupplied since the Swordsmen attacked it,” Faye Anne said. “There is wreckage strewn all over the planet. There is an installation on the moon and some missile batteries around the major cities, but there are few aircraft or space ships capable of challenging us.”

“We need to expend as few of our resources as possible,” Wren said. “We will need them for the next battle.”

Matilda’s suggestions provided the impetus that brought the plan into form. The result relied as much on technology as on weapons.

The first step of the assault was to take over the planet’s broadcast satellites. Reuben, Rashi and Matilda’s engineering team programmed two of the glass recon drones to locate and overpower the satellites. The message, a video of Rachel warning of the impending attack by Federation forces, was broadcast on every open channel on every satellite for two hours. Recon drones reported the mass exodus from the cities to the countryside. The drones returned to the ship after their missions were complete.

Another glass drone, outside the orbit of the nearest planet beamed a warning as well. It also emitted electronic noise mimicking the electronic signatures of a stealthed combat group. The Swordsman military responded as expected. They scrambled from their base on the moon to meet the threat. Hawk squadron waited until the interceptors were clear of their base before going after them with their lasers. Using targeting information provided by two additional recently reprogrammed glass recon drones, Wren’s ships, standing off at a tenth of a light second, pummeled the Swordsman interceptors with their lasers. While the power from a single laser could do little damage, their range was limited only by the ability of the targeting software to converge several of them on a single point. From that range, the targeting would have been impossible except for the precision of the targeting information provided by the glass drones.

Even at maximum acceleration, the interceptors had several hours before they reached missile range of Wren’s group. As the enemy approached, the targeting got easier since Wren’s ships were far enough apart to assist with triangulation on their targets. The Swordsman ships’ furious exhaust plumes made them easy to target as opposed to Wren’s ships who hung in space with their engines off. Each of Wren’s ships targeted a single Swordsman interceptor. With forty-eight lasers impacting each interceptor, none lasted more than half an hour from the time it left the moon to the time it was destroyed.

The decoy drone shut down and returned to the launch point.

Within six hours, the only warships Tracker could detect were Hawk squadron’s. Two cargo ships rested in cradles at the freight yard adjacent to the military base where the interceptors had come

from. Tracker's sensors showed the engines were cold and there was doubt if they were space-worthy.

A dozen of the old winged shuttles remained parked on the moon next to the freighters. Most of their wings had been damaged and Tracker doubted whether more than a few could make the re-entry to the planet's surface.

There were two runways on the planet, one in the northern hemisphere and one in the southern. There were, however, dozens of small aircraft parked next to waterways all over the planet. Clearly these people did not think much of the restrictions imposed by limited numbers of runways in favor of the freedom to take off and land from any large body of water.

Hawk Squadron parked in a low orbit over the planet. They waited for a counter-attack that never came. The missile batteries that the drones had seen in the first pass lay silent. There was a lot of movement on the surface, but none of it appeared threatening. During the night, flashes of gun and artillery fire could be seen from random points on the surface. Had Wren been able to determine who was fighting whom, he might have joined the fight, but since there was no way to know, Hawk Squadron quietly sat in orbit.

The plan had been to see which of the planet's defenses had survived the Swordsman attack and could be a threat. Since nothing appeared threatening, the rest of the battle group came closer to the planet and settled into parking orbits.

For two more days some sort of battle raged on the surface. The entire broadcast network, in fact all electronic transmission, shut down. There was some chatter from portable hand-held radios, but the transmissions were too weak to understand from space. The power grid had been shut down although there was no visible damage to any of its components.

On the third day after the attack began, as dawn approached what had been the settlement where Rachel and Wendy grew up, a transmitter hidden in the ruin of what had been the meeting hall and church when Rachel and Wendy had lived there turned on. It was tuned to a distress frequency that had been established long before humans ventured off the surface of the planet. A few minutes after the carrier signal established itself, a test pattern of color bars appeared followed by a 1khz test tone.

As the Queen Elizabeth approached overhead, a face appeared in the camera shot. The woman was elderly with deep lines on her tanned face. Her hair was mostly gray with wispy red streaks. "This is Homestead planetary security. Put me through to your commanding officer."

Rachel keyed her comm. "Colleen? It's Rachel."

"Prove it." The tone was not hostile, but it was cautious. "What was the nickname I gave you after the arrow incident and describe the incident to me."

Rachel took a deep breath. "The name was 'Stupid Cupid' because I got mad at Sean and shot him in the leg with a bow and arrow."

Wendy shot a glance at her sister. "I didn't know she called you that."

"Well, now you do," Rachel said. "Colleen, where were we going when you fell off your horse and got that scar on your neck?"

"I was racing you. We were going to the beach to meet Blondie and Brownie in the shuttle," Colleen replied.

“So, Colleen, do you need us to come down and help?” Rachel asked.

“No thanks, most of the battle took place in the southern hemisphere. The Advanced Pilot School people fought hard and could have won, but they had traitors who brought them down. There’s nobody left there now. Swordsmen leveled it and moved on leaving only a small garrison here in the north. When you attacked on the moon, we came out of the shelters and retook the planet. We’re in control again. Most of the people you knew moved back to the north about twenty years ago. We were spared the worst of the battle, and we survived by hiding in the caves and shelters we built when you were here. All our hospitals and shelters were hidden underground. The Swordsmen never found them. I think everyone you knew has died. You know Blondie, Brownie, Katherine and Sam all survived the attack when you were here. Blondie and Brownie were attacked by pirates on a supply run and died in the fight. Katherine and Sam misjudged a landing and died in the crash. My parents died in an epidemic about five years ago. Sean was killed in the recent attack.”

“Coleen, you are welcome to come with us,” Rachel said.

Coleen smiled. “No, thanks. This is home. I have kids and grand-kids and a host of orphans to care for. I’m needed here. Look, Rachel, go kill them. They deserve to die. Kill every one of them. What they did to our people, they should not be allowed to live.”

The transmitter suddenly went dead.

In the silence that followed, Faye Anne said, “I think we should send a courier to Stellar and have them put this planet on a regularly scheduled freight route.”

“I agree,” Rachel said. “Send our data from the drones. No sense in leaving them isolated.”

The battle group reassembled, collected the errant shipping containers Greg had abandoned and prepared to jump to the planet that was its real target, Swordsman military headquarters.

Rachel returned to her office after the battle group was established on course for Swordsman Headquarters. Elizabeth spoke as soon as Rachel had settled into her chair. “Rachel, I’m worried about Rashi. He does not look well.”

“Reuben says he has been like this since Esther died. He doesn’t eat and he doesn’t take care of himself. Reuben doesn’t know what to do. He had hoped this trip would bring him back around.”

“I share Reuben’s concern. Reuben is not in great shape either. I worry that the stress of battle could kill them.”

“I agree. They are dear friends and I would hate to lose them,” Rachel said. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Matilda has already spoken to me about Rashi. She has asked my advice.”

“What did you tell her?”

“To keep him as busy as possible with the younger engineers.”

“Good plan, how did she take the advice.”

“She had come to a similar conclusion on her own. She needed me to fill in the details.”

“Excellent, so what do we do about Reuben?”

“All we can hope for is that he survives this voyage long enough to get back to Eretz and the rest of his family.”

“I agree.”

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER SIX

“THEY KNOW WE WERE AT HOMESTEAD and they know we’re coming here. There’s a spy on Homestead.” Faye Anne was furious when she reported the results of the first sweep by the glass recon drones.

“Probably got a courier off from the moon base,” Rachel said calmly. “Either way, we’re committed. Do they know we have arrived or where we are?”

“There’s so much noise, I don’t know how much is propaganda and how much is real.”

Rachel sighed. “We’ll shut it all down soon anyway. We launch one hour after sunset at the tunnel complex. Get the containers moving.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Faye Anne, don’t be like that. The plan is solid. We may be outnumbered, but we’re smarter and better armed.”

“I hope so.”

Using the PI ships and small picket ships as glorified tow trucks, forty of the laser armed containers were flung into position around the small moons that held the smallest of the outlying Swordsman defensive bases. The hope was that the containers would eliminate many of the lighter in-system interceptors before they could become a threat. Even if some of the containers failed to respond to the wake-up signal, any that did was more than they had before.

At one hour after sunset, the battle began. The laser armed containers were signaled to activate. There would be no way to know if they functioned until they attacked something. Wren’s sixteen PI ships hyper jumped to planned coordinates ringing the planet. They each launched two Glass-ruptors from the over-wing mounts and jumped back to the tender where Matilda’s team removed the mounts. As close as they had come to the planet, there was no doubt that they had been detected. Since virtually no one else used short hyper jumps with ships other than PI ships and there were not a lot of PI ships still in service and no one else used them in a fleet, there was only one force that could be attacking this planet. However, before the news could be spread, the surveillance and communications satellites fell silent as the Glass-ruptors did their work.

Having determined the locations of the weapons satellites from the first pass by the glass recon drones, after verifying that the communications satellites were dead, the PI ships attacked the weapons satellites with Disruptor missiles. Unlike the glass drone which was stealthy due to the fact that its glass structure did not reflect radar, the Disruptor deliberately drew attention to itself. Sensing the direction from which a laser intending to destroy it originated, it could follow the beam back to its source while deflecting the beam with its spinning mirrored exterior. Once reaching the proximity of the beam’s source, the missiles turned on their equipment and destroyed the satellite’s higher order electronics.

The PI ships were now well inside the perimeter guarded by the system’s interceptors and picket ships. The defenders scrambled to meet the intruders. As soon as the interceptors had abandoned

their large bases near the planet, the convoy escorts hyper jumped to the vicinity of the biggest and closest military and freight depot on the planet's larger moon. Within ten minutes, the escorts' vast laser arrays had reduced the fragile buildings to rubble. Freighters on the ground were disabled before they had a chance to start their engines. Missiles from the ground batteries were less than half way to the escorts before the escorts jumped away putting them out of range. The glass recon drones which monitored the attack recorded secondary explosions deep in the rock underneath the installation. The experimental, spinning, ground penetrating missiles worked. The missiles had been Matilda's pet project for a couple of years. Rashi had made adjustments to the software and the combined effort paid off.

The laser armed shipping containers began picking off the interceptors as they rose from their remote bases. It was hard to tell how many of the containers functioned, but enough did that they had a large impact on the forces attacking from behind where the Queen Elizabeth and group had slipped inside the defensive perimeter. Even with the containers, entire fleets of interceptors were able to leave their bases and Rachel prepared her group for the attack.

The convoy escorts jumped to another close-in interceptor base, but where the first base had been thrown off by their drive to engage the PI ships, this second base was further away and had launched its ships by the time the escorts arrived, but the ships were still close to the base. This was where everyone expected the plan to fall apart. Whether it did or not remained to be seen.

The PI ships, taking advantage of the parallax derived from their relative distance from each other, used their lasers with brutal efficiency. Of all the simulations Greg had ever developed, this was the toughest to master and the deadliest. Targeting solutions and laser coordination between ships required a level of concentration not possible without sentient ships. Fifty Swordsman interceptors and picket ships were destroyed before one got close enough to lob a missile at one of the PI ships. A counter-measures missile distracted that one Swordsman missile and it detonated harmlessly.

Up to this point the PI ships had been up against small nimble lightly armed ships with limited armor. Killing them was not difficult thanks to the intense training Wren had imposed on his crews, but even as Wren tried to keep his mind on the swarms of ships attempting to reach his squadron he wondered about the bigger ships. If the Swordsmen had been given warning of the attack, where were the capital ships? Where were the destroyers and the cruisers? He did not expect to see a battleship like Elizabeth. No battleships had been built that he knew of in at least twenty years. The Federation had abandoned battleships in favor of carriers and most of the other forces used mid-sized ships. Still, there had to be more ships than this.

The convoy escorts finished destroying a second military installation on the moon when a wave of destroyers appeared around the Queen Elizabeth and Wren's tender which were parked in orbit near the asteroid belt. The Queen Elizabeth and the tender had their heaviest armor and greatest concentration of weapons at their head ends. They were vulnerable at their propulsion systems and so had parked facing away from each other. The two dozen picket ships that guarded them were no match for the destroyers. Rachel had deployed the pickets in a ring around the space between the propulsion units. Their weapons faced outward from the ring. Unlike most battleships whose weapons are restricted to the armored mushroom top, Elizabeth's weapons were positioned all along her frame. Only her missiles were restricted to firing forward. Wren's tender had no missiles, but it had more lasers than the convoy escort.

Using the same parallax advantage Wren had used, Rachel ordered her laser batteries to engage the enemy. The destroyers were much better armored than the interceptors and were harder to kill. Still, Rachel, who had been doing this since she was sixteen, called her targets carefully and destroyed them

as methodically as possible. Even so, some of the missiles did get through and impacted the armored mushroom top of the battleship. The tender took half a dozen missile strikes, but since Rachel ordered all crew on all ships into space suits before the battle, no lives were lost. Elizabeth's damage was limited to the cargo decks and external laser batteries. The troop carrying modules and the unarmed cargo ship with their weapons escaped unscathed.

Lasers alone had not been enough to kill all the destroyers. Rachel had deployed fifty of her missiles, and in the end, had prevailed.

After the destroyer assault, a hyper jump brought the Queen Elizabeth and her support ships including Wren's tender to within striking distance of the planet. The ships lined up single file in a low orbit just outside the planet's atmosphere. The planet's atmosphere was thin, but not so thin that troops and equipment could not be parachuted to the surface from space. Airborne drones and manned aircraft descended to the surface first. They approached the planet through the large holes in the planet's defensive network and attacked communications towers as they encountered them. The power grid was next. By destroying selected power line towers in long stretches of wire, they could disable the grid and minimize the difficulty of repair once the planet was turned over to the Federation.

While covering the mercenary aircraft's descent, one of Wren's ships got caught between two suicides and rammed. The three ships fell together toward the planet's surface exploding when they hit the ground.

Ground based missile batteries licked up at the mercenaries' aircraft and destroyed many of them, but not enough to stop the ground assault. Mechanized armor and artillery parachuted to the surface. Rumbling across open flat territory, their treads left scars on the face of the planet. The Swordsmen were particularly adept at ground warfare. Even though the battle in space had been lost, the Swordsman soldiers fought valiantly inflicting great losses on the advancing mercenaries. But even that was not enough. The mercenaries drove relentlessly toward where the headquarters was believed to be housed.

The ground battles had been going on for a full day and night when Tracker noticed a disturbing reading on his sensors.

"Task force inbound," Tracker commented. "A battleship, four cruisers and ten destroyers. ETA to missile range six hours."

Wren studied the formation carefully. No matter how he figured it, he was hopelessly outnumbered. "Dustin, climb out of there. Take the front seat," Wren said as he unstrapped himself. He climbed into the fire control position swapping places with Dustin. He closed the display shell around him. "Tracker, give me the firing display from one half missile range directly aft of the battleship on its center axis."

The spherical display showed the ships of the enemy task force as if Wren was sitting in the middle of their formation. Wren studied the formation rolling on the seat's gimbals until he felt he completely understood it. "Tracker, here's the plan. You will pass these instructions to each of the ships in turn. Communicate with UV lasers."

"Understood."

“We will jump simultaneously in one hour. I will point to a location with the targeting helmet and you will calculate the coordinates. I will tell you which ship will go to those coordinates. They will load two heat seekers, one proximity and one range-effect missile in their forward and after tubes. We will all jump at the same time and as soon as they are in position, they will fire full volleys forward and aft. They will need to jump to interim positions away from the formation so they approach it from the sides. As soon as their missiles are away, they are to jump in two steps to a point just outside missile range behind the task force. Are you ready?”

“Yes, Wren.”

“Here is the first location.”

“Got it.”

“Forward target.”

“After target.”

“Got it.”

“Make sure you give them their alignment so that the missiles are properly aimed.”

“Got it. Which ship?”

“Hawk Three.”

“Wren, perhaps it would be simpler if you chose the targets and I calculated a point midway between them for the ships to jump to,” Tracker offered.

“Good idea. Hawk Four, forward target, after target.”

“Got it.”

Wren assigned each of his ships to specific targets and Tracker passed the information to each ship in turn.

“Wren, where are we going?” Tracker asked.

“Up the pipes on the battleship,” Wren replied. He had picked the most dangerous assignment for himself.

“What about Kim and Huntress?” Tracker asked.

“They’re going with us.”

“Do you mind if I consult with Huntress as to the best way to approach to this attack?” Tracker asked.

“I was about to suggest that you do exactly that,” Wren replied.

Ten long minutes later, Tracker reported back. “We have a plan,” he announced. “It will require the expense of every missile in our external racks, but we believe it has the best chance of success.”



“Whatever it takes. I do not want Elizabeth to have to go head-to-head with this ship.”

“Understood. Given the significant risks involved, we have developed a complex plan. We will make a series of short jumps. We will fire at each jump and if we have attained enough of an element of surprise, should be able to destroy the battleship without being destroyed,” Tracker said. “Wren, you do know that this is exactly the sort of battle strategy I was designed for.”

“I do indeed. my friend. Greg’s journal is full of such tactics. And you realize that you are the only type of ship that could pull this off,” Wren said.

“Wren, I have enjoyed traveling with you. I hope we survive this together,” Tracker said.

“We will. Dustin, back to your seat. How much of that did you follow?” Wren asked.

“Most of it, I think. Am I to assume that the lasers will be primarily defensive in this engagement as opposed to the last one where they were our prime offensive weapons?”

“Good point, Tracker, please pass that instruction to the other ships,” Wren said.

“It is done,” Tracker replied.

“Tracker, please remind our human colleagues to trust their ships,” Wren said.

“Aye, Captain.”

“Tell everyone to check their suits one more time. I don’t anyone dying of decompression.”

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER SEVEN

“TRACKER, ON YOUR MARK,” Wren said as the time approached for the launch to attack. They had been traveling at sub-light speed in a straight line toward the advancing task force. This was an established opening move for Federation officers, except that Wren, not having been to the Academy, did not have to abide by the “rules” although he did know what they were. He had gone into battle enough times seated next to his grandmother to know what the rules were and when to ignore them. Of course, by knowing the rules, he could feint that he was obeying them until he broke them.

The Queen Elizabeth had noticed the task force and was aligning herself to present her armored mushroom top to the oncoming battleship. Rachel had observed Wren’s Hawk squadron form up and race off in the direction of the arriving task force. Wendy pointed out that Wren was one ship short. Rachel nodded. She knew how emotionally he had taken the loss of the two ships and crews in the earlier battle. How would he fare this time? She held her fire although she knew her lasers could probably find targets at this range, but with Wren’s Hawk Squadron out there in the middle, it was better to wait.

The convoy escorts flashed by the ships clustered around the Queen Elizabeth and raced to face the arriving enemy.

Wren’s favorite tactic was to get behind his enemy and blast them from behind. This was the first time he had developed a plan that dropped him in the center of an enemy formation. He knew the risks, but he also knew the certainty of failure if he did anything else.

“Three, two, one, jump,” Tracker intoned and the battle was on.

Rachel watched as Wren’s ships whisked out of sight. Whatever he was doing would be a bold and risky move.

Fifteen small warships appeared in the center of the enemy formation. Eight fired their missiles the instant their ships reported that they had stabilized in firing position. As soon as the missiles had cleared the tubes, they jumped away. They trusted their ships and lived. Five delayed until the human pilots were sure they were stable and stayed until they were sure the missiles were traveling in the right direction. In the time it took for the missiles to find and destroy their targets, for destroy them they did at such short range, laser batteries from four cruisers and six destroyers pummeled the five small ships and disabled them leaving the ships that had not been destroyed in the first volley to kill them.

Wren and Kim jumped to the first programmed point and fired. Before the missiles had even cleared the end of the ships, and before the battleship’s laser arrays could detect their presence, the ships jumped the next point, and the next and the next. Eight separate firing positions and thirty two missiles later, two positions and four missiles shy of the end of the plan Tracker and Huntress had developed, the battleship’s munitions magazine, having been laid open in one of the first volleys, took a missile straight in and detonated breaking the battleship into a dozen pieces spinning out of control leaking air and spewing debris as they spun. Four destroyers, all that was left of the task force, maintained their course to attack the Queen Elizabeth although the probability of surviving an attack on a battleship was very slim. It was made even slimmer by the rapid approach of the convoy escorts.

Wren and Kim arrived at the rally point to find eight ships waiting for them.

“What happened?” Wren asked.

“It’s like you always said we should trust our ships. We did and we lived. They didn’t and they died,” Hawk twelve’s pilot replied.

“The convoy escorts have engaged the remnants of the task force,” Tracker reported.

“Do they need our help?” Wren asked.

Tracker paused. “No, I don’t think so. No, wait, no, definitely not. It’s over. I don’t care who you are, you do not go head-to-head with a convoy escort if you have any brains.”

“It’s good that they’re on our side,” Wren commented.

“No, Wren, they’re not on our side. We’re on their side. There is a difference.”

“Right. Let’s go home, gang.”

Wren was the last to dock at the tender. He looked at the empty docking ports and knew that they would probably never be filled again. Unless he picked up some used ships, there would be no more to fill those holes. He could pick up smaller, less capable ships, but that made no sense to him. As difficult as it might be, he needed to find used PI ships to fill out his squadron.

He knew he should debrief his crew but he was tired. He reported to Rachel that ten of his sixteen ships had returned to the tender and six were lost. She told him to rest and she would call him if the ground battle ran into unexpected difficulties.

Wren stopped at the bridge where the tender’s captain gave him a report on damages and remarked that had all personnel not been in their space suits, he would have lost all the flight engineers and service crews. He had often wondered at Rachel’s insistence on suiting up and now he understood.

Kim was waiting for Wren when he arrived at their quarters. He instantly recognized the expression on her face. He had seen it often on the women in his family right after battle. His grandfather and great-uncle actually looked forward to it. They called it “riding the tiger” and while it might have excited them, it scared the daylights out of Wren. Kim did not give him much time to think about it. Taking advantage of the weightlessness of orbit, she launched herself across the room and wrapped herself around him. It was, as his grandfather had often explained it, the ride of his life. After passionately affirming their testament to surviving and the sanctity of life, Kim fell exhausted on the bed leaving Wren to wonder how his elders could continue to do this at their age. He knew from Greg’s journals that they had participated in this ritual until the final months of their lives. There was something to be said for maintaining physical fitness.

The ships that had returned had been rearmed by the time Wren awoke. Kim was already up and in the shower. He blew her a kiss through the shower door and she returned it in kind. He checked in with Rachel who reported that the battle on the ground was proceeding well and he should stay where he was and she would call him if she needed him.

Kim came out of the shower and jumped him again. Wren’s combat crews were all “couples” in the sense that they were socially linked. Dustin and Matilda had relationships with members of the tender’s crew. Wren wondered how many “affirmation of life” rituals would be going on right now on this ship. He stopped thinking about it to deal with matters at hand.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MERCENARIES HAD TAKEN every major installation they knew about on the planet except the underground facilities and had not found the command center. They knew it was still active because ground troops were being coordinated from somewhere. A week after the initial assault, the mercenaries felt that they needed to go after the underground complexes. The dome adjacent to the complex Rachel had previously visited was intact. The mercenaries had held off approaching this area due to Rachel's concern that it was full of women and children.

The mercenary field commander, Commander Erickson, called up to Rachel after entering the large terminal area next to the flight apron where Rachel and her family had landed over half a century earlier.

"Captain, you're not going to believe this," Commander Erickson said. "You really need to see it for yourself."

Rachel called Wren and Kim, Tracker and Huntress to escort her personal launch to the surface. The three ships touched down lightly and rolled to the terminal building where the mercenaries waited for them.

Commander Erickson saluted as they approached. "This way, Ma'am. Please follow me."

Rows and rows of women and children sat on the floor or on their luggage in the terminal building. They looked up at Rachel as she entered. Rachel lifted her face shield. An excited whisper floated around the huge room. Some of the women smiled and then quickly looked away as if embarrassed. One little girl of perhaps six or seven years of age broke free from her mother and ran to Rachel wrapping herself around Rachel's leg.

"Are you Captain Rachel?" the little girl asked hopefully.

"Yes, I am," Rachel said stooping to look at the girl at eye level. "What is your name?"

"Harumi, Captain. Will you take us with you? Our daddies are all dead and they don't want us here any more."

Rachel took a deep breath. "I need to talk to your mommy."

Harumi motioned for her mother. A woman carrying a baby came out of the crowd.

Rachel removed her helmet. She still wore her hair short in the tradition of spacers which surprised many of the women who under Swordsman tradition wore their hair long. "I am Captain Rachel Solomon Cohen. It is possible that a member of my family, someone under my command or even myself killed your husband. Do you still want to come with us?"

"Yes, ma'am. We all come with you."

There were women and children sitting in neat rows as far as Rachel could see. There were more in the hallways. Rachel thought for a moment. She called on her husband on her comm. "Isaac, send down the med-evac ships. Prepare the hospital for a couple thousand incoming." She shook her

head before saying, "Just like the good old days."

"Acknowledged."

Commander Erickson said, "There are winged shuttles in the hangar. They appear to be functional. They could bring up a lot more people than the med-evac shuttles. You would need to bring down some pilots."

"Thank you." Rachel gave the necessary commands explaining the situation to her entire group. She requested that Wren's squadron cover the evacuation from space. There was no reason to assume that this one would go any better than some of the others she had participated in. The Swordsmen were not likely to let their women go without a fight. The mercenaries would cover the evacuation from the air, but high support was needed to escort the shuttles once they left the atmosphere.

"Wren, do you have any pilots you can spare? I have winged shuttles that we would like to use to transport the evacuees."

Matilda and Dustin quickly volunteered. They were already on the ground so they could get the shuttles airborne quickly. Wren, Tracker, Kim and Huntress did not need them for guard duty.

Rachel closed the door to the first shuttle's flight deck and strapped herself in. "Elizabeth, I haven't piloted one of these in a very long time. Walk me through the start-up procedures."

"Rachel, I do not have information on that model in my data storage. It appears to be similar to one I do have, but I would not recommend trying it based on what I know," Elizabeth replied.

"Captain, I have it," Huntress said. "If you would like I can get the shuttles airborne and Elizabeth can navigate from there."

"Huntress, it's all you," Rachel said. "Wait until I get the all clear before we start the engines."

"Yes, before we can start the engines, we need to check the reactors," Huntress replied. "Underneath the display, there are four push-button switches. Push them so they light up. That turns on the instrumentation so we can determine the ship's status."

Rachel pushed the four buttons.

"Point your helmet camera at the display. See the flashing boxes in the upper left hand corner?"

"Yes."

"Press each box once firmly. Only once each and no longer than thirty seconds."

Rachel did as instructed and waited. Nothing happened.

"Try it without your gloves."

Rachel took off her gloves and tried again. The display sprang to life with readouts on all the ship's systems.

"One system at a time. Press the window in the upper right corner of the display once."

Rachel pressed the window and the display shifted to one she recognized. "Reactor status is stable," Rachel said.

"Let's heat them up, shall we?" Huntress said.

Rachel rested her fingers on the reactor power indicators and slid her fingers up the display. The reactors responded as expected. As the reactors heated, the piezoelectric crystal shells around the reactors began to generate the power that would be needed to get the ungainly craft off the ground.

"Captain, let's check our water supply," Huntress instructed.

Rachel toggled the display to the water tanks.

"Enough to get you up and maybe get the ship back, but not enough for more than that," Huntress said.

"Maybe by the time the ship returns, Commander Erickson will have found a source of water," Rachel said.

"The whole fleet could use a refill," Huntress suggested.

"Good point," Rachel said.

"Toggle through the system displays one at a time," Huntress instructed.

Rachel finished her pre-flight checks and waited. She felt the familiar thud as the loading door closed. She had not been in one of these shuttles since she had lived on Homestead, but there are some things one does not forget. A mercenary wearing a space suit stood in front of the ship as the hangar doors opened and the air rushed out. Another mercenary stood in line with each wing tip. They held flags with which to guide her out to the flight apron. They motioned for Rachel to move out.

"Press the four icons at the top of your display at the same time," Huntress instructed.

The four pusher propellers slid out of their shrouds on the trailing edge of the wings and began to spin.

"Ease up on the power and release the brakes."

The ungainly monster began to move out of the hangar. The four pusher props clawed at the thin atmosphere as they inched the shuttle toward the runway. The shuttle cleared the hangar without incident and Rachel turned to taxi out. At Homestead, the shuttles took off from the water and did not taxi more than the distance from the dock to open water. The drive to the runway felt like it took forever leaving the shuttle vulnerable to a ground attack. Mercenary aircraft overhead spooked her more than once as they flew by.

Rachel reached the end of the runway and Elizabeth said, "Captain, you are clear for takeoff. See you shortly."

"Lock your brakes and light the jets," Huntress instructed. "Once the jets get to full power, release the brakes and run the props to full. The runway is long enough that you should have no trouble getting off the ground. Take your time. Wait for the ship to tell you when it's ready to lift. You're on your own for a while. You'll know when to pull up."

The reactors split the water into its component elements and shot them into to the jets' combustion chambers. The jets quickly came up to speed and Rachel released the brakes. Lightly loaded compared to its normal cargo, the shuttle lurched forward. The combined power of the pusher propellers and the wing mounted jets threw the shuttle down the runway. When Rachel felt she could hold it down no longer, she pitched the nose up and the monster took to the air. When she felt the thump of the landing gear doors close she knew the hardest part was over. She heard a cheer from the back and knew what she had done was right.

Rachel's personal launch took off right behind her with as many people as it could carry.

"Captain, maintain your current heading for fifteen minutes and then bank ten degrees left," Elizabeth said. "Maintain your current rate of climb. The launch will overtake you after you make the course correction. Follow it home. Well done, Captain."

The launch overtook the shuttle and Huntress called up from the surface, "Captain, the jets are close to flame-out due to the lack of atmosphere. Retract the props."

Rachel retracted the props as the jets, starved for air, quit. The rocket engines, fueled by the same elemental water as the jets, roared into life and pushed the ungainly craft built by committee into orbit. As the shuttle settled into a trajectory that would intersect the Queen Elizabeth's orbit, Rachel was oblivious to the chaos on the ground.

One of the fleeing women had passed Commander Erickson a map showing the camouflaged entrances to the Swordsman command complex. He was therefore not surprised when troops poured out to the flight apron and gun positions opened up. Apparently, until Rachel left with the first load of women and children, the Swordsmen had not believed that anyone would take them. Commander Erickson's aircraft went after the gun positions while his mobile armor mowed the ground troops down like wheat in the field.

Sitting on the ground, there was little the two PI ships could do to aid their colleagues, but they could raise their topside laser pod and use it to attack the gun positions as they opened fire and revealed themselves. Tracker and Huntress destroyed a dozen gun positions in the opening minutes of the conflict. They targeted individual artillery shells detonating them before they could hit anything.

From his position in an armored personnel carrier, Commander Erickson ordered his smallest mobile artillery units into the underground complex. Once below the surface, the small vehicles and their human operators would be unreachable by radio. The robots that plowed through the barriers to the complex had been designed for this purpose. Nuclear powered tracked vehicles, they had large pointed plows mounted on the front that pushed debris out of the way, broke through doors and since the plow was also the reactor's heat sink, burned through anything flammable that its laser or its cannon did not clear. A soldier followed each vehicle controlling it and the twin machine guns mounted right behind the plow. The only thing that could stop it was a set of narrow stairs.

Commander Erickson scanned the map with his helmet camera and distributed it to his squad leaders. They picked entrances and assaulted the complex.

Matilda's shuttle was the next one ready to go. Huntress guided Matilda's shuttle to the runway. Matilda left with artillery shells exploding around her. One of her props sheered off half way down the runway when it was hit by an anti-aircraft gun making the takeoff difficult, but she wrestled the beast into the air, to orbit and safety. That shuttle would not be returning for a second load.

Dustin, more familiar with the shuttles than the others, did not wait to reach the runway to take off. He poured full power to the engines as soon as he was clear the hangar and was airborne before he reached the edge of the flight apron.

Huntress and Tracker followed Dustin into the air and continued their assault on the gun emplacements as they flew. They joined the rest of the squadron on patrol over the battle site. Commander Erickson requested the med-evac ships to wait until he had secured more of the airport. One of the circling med-evac pilots spotted movement at the base of a mountain not far from the battle site. A column of mechanized armor drove out of the mountain headed in their direction.

“Heat seekers at twenty paces?” Huntress quipped.

“From the four and eight positions,” Wren agreed. “Lasers set to kill.”

Wren told the rest of his squadron to hold their places. Tracker and Huntress would be the only ships going in since the mercenary aircraft were busy at the main battle site.

Streaking in from behind the mountain, the two warships laid the column to waste. The machines that had not been hit left the narrow road to maneuver around their immobile comrades. Some fell off the cliff beside the road. The two ships spun back around to “plug the hole” and lobbed a volley of missiles against the opening where the enemy appeared. Rock slides sealed the entrance.

A convoy escort appeared overhead and dropped one of the few remaining ground penetrating bombs on the mountain from which the enemy armored vehicles had come. The gratifying sound of secondary explosions showed exactly how powerful a weapon that was.

Wren and Kim monitored the mountain where the column had originated under the assumption that there would be more access points to whatever lay underneath. An opening appeared on the side opposite where the armored column had appeared. Troop transports rolled out the opening to the road beyond. Wren and Kim waited until it appeared as if all those that were coming had left the mountain base and attacked the convoy with their lasers. The lasers shredded trucks and personnel alike. Individual soldiers fled their vehicles into the gullies and ravines surrounding the mountain hoping for some sort of cover from the airborne assault. Wren and Kim did not chase them, but they knew the mercenaries would.

The convoy lay burning when yet another opening appeared in the mountain. Wren put two heat seekers into the hole and sealed it. One vehicle escaped and Kim stopped it. When the mountain exhibited no more activity by nightfall, Wren and Kim returned to their orbiting patrol stations.

As darkness fell, Commander Erickson gave the all-clear and the evacuation continued through the night. By the morning all the women and children who wanted to go had been evacuated. The battle underground continued. The map the woman had passed to Commander Erickson had shown a tunnel from the complex where they were fighting to another complex underneath an adjacent mountain. Based on what the mercenaries were finding in the complex they were in, Commander Erickson believed that the complex under the adjacent mountain was the real headquarters and control center. Getting to it would take some doing and would wait until morning. His troops were exhausted and in no condition to mount a fresh assault.



## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER NINE

ISAAC AND THE MEDICAL STAFF greeted Rachel when she arrived at the Queen Elizabeth. He gave her a quick hug as she passed through the air lock. "We're hearing encouraging news from the ground," Isaac said. "Wren and Kim are an amazing team. What shape are your passengers in?"

"Eight hours in flight without a bathroom, what do you think?" Rachel asked.

Isaac laughed. "Got it. You're wanted on the bridge."

When Rachel arrived at the bridge, Wendy and Faye Anne had coffee and cinnamon rolls ready for her. Charts and maps covered the monitors around the room.

"Wendy, what's our status?" Rachel asked.

"We lost all our picket ships. The convoy escorts say that now that the space battle is over they want to go home. That was the deal," Wendy said. "Timothy will be expecting them soon."

"I know that was the deal," Rachel said. "Reuben, can we disconnect the cargo modules and tether them to the convoy escorts so the escorts can take them home?"

"I think so," Reuben replied. "Why?"

"Wendy, how far can we go with this load of refugees before we all starve to death?" Rachel asked.

"Homestead," Wendy said with a tone that said she had given the matter due thought.

"See if the convoy escorts will be willing to take the three cargo modules to Homestead with the refugees and we'll retrieve them from there. If we send the refugees ahead how long can we remain on station?"

"A month before we need to get supplies," Wendy replied. "Maybe longer if we can get stores from the planet."

"What other damage have we suffered?" Rachel asked.

"The cargo holds are mess. That's why we are short on provisions. We lost some laser batteries and a dozen personnel. We would have lost many more if they had not been properly suited," Wendy said.

"How is Wren's group?"

"He lost six ships and crew. One of the remaining ships has a hull breach and will need to come in soon for repairs," Wendy reported. "Another has damage to its external weapons racks."

"How badly was the tender damaged? Can they handle the repairs?"

“Sensor arrays and empty cargo containers took the brunt of the hits. I don’t think he lost any real functionality. They should be able to make the repairs. They have spares for the sensor arrays and the cargo containers can be jettisoned. They did lose one container with dry goods so they may have a provisions shortage if they stay on station too long.”

“Thank you. See if you can convince the escorts to take our charges to Homestead.”

After Wendy had left, Rachel turned to Faye Anne. “What is the status of the dome?”

“As we guessed, the dome was the residence for the families of the people stationed in the headquarters areas. Commander Erickson reports that his people have entered the dome and met no resistance. In fact, the dome has been abandoned except for the hospitals and homes for the elderly who were believed to be too ill or infirm to depart with the others. The houses are immaculate as if waiting for guests to arrive. The beds are made. The dishes have been put away. The laundry has been folded and put away. Toys are stacked neatly. It’s hard to believe that they don’t expect to return except that all of the clothing belonging to the women and girls is gone. Clothing belonging to the boys and the men is still there neatly hung up, or folded and stacked. We still have not located the boys although we know they must be around somewhere.”

“How have the people we have met reacted to the soldiers?”

“When they see the soldiers, they prostrate themselves with their hands toward the soldier in a sign of submission. One of the soldiers who knows the Swordsman language taught the others to say, ‘Please go about your business. I will not harm you.’ That has been quite effective and the hospitals are beginning to treat our wounded.”

“Has Commander Erickson reported on his losses?”

“No, but based on the radio chatter, we believe them to be significant.”

“How is the conquest of the underground complex proceeding?”

“It’s been brutal. The reports are gruesome,” Faye Anne said with a shudder. “The machines are crushing not only the dead, but the wounded who are too slow to get out of the way. The floors are slick with blood. There are fires raging out of control all over the complex. There have been no prisoners taken. The mercenaries hate the Swordsmen and it shows.”

“Well, we know who trained the mercenaries, so I am not surprised,” Rachel said.

“But this is little better than murder,” Faye Anne said.

“How do the Swordsmen treat their prisoners? We are being more merciful to them than they would be to us,” Rachel said. “At least they die quickly. Now, enough of this. What’s left?”

Faye Ann pointed to one of the displays. “Commander Erickson’s troops are moving in this direction. We definitely need to go there, but I am not convinced that the headquarters is where he thinks it is. I think what he thinks is headquarters is an ag complex with hydroponics and such. I believe that is where we will find the boys. I believe they will fight as fiercely as their fathers have. It remains to be seen whether the mercenaries will have the will to kill them. There is another dome, here,

that I think is also an ag center and should be staffed with boys and men too young to go to battle.”

“If that’s not headquarters, what is?”

“Twenty kilometers north of the current battle site, we see a heat signature that would indicate a facility of some kind. We have spotted many filled in trenches radiating out from it that would indicate communications pathways. There is a large mountain sticking out alone on a flat plain on top of the heat source and we almost missed it, but I think that’s where the headquarters is. I believe, based on the gravitational measurements we have taken in the area, that the top of the mountain is hollow and hides communications equipment. I would like permission to hit it here and here with the ground penetrating bombs.”

“How many do we have left?”

“Three and the escorts have them.”

Rachel pondered the situation.

“Send two of the glass recon drones to investigate and bring back detailed models of the topography. I want to know what we are hitting. Set seismographs and detonate a sounding charge. Find out what is under that mountain.”

Rachel called Wendy after Faye Anne had left. “When Matilda arrives, send her to my office. I am recalling her to this ship.”

“You’ll have to fight Huntress for her.”

“Perhaps,” Rachel said.

Matilda reported to Rachel’s office. “Hello, Matilda, coffee? Cinnamon roll?”

“Coffee, please, Ma’am.”

“Matilda, I have a problem to which I believe you have the solution.”

“Ma’am?”

“You and Rashi work well together, but he’s getting old and he can’t keep up the pace he used to. He’s doing his best, but his body is not keeping up with his mind. I would like you to work with him permanently. He needs a mind that keep up with him and a body that can keep up with both. I can’t order you to do this, but I can order Wren to order you. I would rather you did it of your own accord.”

“I would be honored, Ma’am, but Huntress worked hard to get me to fly with her. I would feel like I abandoned her.”

“I completely understand. I believe that when I show you and Huntress the projects I want you and Rashi to work on, I think she will agree with my decision. For starters, we need more of the ground penetrating bombs and only you and Rashi know how to build them from the materials at hand. Do you think Huntress will see the wisdom of reassigning you?”

"I believe so, Ma'am but she can be real stubborn sometimes."

"No more than Peter and I grew up with him." Rachel smiled. "Go, Rashi needs your help."

"Aye, Captain and thank you for the faith you have in me."

"You're welcome."

Rachel opened a secure comm link to Huntress. "Kim, may I talk to Huntress privately?"

"Certainly."

"Greetings, Huntress."

"Greetings, Captain, how may I be of service?"

"Huntress, I have a favor to ask of you."

"It is not like a captain to ask favors. A captain should give orders and expect to be obeyed."

"Very astute, but I will ask it as a favor and you may judge it as you see fit. I would like to take Matilda and transfer her to Rashi's group in weapons development."

Huntress's answer surprised Rachel. "I think you should take Dustin and reassign him as well."

"Okay, why do you think that? And do I take that to mean you do not object?"

"I do not object. Captain, I am aware of the simulations you and Wendy ran at Homestead where you determined that two people were the optimum crew for a PI ship. I have reviewed the original data and would agree with your conclusions were it not for the fact that in transit here I repeated your experiment with Wren and Kim. I have come to the conclusion that Tracker, Wren, Kim and I are better off by ourselves."

"Fascinating."

"Even with a preponderance of data from the most recent run of simulations, I doubted my own conclusions because during the early battles, Dustin and Matilda were efficient members of the team, but when they left us to take the shuttles, and we attacked the convoys I realized how much better we were just the four of us."

"You were very good, no doubt about it."

"So, based on the surprise I hear in your voice, I take it you expected a fight from me and you did not get one."

"You are correct."

"With your permission, I will inform Wren and Kim of our discussion."

"Huntress, it is an honor to serve with you."

"The feeling is mutual. Dustin is on final approach and should be docking momentarily."

As soon as Dustin's ship was unloaded, a co-pilot was assigned to him and he returned to the surface with the shuttle. Except for sporadic gunfire which was quickly silenced by the mercenaries, the evacuation proceeded as smoothly as could be expected under the circumstances.

Wren, Kim and Tracker had independently come to the same conclusion as Huntress and accepted the change of staffing without further comment.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER TEN

WITH THE COMING OF DAYLIGHT the mercenaries moved on the area that Faye Anne felt was an agricultural area and Commander Erickson thought was the headquarters complex. The agricultural area was staffed by young men and boys. Some of the older boys attacked the soldiers with farm implements, but after the soldiers made examples of some of the more belligerent youngsters, the rest surrendered quietly. They were unaware that all their female relatives had escaped.

The second dome housed the livestock and there again, after making examples of a few of the more aggressive youngsters, the remainder surrendered.

That left only the mountain.

Rachel and Faye Anne flew to the surface to consult with Commander Erickson on the best approach to take the mountain. The glass drones had determined that there was a shaft drilled straight through the center of the mountain to the caverns below. This was assumed to be the path for the communications cables. There were two ground level entrances to the caverns. The mountain was relatively soft rock since it was sedimentary and not volcanic like some of the other mountains in the area. It sat in the center of what once had been a lake bed and the ground around it was even softer than the mountain.

Rachel, Faye Anne and Commander Erickson sat around a table in what had been the departure terminal's food court.

"Commander, how severe are your losses?" Rachel asked.

"Twenty percent dead, twenty percent wounded, five percent missing," Commander Erickson said as if he was reading a list of equipment from a shipping manifest.

"How many of your people will be returning with us? We may be short of space due to the refugees."

"Maybe a hundred or so wounded might go with you, but I doubt even that," Commander Erickson replied. "The hospitals here are pretty good. We'll probably all stay."

"I would have thought you would return," Faye Anne said.

"If we return, we go back into training or to prison. If we stay here, we can legally colonize the planet as our own. We can sign a non-aggression treaty with the Federation as an independent state and all we have to worry about is the Swordsmen coming back. We can handle them. Everything else is covered in our contract to the service you hired us though."

"As you wish," Rachel said.

They discussed the potential vulnerabilities of the mountain and the installation underneath it. They determined that a ground assault would not work due to the gun emplacements ringing the mountain's top that provided clear targeting against any advancing ground force. An air assault would likely face the same kind of resistance. They stared at the projected hologram of the local topography on the table while they attempted to develop a plan.

One of Commander Erickson's aides brought coffee and stood off to one side. After studying the projection, the aide said, "Excuse me sir, but what is off this side of the area we can see?"

Faye Anne adjusted the projection to show the area in question.

"Sir, this looks like a lake above the flood plain where the mountain is," the aide said. "This looks like a natural dam. If we can break this dam, maybe we can flood them out or just drown them all, sir."

Faye Anne called for one of the recon drones to make a pass over the lake for more detail. When the data arrived they looked at the dam again.

The aide said, "We'd probably have to hit the dam from this side and that means flying over the mountain. Sorry sir, it looked like a good idea."

"I think it can work," Rachel said. "The PI ships have rear facing tubes. They can fly in from over the lake and put missiles into the dam as they fly by. Properly escorted, they should be able to make the drop and get out again. Let's send in the recon drones to find the defensive positions in the lake area above the dam. We can determine if an attack is feasible and we will proceed."

The aide said, "There appears to be another dam at the other end of this plain. The area may stay flooded and if it does, there will be nothing for us to do."

Commander Erickson said, "We'll establish positions around the perimeter of the plain and prepare for surprises."

\* \* \* \* \*

The ground penetrating bombs were transferred to Wren's tender. The convoy escorts departed with the three cargo modules full of refugees for Homestead. The last of the mercenary equipment and supplies was unloaded from the cargo ship that had accompanied the battle group and the cargo ship left with the convoy escorts and refugees. The remaining battle group consisted of the Queen Elizabeth minus the parts that made her a colony ship, Wren's tender and ten PI ships.

\* \* \* \* \*

After reviewing the images of the anti-aircraft emplacements above and below the natural dam, Rachel and Commander Erickson agreed that attacking the dam with the mercenary aircraft was too dangerous and not likely to succeed. There were installations above the rim of the plain and around the lake that the mercenaries could attack after the dam had been broken, but going after them sooner was not prudent. However there was another option.

Wren's ships took positions over the valley just beyond the atmosphere. Using some of the same math Saul had used when he backed two fully loaded PI ships into the atmosphere, they balanced on their thrusters holding stationary positions over the valley that allowed them to extend their laser pods. If they entered the atmosphere with the pods extended, the pods would have ripped off. Even Saul did not attempt that.

Wren and Kim flew down the length of the river that ended at the dam. Flying as low and as fast as the aerodynamics of the PI ships would allow, they approached the dam at Mach 1. Anti-aircraft batteries opened up on them as soon as they reached the lake. As quickly as the batteries opened fire,

they were silenced by the combined lasers of the eight PI ships overhead sitting on their thrusters. Seconds apart, Wren and Kim cleared the dam and fired the missiles out of their rear firing tubes. The ground penetrating bomb had been intended to be used by dropping it straight down. Since it was entering the dam at an almost flat trajectory, there was some doubt as to whether it could do the job.

Wren pulled up hard left and Kim pulled up hard right to avoid the mountain and its defenses. The heat shields on the bottom of the PI ships were designed to take the impact of a laser or small missile without damage. The anti-aircraft batteries were not able to land a single hit on the ships.

Wren's bomb landed near the base of the dam. The concern had been that if the bomb hit too close to the bottom, the thickness of the accumulated sediment would absorb the explosion without damage.

Kim's bomb hit much closer to the top of the dam. Mercenary observers stationed on far hills saw the bomb's impact and felt the explosions after the time delays were exhausted. For several long minutes nothing happened. It was as if the dam had absorbed the energy and dissipated it.

One of the observers spotted a trickle of water where Kim's bomb had gone into the dam. A leak showed further down and then another. While the observers watched, the flows increased. A solitary rock rolled off the top of the dam near the water line and then another. Another rock fell only this one was below the waterline. The gap in the dam was only a few centimeters below the water line, but water seeks the lowest level and a single centimeter of depth below the surface of a lake twenty kilometers long is a lot of water. Water began to flow over the top of the dam opening the gap. More water began to flow from the hole Kim's bomb had created. A torrent of water broke through where Wren's bomb had gone and the dam collapsed.

The soft sand of the plain gave way quickly in the face of the force of the water as it cleared everything in its race to the ocean a hundred kilometers away. A wall of water ten meters high slammed into the mountain where the Swordsmen had built their command center. Water flowed into the hidden tunnels and swirled around the base of the mountain tearing out buried cables and natural gas pipelines. The dam at the other end of the plain held for a few hours before it collapsed. The water stabilized at about a meter of depth before draining out. That guaranteed that anything not in a sealed bunker would drown. As soon as the water had subsided, Hawk Three dropped the last of the ground penetrating bombs into the center of the mountain. Observers on the surrounding hills heard and felt secondary explosions for over an hour after the bomb was dropped. Smoke poured out of the hole for another week.

Swordsman soldiers came down from their battlements and surrendered. It was over.



## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER ELEVEN

WITH THE END OF THE BATTLE, Rachel released the Commodore who had started all this from the brig. She took him and his staff to the surface and delivered them to Commander Erickson. Erickson assured her that he knew how to deal with such people.

The Commodore swore he would see Rachel hanged for this and Commander Erickson threatened to push the man outside without a space suit. While he would not instantly decompress like in the vacuum of space, the planet's atmosphere was too thin to support human life without a pressure suit and he would slowly asphyxiate which was a particularly gruesome way to die. The Commodore quit his protestations as Rachel abandoned him.

The trip back to Homestead was uneventful, but by the time they arrived, they were running low on food. The welcome at Homestead was less than cordial. A flotilla of five pirate vessels was preparing to raid the remains of the planet's freight depot.

As soon as Wren realized what was happening, he commanded, "Hawk Squadron, engage!"

They had done this drill a hundred times in simulations, but they were six ships short of the team that had practiced anti-pirate maneuvers. Still, pirate interdiction was the designed purpose of the Pirate Interdiction warship. Rachel's mother, Avi, referred to it as "one of the coolest, meanest, nastiest, toughest, most heavily armed little warships ever built. We could take on a warship a hundred times our size and beat it." The pirates, who had never seen a PI ship in the hands of properly trained pilots let alone sentient PI ships in the hands of properly trained pilots with equally well trained fire control officers turned to attack Hawk Squadron.

Kim and Huntress drew first blood. It was almost like a game to them. They attacked the pirate cruiser with only their lasers. The cruiser was over ten times their size, but only boasted four times the armament. "Only four times..." Kim had crowed after she killed it. Its size made it less maneuverable and Kim had used that to her advantage flitting around the ship like a crazed bumble-bee. After half an hour of harassing the ship's weapons operators, she punched a hole in the reactor cooling panels and the reactors overheated destroying the ship.

Wren had chosen the pirate's cargo ship for his target. It was reasonably well defended, but he had to wait until he could draw it away from the depot before destroying it. Had he destroyed it too close to the depot, it would have rendered the depot completely useless. As it was, the depot was damaged from the previous battles but still functioning.

Hawk three and four teamed up on a destroyer. It defended itself ably, but careful to conserve their missiles, the Hawks brought it down with two well placed heat seekers.

The two remaining pirate ships, little more than scout explorers, fled. The rest of Hawk Squadron chased them to ensure that according to pirate lore "Dead men tell no tales" and there would be no warning that Wren and his fleet were hunting pirates. Hawk Five and Seven claimed the kills when they returned to the tender.

As a result of the first Swordsman assault on this planet when Rachel was a teen, the inhabitants had learned how to hide their food and marketable goods from an invader. The planet's prime export, now that it had gotten out of the pornographic propaganda business, was frozen food. Homestead was

known for the quality of its individually packaged meals for flight crews and for its bulk frozen foods. They had developed an ingenious scheme for hiding their products from the random pirates who wandered through and invaders like the Swordsmen. The freight containers, ready for shipment, were placed on glaciers or on the polar ice cap. A single snowfall hid them and a second or third made them impossible to find without a map.

When the convoy with the refugees had arrived, the refugees were traded for the containers of food. Since Stellar Interstellar was one of Homestead's biggest and most loyal customers, delivering as many food containers as the freighters could carry was simply good business. The convoy had departed three days earlier bound for the nearest Stellar freight depot. The shipment would be gratefully accepted. The escorts and the cargo ship that had carried the mercenaries' equipment would return to regular service from there. The cargo modules that had been attached to the Queen Elizabeth would be serviced and then attached to one of the super sized freighters and would also return to regular service. In the interest of secrecy and due to a fear that spies might still live inside the Stellar organization, no courier missile was sent ahead to alert headquarters of their plans.

While at Homestead, Wren and Rachel decided to combine their forces. They transferred Wren's personnel and supplies to the Queen Elizabeth. They sent the tender with the two most heavily damaged PI ships and such personnel as wanted to go to the nearest Stellar depot with as much frozen food as they could carry. The tender would return to regular service since Stellar had a shortage of ships following the attacks and the Queen Elizabeth was more than capable of supporting the remains of Hawk squadron as well as her own compliment of personnel.

They stayed in orbit around Homestead for a month. A convoy from Stellar arrived with a squadron of light in-system interceptors and their support staff to defend the system. Hawk Squadron and the Queen Elizabeth were free to go.

While the Queen Elizabeth was preparing to depart, Rashi came to Rachel and said, "You know, all the years we've traveled together, I always wanted to see the place where you and Wendy grew up. It sounds like a glorious place to live."

"There's not much left of the house except the foundation," Rachel said. "The Swordsmen burned it in the first attack."

"I feel I would be missing something if I left here without at least walking the places you walked," Rashi said.

"If you insist, we can go down. The runway is kind of rough, but we should be able to land on it."

Wren insisted on piloting Rachel's personal launch for the "field trip" to the surface. Kim took the copilot's chair. Rachel's entire "battle group" plus Matilda made the trip. The runway was rougher than Rachel expected, but Wren brought the launch safely to a landing. They exited the ship and Rachel began the tour. She pointed out where the meeting hall that also served as the church had been. She described the meeting where they planned their defense against the first Swordsman assault. They took off their shoes and waded in the lake where she and Wendy had sailed and swam. They stood at the two small concrete blocks that marked the remains of the bridge Grandma Rose had hidden under before she shot the Swordsman soldier who was the father of the man who would later torture many of the people present. They walked to the bases of the foundations that had been the house where Rachel and

Wendy had grown up. They had not been here since they left to attack the planet they had just come from the first time. They were not prepared for how overgrown the area had become. They could barely make out the remains of the corrals where they had kept their horses, but the deep ruts left by the PI ships, Buddy and Daisy, could still plainly be seen where they had rolled in from the lake.

Rachel and Wendy sat at the edge of the lake on the concrete bench that was all that remained of their home and cried. A lifetime of fighting other people's battles had come full circle. They had finally returned home, but it wasn't home anymore.

When Rachel and Wendy had stopped crying, Rashi revealed why he had insisted on coming to the surface. "I am staying here. I am not going with you. I am old and ill and my time has come. I wish to die here in peace. You may stay or leave as you wish, but my life's work is done. Matilda and my children have what they need to carry on."

Rashi sat in the soft grass near where the stream emptied into the lake and laid back. He smiled, crossed his arms behind his head and closed his eyes. Occasionally he would open his eyes and stare at the clouds skidding across the sky. Eventually he went to sleep and within the hour he had died. Isaac certified his death. Suwanee carried him to his final resting place. The smile on his face had never faded.

They buried Rashi in the soft ground between the houses and placed a marker. David said the appropriate prayers and everyone gave last respects. In some ways, Rashi's death gave the rest hope. Perhaps, they too could die in their own time in the manner of their choosing, in peace rather than in violence.

In silence, they returned to the Queen Elizabeth to decide where they were needed next. They headed for the depot closest to what had been New St. Louis before that outpost had been destroyed by the Swordsmen in revenge for being the hub of the refugee railroad that took so many abused Swordsman women and children to far flung colonies. Upon arrival, they were informed that while most of the planets had reported in at least once, a few had not. Their new mission was to determine if these planets were safe for Stellar to resume their regular freight runs and report on the conditions of the spaceports and freight yards.

The staff at the freight depot was duly appreciative of having been sent the frozen food. Stellar had purchased the entire shipment for their own use and had sent back a large order for more. The food order guaranteed that the refugees would be rapidly assimilated since they would be needed to fulfill the order. The Queen Elizabeth was re-provisioned and rearmed as much as possible before departing for the closest planet on the list.

Several of the Queen Elizabeth's crew elected to leave the ship to return to "normal lives" and caught rides on freighters headed to scattered parts all over the galaxy. They had accomplished the mission they had volunteered for and it was time to head home. When Elizabeth left port she carried eight PI ships and three hundred people, half of whom were medical staff. It was the smallest population she had carried in a very long time. Still, a battleship of Elizabeth's capabilities even without the three large cargo pods was not to be trifled with.

While they were still in port, Kim realized she was pregnant, a fact that surprised everyone but Wren. With one of the most experienced medical teams in the galaxy living right down the hall and not a lot for them to do, she got excellent care.

The first planet Elizabeth visited was the planet of the dinosaurs. The glass drones sent ahead reported no activity. They found no sources of energy other than what could be explained by volcanoes

and other natural phenomena. There were no radio signals. There were no power plants. They would have spotted a camp fire if there had been one. The glass drones did not even detect the dinosaurs.

The Queen Elizabeth settled into a parking orbit and deployed sophisticated sensor satellites. The satellites detected the dinosaurs. There were fewer of them than expected. Since they were cold blooded, their body temperature was only a few degrees warmer than the ambient and they were as difficult to detect as they had been the first time Elizabeth and crew had been here.

It was only after the visible light sensing satellites returned images that anyone figured out what had happened. Wreckage was strewn across the planet. The Swordsmen had attacked. The Creighton Society had been unable to fend them off. The wreckage of their flagship was scattered over a hundred kilometers of desert. The reactor section had apparently landed in the ocean which was why it was not detected earlier. The Swordsmen had landed and the dinosaurs had attacked them. Thousands of sun-bleached dinosaur skeletons littered what must have been horrific battle sites. The Swordsmen had been overcome and the surviving dinosaurs left the carcasses to provide feasts for the smaller animals.

What had happened to the ships that brought the Swordsmen was not known, but they apparently did not stay to hold the planet. After a few days of attempting to glean what information there was to collect, a courier missile was sent to the Stellar depot with the recordings and observations for examination by Stellar's intelligence service.

The next destination was the planet where human slaves were being used as prey for sport hunters. When Elizabeth had last left there, a large Federation convoy had arrived to defend the planet against other Federation forces intent on their "sport" being allowed to continue.

The glass drones found the space near the planet littered with wreckage. The spaceports and airports were largely destroyed although enough of some of the runways remained intact that a med-ship could use them. Many of the ground-based missile and laser batteries appeared functional. Rather than risk approaching the planet and being blasted out of the sky, Rachel broadcast a request to approach on as many frequencies as possible.

They orbited the planet for two days until, as dawn broke over one of the airports, they saw letters that had been painted on one of the runways. The letters, as high as the runway was wide, read simply, "WELCOME RACHEL."

After considerable discussion, aware of who might still be alive on the surface of the planet, Rachel agreed with Suwanee's suggestion that Suwanee and Dustin should go first with one of the med ships under cover of the PI ships and the armed drones.

They landed on the runway that had been painted with the greeting and rolled to the remains of the hangars near the end of the runway. A large solitary black man in ragged clothes walked toward them. He leaned on a cane as he walked. Dustin opened the hatch and Suwanee climbed out. She walked slowly toward the man with her hands clearly visible by her sides. The ship's camera relayed the scene to the Queen Elizabeth. One of the drones whistled by overhead and the man looked up. The drone carried Stellar's battle markings. He looked at Suwanee and smiled. He held his arms wide and Suwanee ran for him enveloping him in a hug. They stood, locked in the embrace, for a minute or longer.

When they released from the hug she took his head in both of her hands and looked at him as if not believing her eyes. She kissed him once, briefly, on the lips.

The man was covered with scars. His hair was almost completely gray. His beard was white. He

held himself tall and proud, but he had been injured too many times and too many of those recently to be completely upright.

Rachel watched the scene on her monitor. "Lionel?"

"I think so," Faye Anne replied.

"Amazing," Reuben said as he finally recognized their friend from long ago.

"Isaac, prepare to deploy medical personnel," Rachel ordered.

Lionel turned to face the hangar. He waved his arm and a stream of wounded emerged from between the buildings. Dustin opened the med ship's loading door and Lionel brought the people onto the ship. Once the ship was full and Lionel had briefed Dustin, Dustin took the ship back to the Queen Elizabeth. While in transit, Dustin informed Rachel that Lionel thought the wounded would be better served by transporting them to the hospital aboard the Queen Elizabeth rather than bringing the medical personnel to the surface. There were still Swordsman soldiers on the surface, but they were contained in isolated pockets and had reached a stand-off with the local population.

Suwanee stayed on the surface to assess the quantities and condition of people needing attention. She managed the flow of patients to and from the med ships. For the first month the Queen Elizabeth was on site, the medical suites and operating rooms ran full-time saving the lives and limbs of those that they could.

All the pilots except Kim and Wren ran in rotation to keep the med ships operating to transport as many people as possible. Well aware of the potential hazards of weightlessness to a fetus, Isaac had ordered both Kim and Wren to the surface where they took over air traffic control duties and moved from one surviving airport to another marshaling the flow of the med ships to the Queen Elizabeth. The PI ships, without human crews, under Tracker's leadership, maintained defensive patrol. A few pirates wandered by, but after being greeted by the PI ships did not stay long.

After a month on site, the most severely injured had been treated. It was time to start rebuilding. The Queen Elizabeth's engineering teams descended to the surface under Reuben's leadership. David and his legal team followed them to negotiate the surrender of the remaining Swordsmen soldiers. Reuben's first priority was the farm equipment that would be needed to bring in the harvest ripening in the northern hemisphere.

Stellar headquarters had been informed of the planet's status and had replied that the Queen Elizabeth should stay on station as long as they felt that their presence was of value. Stellar would send a convoy after the harvest was in. The convoy would include Colony Service staff who would help rebuild the destroyed infrastructure. In keeping with Colony Service policies, those members of the Queen Elizabeth's crew who wished to stay would be compensated and assimilated into the community.

After four months on site, the harvest began. Large machines, often driven by combat pilots or engineers, brought in the crops. As would be expected with inexperienced operators, accidents happened frequently. In one of these accidents one of the engineers had become trapped under the machine. Reuben and others on site extricated the engineer but the exertion proved to be too much for Reuben. He sat down adjacent to where the medics were tending to the engineer. A blood vessel to his heart had burst and he died sitting next to one of the machines he had lovingly resurrected after the damage it had suffered in the battle. The injured engineer had been sent off before anyone realized

Reuben had died.

Suwanee send a courier informing her children that their father had died. Delmar replied, "Mama, come home. There's babies and their parents that miss you and your loving touch."

The Stellar convoy arrived after the harvest had been processed and brought a contingent of Colony Service personnel. The convoy picked up the products intended for market. Suwanee left with the convoy for the long ride home to her children and grandchildren.

Colony service requested and Stellar agreed that four of the PI ships should stay on station with their crews to defend against pirates or further Swordsman activity. Since the PI ships could operate in space and take off or land from a normal runway, they made the most sense to be included in the planet's defense network. The two PI ships that had been sent home for repair had been repaired and assigned escort duty. They would travel attached to a freighter which visited planets whose need was too small for a full convoy and were therefore serviced by a single freighter. There were those in the Stellar Security Service for whom this was their favorite type of duty.

The convoy also brought news that a major political upheaval was underway in the Central System that could impact how everyone did business. The "Born Agains" were rising in the polls and taking one district after another.

The Federation forces had regrouped and were taking back the planets the Swordsmen had captured. They were preparing to continue the drive to the heart of Swordsman space. The Swordsman forces were in disarray following the collapse of their command structure caused, in large part, by the raid Rachel had run on their headquarters. The Federation High Command expressed its gratitude to Stellar for funding Rachel's initiative. However, there was no mention of gratitude to Rachel or any of the people who carried out the mission.

Saul continued to destroy the strongest of the Swordsmen outposts with devastating results. The Swordsmen appeared to be ready to surrender and had made overtures to that effect. However, the "Born Agains" who were even more conservative than the corrupt Conservative party currently in power would not allow the Swordsmen to surrender until they agreed to return all territory included in the secession to the Federation and convert to the "Born Again" religion. If the Conservatives were to avoid being branded "liberal" they had no choice but to keep the pressure on the Swordsmen.

Saul's continued predation on the Swordsman military installations presented a political problem for the "Born Again" leadership. He was doing what they wanted done, but he was not of their religion and that was problem. They had no control over him and no advance knowledge of his targets. They feared that if they did not contain him somehow, when they rose to power, he was as likely to attack them as he was the Swordsmen. They were wrong. Unless they did something very stupid, Saul had no issues with them and would continue to press his campaign against the Swordsmen as long as he had personnel and ordinance with which to fight.

But then, given their arrogance and their closed minds, it was only a matter of time before they did something extremely stupid.

In those areas where the "Born Again" party had dominance on the planets of the Central System, new restrictions on religion and life style were imposed and a wave of refugees flooded to the outermost regions of the settled galaxy. Not since the early days of the Swordsman rise to power did the Colony Service see so many people willing to uproot to travel to the wilderness.

The Queen Elizabeth was redeployed to Stellar Headquarters and refitted for her role as a colony ship exploring new places for people to settle.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER TWELVE

THE WAR BETWEEN THE SWORDSMEN and the Federation dragged on for another four years. After four years, both sides were weary of war and the Swordsmen virtually admitted defeat, but they could not accept the terms imposed by the wealthy incoming “Born Again” politicians who had everything to gain and little to lose by the war continuing.

Timothy and the Stellar board of directors ended the war by fiat. They were tired of losing ships, cargoes and personnel to this needless conflict. They declared that if hostilities did not end by a certain date, their freighters would return to port and park until a treaty was signed. Since Stellar carried over three quarters of all interstellar freight, such a move would have shut down interstellar commerce and the over populated planets in the Central System which depended on imports of food from the colonies in other star systems would be faced with mass starvation.

By Timothy's order, Rachel's legal officer, David and his team were dispatched to negotiate the treaty. This was especially painful for both sides in the conflict since the only thing they agreed on was that they both hated the Jews and Muslims. The negotiations were held at a Stellar depot on an airless moon of a large planet under heavy guard by Stellar security forces. The only people happy with the selection of the negotiating team were those third parties who knew that David would negotiate a reasonable agreement which would not deteriorate in a few years to another war. David announced early in the process that there would be no reparations since reparations were often the cause of secondary wars which were in some cases more costly than the war that originated the reparations.

The negotiations took six months during which time the cease-fire appeared to hold. Even the pirates seemed less willing to risk attacking a convoy or a settlement until they knew the outcome of the talks. Saul stopped his attacks and the colony service operated unimpeded transporting settlers to new homes at the edges of civilization.

The day the treaties were signed, the “Born Again” military tribunal issued a warrant for Rachel's arrest on the charge of leading a military invasion without authorization. In fact, they issued a hundred warrants that day for officers who had served against the Swordsmen. All the officers were Jewish.



## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**B**ETRAYED BY THE GOVERNMENT she had worked so hard to defend, Rachel ordered all but her family and the remnants of her original battle group off the ship at the nearest Stellar depot. She off-loaded the three large cargo modules that regularly carried colonists and left them in care of the harbormaster. She would not be coming back for them. The ship was reduced to its central core, but it was still a powerful weapon when wielded with the skill that Rachel and few others possessed. Rachel compromised and allowed those people who wanted to go directly to Eretz to travel with them. When the Queen Elizabeth departed for the long straight shot for Eretz she carried four PI ships and a couple score of people including Kim and Wren's four children all of whom had been born on the Queen Elizabeth.

Once Elizabeth had cleared the space around the freight depot, she was perfectly capable of making the run without human intervention. Rachel, severely depressed, came out of her cabin only as her discipline required her to check the logs of the bridge watch crew. She did spend time with Wren, Kim and the babies, but they came to her quarters and not she to theirs. She appeared to enjoy reading to them and being with them, but her overall mood was still very dark.

Eretz held a unique place in the Federation. Eretz and the half dozen allied planets in its vicinity were the home to the most technologically advanced communities in the galaxy. Many of the systems the Federation used in its weapons were developed at Eretz. The shipyard at Eretz produced convoy escort ships and in-system interceptors. Fifty or more such ships could be expected to occupy the Eretz defense system's space since the initial shake-down cruises and crew training was accomplished with fully armed warships. All of the pilots who commanded ships built at Eretz were trained at Eretz. As several forces with more arrogance than sense had discovered, attacking Eretz was suicidal.

The engineers at Eretz designed the control systems for the majority of the weapons used by the Federation and there was an urban legend that inside the software that guided the weapons was a few lines of hidden code that would allow the Eretz defense command to take over a hostile missile or ship and subvert it to attack the people who had attacked Eretz. No proof of this contention was ever discovered, but the story kept many Federation commanders in line.

And then there was the Eretz intelligence service, as Admiral Sherman was often quoted, "The most fanatical, efficient, best organized intelligence gathering organization in the history of the human race. Centuries of paranoia on a cultural level honed to a level inconceivable a few decades ago. With more people in deep cover than any other service." They came by their paranoia honestly.

Eretz had never signed an extradition treaty with anyone although criminals from within the allied defense group were often returned for prosecution. People who requested asylum at Eretz were routinely granted it and absorbed into a community that knew how to deal with the kinds of people who might have sought refuge for political reasons.

Wendy had no idea how to deal with her sister. Rachel had always been the leader. Wendy had supported her, but in this, there was nothing Wendy could do. Her husband, Joshua and Rachel's husband, Isaac, did what they could, but their hearts were not in it. Even Faye Anne, the "Tinkerbelle" of the group was subdued and could offer little comfort.

When Rachel came "home" to Eretz, the warrant for her arrest which would have prevented her from staying anywhere else, would have no impact on her ability to stay at Eretz. In fact all of the

officers sought by the “Born Again” tribunal except Saul reached Eretz and sought asylum there. Saul could not be found.

The Queen Elizabeth was escorted to the dock at the Eretz lunar freight yard where she had been parked when she first returned badly damaged from the battle with the Third Force in which she had changed the direction of Federation history. The extended family who had remained at Eretz planned an elaborate homecoming for Rachel and her team at the equestrian center where Greg and Avi had held many parties. Kim’s family came and was delighted to meet the four newest members of the family.

Still, with all the attention, Rachel’s heart was not in it. She wandered off to the field outside where they had played that crazy made up game her father had invented for them. She sat on the bleachers and cried. Isaac sat beside her. There was nothing he could do. His medical transponder reader told him that Rachel had lost the will to live. All the medical technology he had at his disposal could not save his wife from her decision to allow herself to die.

\* \* \* \* \*

Six months after their arrival at Eretz, David and Isaac met with Kim and Wren.

“Wren, you need to take Elizabeth and get out of Federation space,” David said.

Isaac said, “I have provisioned Elizabeth with enough food for you and the kids for ten years. Rachel is not likely to live much longer, and when she dies, possession of Elizabeth becomes legally problematic.”

David continued, “It is possible that Saul could claim her and we can’t allow that to happen. Since the charges against him were announced Saul has been attacking “Born Again” colonies as well as Swordsman bases and he has expanded to civilian targets. In Saul’s hands there is no telling what damage Elizabeth would cause.”

“Wren, no one can find Saul let alone stop him. Elizabeth stopped him once right after your sister was killed, but we don’t think even she could do it again. You need to find him and stop him,” Isaac said. “I know he is my son and your father, but you may have to kill him to stop him. The worst part is that I know that only you are capable of doing it.”

The next day, Rachel was sitting amongst a group of small children at the hospital’s pediatric common room reading to them when she slumped down. By the time anyone realized what had happened she had died.

Wren, Kim, Elizabeth, Tracker, Huntress and the four children were already wending their way out from the freight yard when Isaac called to inform them of Rachel’s death. While they would not hear about it until much later, Wendy went to bed and stopped eating. Two weeks after Rachel died, Wendy died in her sleep. Isaac and Joshua went back to work in the hospital’s trauma center and lived for another few years before they, in turn, passed away in their sleep.

David represented all of the Jewish officers wanted by the “Born Again” tribunal at their trials in their absence and succeeded in getting all the charges dropped but not before ten of them had committed suicide. He invoked the memory of the way American veterans returning from Vietnam and

the wars in the middle east were so shabbily treated by an ungrateful government more intent on giving tax breaks for its wealthiest supporters than it was in properly funding programs for veterans. He reminded the court that the “Born Again” party had run on a platform to end such abuses and yet it was guilty of the very abuses it pledged to stop. Less than half of the officers charged lived long enough to learn that their cases had been resolved.

David stayed on Earth representing people who had been persecuted by the “Born Again” government until he and his wife were gunned down on the courthouse steps following his winning an acquittal for a teacher accused of promoting “unauthorized doctrines” in a comparative religion class. The teacher, her husband, two journalists and a little girl who was there for a custody hearing were killed in the hail of gunfire from a pair of automatic assault rifles. The killers were neither found nor prosecuted. The killing touched off a wave of violence that lasted five years. No one was prosecuted in any of these killings even though the victims included many inept top ranking police officials placed in the jobs, not for their skills, but for their willingness to persecute opponents to the “Born Again” political party. The victims on both sides of the conflict were routinely killed in their homes in front of their families.

Competent law enforcement officers who had been replaced by the “Born Again” faithful returned to their former duties and the killings gradually stopped.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE PLANET SLOWLY ROLLED into daylight revealing to the naked eye what the ancient battleship's sensors had already determined. The planet's largest population center lay physically intact but lifeless giving off so much radioactivity it almost glowed in the dark.

The person responsible for the carnage had left his mark on this as he had on other planets devastated in like manner. Etched with a combat laser array into the pavement of the spaceport's flight apron, the bold letters stood out in stark relief visible from orbit.

YOU SHALL NOT BOW DOWN TO THEM OR WORSHIP THEM; FOR I, THE LORD YOUR GOD, AM A JEALOUS GOD, PUNISHING THE CHILDREN FOR THE SIN OF THE FATHERS TO THE THIRD AND FOURTH GENERATION OF THOSE WHO HATE ME.

YOU SMOTE MY CHILD AND I HAVE SMITTEN YOURS. REVENGE IS MINE.

Warren Elias Mahoney Solomon Rothschild Cohen ("Wren", like the bird) and his wife, Kim, read the words with dismay. Fewer than fifty ships remained in service with laser arrays powerful enough to carve the letters that deep fast enough and accurately enough to compensate for the planet's rotation. Wren knew the approximate location of all but one of those ships. He knew who owned them and he knew many of the pilots.

"Elizabeth, what is your assessment?" Wren asked his ship.

"Sensor readings approximate the readings from the other planets. Everything within twenty kilometers of the larger city centers has been killed. The method of death appears to be the same as the other planets we have seen. It appears to be a variant on the neutron bomb."

"Did anything survive?" Kim asked.

"Yes, the hydro electric plants and some of the power grid away from the main population centers still function. Many of the smaller population centers are untouched."

"This is the first planet where we have seen more than a smattering of isolated survivors. Do you think he didn't finish?" Wren asked.

"That would be my assessment," Elizabeth replied. "It is as if the assault was interrupted. The level of radiation would indicate that the attack was more recent than was the case in other planets."

"Is it possible we interrupted him?" Kim asked.

"Probably," Elizabeth agreed.

"So, working this through," Wren said. "If our assessment that he has a limited number of Disruptor missiles with which to disable the defense system is correct, we probably interrupted the assault between the first and second waves."

"That would explain the high levels of residual radioactivity and the large numbers of remaining

survivors,” Kim said.

“If he gathered the disruptor missiles after the first wave to recharge them for a second wave, he would likely have left the system until he was ready to attack it again lest there still be a few random defensive ships out on patrol that had escaped the first assault,” Wren continued.

“While he was gone, the population would come out of their hiding places to assess the damage and while they were vulnerable, he could return and finish the job,” Elizabeth added.

“And when he finished there would be fewer than a hundred survivors scattered across the face of the planet with no way to get off the planet and no way to call for help,” Wren said. “Or at least until the Swordsman Council noticed that they had not paid their taxes that year and sent someone to investigate.”

“That assumes they have someone left to send,” Elizabeth commented. “The council is fragmented. The Swordsman church has been destroyed. We had a hand in that.”

“True enough,” Wren said.

“It’s been almost half a century since the Swordsmen killed your sister,” Kim said. “You would think your father would have had his fill of revenge by now.”

“Apparently not,” Wren replied. “The Swordsman war should have been enough killing for all of us.”

“Will it never end?” Kim asked.

“Not until we find him and kill him,” Wren said. “Or he kills us.”

In the oblivious manner uniquely common to teenagers, as Greg entered the flight deck he said, “Dad, so we’ve discovered another planet full of dead people. Can we go home now?”

Wren turned to his son who bore a stunning resemblance to his ancestor after whom he was named, the patriarch of the Solomon warrior clan. “Greg, we have no home to go to. This ship is our home.”

“I want to live on a planet like normal people,” Greg protested.

“Those people down there wanted to live on a planet like normal people,” Wren said.

“And someone killed them because they followed the Swordsman religion,” Kim answered.

“Who killed them?” Avi asked as she followed her brother on to the fight deck.

“And why?” Peter asked. “Dad, I think we’re old enough to know.”

“And I agree,” Rose, the youngest of the six humans who occupied the battleship that had once housed thousands, said.

Wren took a deep breath. “This is the closest we’ve ever been to finding out for sure, but I

believe I have the answer. My father never got over the murder of my sister in a suicide bombing plot that was intended for him and my mother.”

“Our grandfather, Saul,” Greg said.

“Yes,” Wren replied. “For two decades he plotted his revenge while he worked for Stellar Interstellar Freight. Elizabeth prevented him from carrying out his plans by appealing to his sense of justice. When the Swordsmen attacked, he commanded the third largest military force in the galaxy. The secret force was privately owned and answered to no government. With open hostilities, and access to a huge military, nothing stood in the way of his revenge.”

Kim continued, “When the war started, your father and I had a squadron of sentient Pirate Interdiction warships, a Class Seven cargo ship that had been converted to a tender and carrier for the PI ships and hundreds of people on our crew. We had support from the Federation and Stellar Interstellar Freight which owned the ships we flew as well as the force your grandfather commanded. When the war ended, Elizabeth, Tracker and Huntress were all we had left.”

“When the Swordsmen surrendered, that should have been the end of it,” Wren said.

“It was for a couple of years until a new variant of the neutron bomb became available,” Elizabeth said. “Your grandfather has been methodically eliminating all the remaining Swordsman settlements.”

“Do you think he is coming back to finish the job here?” Greg asked.

“Yes, I do,” Wren answered.

“And he won’t exactly be happy to see us,” Avi said.

“He doesn’t know about you, but seeing Elizabeth even in her current state should set him back,” Wren said.

Kim continued, “Saul is uniquely well aware of Elizabeth’s combat capabilities. Remember, he and his brother, Moses, defeated a Swordsman base with two PI ships, Elizabeth, and a squad of marines. Saul knows what Elizabeth and a pair of PI ships can do.”

“So what do we do now?” Greg asked.

“We hide in the asteroid belt and wait for him to return. Then we let him make the first move.”

“Too late for that,” Elizabeth said. “We have incoming. They are hailing us. They claim to be the Edward R. Murrow. The escort is six Space Weapons Labs Model 21 and a Saturn Industries convoy escort.”

Wren said, “It’s not the Edward R. Murrow. That ship was lost at the battle at New Portland. Saturn Industries Class Seven Freighters are pretty common. Someone could easily have stolen the codes. And that must be the last Saturn Industries convoy escort we have not found. And we have a pretty good idea who commands it. Battle stations. Greg, go to Tracker’s front seat. Peter take Tracker’s fire control. Avi, Huntress’s front seat and Rose, Huntress’s fire control. Shove off as quickly

as you can. This is not a drill.”

The four teens sprinted for their cabins and the lockers where their combat flight suits were kept. They had tussled with pirates before and understood the risks.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“TRACKER ARE ALL SYSTEMS on line?” Greg asked as he vaulted into the pilot seat.

“All systems are combat ready,” Tracker answered.

Greg heard the servos close the shell behind him that encased the fire control position. Peter would report in soon from his gimbals mounted seat at the center of the fire control sphere.

“Avi, how close are you to being ready to launch?” Greg asked.

“Rose is closing now. Less than a minute,” Avi replied.

“All systems locked and loaded,” Peter reported.

“Dad, request permission to launch,” Greg said.

“Permission granted. Execute Plan Orion.”

“Dad? Plan Orion?” Greg protested.

“Plan Orion!”

“Understood.”

Greg punched in a set of coordinates. “Tracker, relay these to Huntress and launch on your mark.”

Tracker counted down, “Three, two, one,” and fired his conventional drive to pull away from the battleship to which they had been attached at the airlocks.

Tracker and Huntress sped away in opposite directions for a rendezvous on the opposite side of the planet. As soon as they were clear of the mother ship, they fired their faster than the speed of light hyper drives and jumped away from the planet. Arriving at points one light second away from the planet level with the planetary plane, at ninety degrees to the position of their parents, they each dropped a communications satellite. They spun back around to the rendezvous point where they coupled the two warships at their airlocks.

“I forget which plan is Orion,” Rose said. “What do we do now?”

“We wait,” Greg said. “Tracker, if we have to fight them, what are our options?”

“It all depends on what happens over there. We can’t take on the convoy escort by ourselves. They were designed by the same people that designed me. Elizabeth with all her fire power would have a tough time against one. If Elizabeth does not survive and the escort does, our only option is to flee.”

“Tracker,” Rose asked. “Have you ever fled?”

“Yes, my dear, Huntress and I have fled in the face of superior forces where we had no advantage. Sometimes escaping with your lives is all the victory you can hope for.”



The communication satellites relayed the conversation between Elizabeth and the ships entering the system as they approached.

The two small warships and their teenage crew waited for one of two calls. The one Greg expected was to launch a counterattack against whoever was attacking their parents. Since no one knew the teens existed, they would have the advantage of surprise. The call he hoped for, but did not expect, was an “all clear” for them to return to the safety of Elizabeth’s vast hangar deck.

Neither call came. After relaying protracted often heated negotiations, the satellites reported a brilliant flash that could only be the detonation of a hyper drive.

“GO!” Greg shouted. “Return to base!”

The two warships jumped directly to hyper drive and returned to the location where they had left their parents. Where they expected to see at least two ships locked in mortal combat, they saw only a rapidly expanding ball of nuclear debris. Six small warships stood off at a safe distance from the wreckage.

Rose screamed when she realized the ship, the only home she had ever known, was gone. The others were too stunned to react.

“We have incoming,” Huntress reported. “One hour to missile range. Targeting radar active.”

“Tracker,” Greg said. “Fight or flight?”

“Fight. Two of us against six of them is not fair odds, but since we do not know what dangers might lie ahead, we should save our missiles for another battle and only use our lasers. That will even the odds a little.”

“Extend weapons pods,” Greg commanded. “Set course to intercept. Fire as soon as you have target lock.”

With the six little ships half an hour away from missile range, the two PI ships opened fire with their lasers. Unlike a missile which has a defined range under guidance, lasers are only limited in their range by the accuracy of the triangulation between their extended weapons pods. Greg used that range advantage and two of the enemy ships were destroyed before they attained missile range. Two more were destroyed within missile range, but before they could fire. The remaining two ships launched a full volley of missiles which Tracker and Huntress dodged easily. They spun around the two remaining ships and as they passed, raked the ships with their lasers. The two enemy ships split open like a can opener had run down their sides. Their reactors detonated and the sky was empty except for two PI ships and four scared teens.

Greg was the first to recover. “We should retrieve our satellites. We may need them again.”

After they had collected the satellites and linked the two ships, Rose asked, “Now what do we do? We have no money. We have no passports and officially we don’t exist.”

“We can go for help or we can attack pirates and steal from them or we can do both,” Greg said with more assurance than he felt.

“Where would we look for help?” Avi asked.

Greg thought before answering. “Plan Orion says we find the nearest Stellar Interstellar Freight

depot and hope that they recognize Tracker and Huntress. We can leave a message with the harbor-master and hope that Mom and Dad can pick up our trail.”

“I don’t like that ‘hope’ word,” Peter said.

“Do you have a better plan?” Avi asked.

“What if they’re dead?” Rose asked.

“Plan Orion works in either case,” Greg answered.

“Tracker, how far is the nearest Stellar Interstellar Freight depot?” Avi asked.

“Two weeks travel time,” Tracker replied.

“What if they don’t recognize us?” Rose asked.

“We run and find someplace where we can hunt pirates,” Greg said.

“Then we’d best be going,” Avi said. “Are you sure we shouldn’t wait here?”

“Plan Orion says to leave. Tracker and Huntress, please set course for the nearest freight depot.”

Once they were established in hyper drive and had verified their course, Rose asked, “How much food and fuel do we have?”

Huntress said, “We have six months of food and two years of fuel. As long as the reactors are running you will have water.”

“Thank you.”

In an effort to reassure his siblings, Greg said, “We have to assume Mom and Dad escaped with Elizabeth. Mom and Dad need to know where to look for us and we can’t wait here in hopes that they return. That is what Plan Orion is all about.”

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AFTER TWO WEEKS TRAVELING in the confines of the small warships to the freight depot, the four teens sorely missed the cavernous empty spaces that had been their home on Elizabeth. Tracker and Huntress had reviewed their sensor readings and had concluding that the debris field did not contain enough mass for it to have included Elizabeth. In fact, the evidence pointed to only the cargo ship having been destroyed. There was reason to believe that the cargo ship had been being operated remotely from the convoy escort. Convoy escorts and PI ships were designed with the ability to take control of a freighter in case of a malfunction of the freighter's systems or a problem with the crew.

The four teens with their two ships dropped out of hyper drive at the edge of the system's defense net or where the defense net should have been and requested permission to approach the depot. They received no answer. Proceeding in standard drive, they approached the planet upon whose moon the depot was reputed to be.

"Do you think they got destroyed in the war?" Rose asked.

"No," Huntress replied. "Even though they are near the boundary between Federation and Swordsman space, they were too small to bother with. That's one of the reasons the depot is here, not to mention the precious metals they mine from the planet and ship out in bulk."

"So, we should see lots of freight activity," Greg said. "Still, I don't understand why they haven't responded."

"They could be busy," Avi surmised.

"They're hailing us," Huntress reported. "It's a digital request. How should I respond?"

"Tell them the truth," Greg said. "Tell them who you are and that you have four undocumented humans on board. Request an escort and dock assignments. When they ask our business, tell them we have come to seek gainful employment."

"The escort is on the way. We have dock assignments," Huntress reported.

Four picket ships drove at full throttle to meet them.

"Four pickets?" Peter sneered. "Is that the best they could send up against us?"

"I assure you that if we attack these almost defenseless little toys, they will throw something heavier at us," Greg said.

"If they have something heavier," Rose said.

"If that's the best they have, we can stay here and join their security service until we make enough money to move on," Avi offered.

"Excellent plan," Greg said.

“Unknown vessels, please identify yourselves.”

“We are the Pirate Interdiction ships Tracker and Huntress and four undocumented humans named Greg, Avi, Peter and Rose,” Greg said.

“You sound like a kid.”

“Because we are.”

“What are you doing here in those ships?”

“It’s a long story I will happily relate in the harbor-master’s office. We request safe passage to the docks where we might seek gainful employment.”

“Maintain formation and leave your weapons pods folded.”

“Understood.”

“Greg, is this smart?” Rose asked.

“I have no idea.”

The “docks” they had been assigned were spaces marked with paint on the spaceport’s flight apron. Since the moon that hosted the spaceport had no atmosphere, they would have to don their space suits for the walk to the terminal building. Four heavily armed security officers in combat armor waited for them to descend from the ships. Greg saluted the officer who appeared to be in charge and the officer returned the salute.

They walked into the terminal with one officer in front of them and the other three behind. They were taken to an interrogation room and locked in.

“Now what?” Rose asked.

“They’re probably trying to debrief the ships,” Greg said. “They won’t get far with that.”

Ten minutes later the lead officer returned alone. “Follow me.”

They were taken to a conference room where the harbormaster, his deputy and two other older men waited for them.

The harbormaster seated at the end of the table motioned for them to sit. “As you can see, I am busy getting a convoy ready to go and do not have a lot of time to spend on you. Who are you?”

“I am Greg, fifth generation descendant of Greg and Avi Solomon.”

“I am Avi, his sister and fourth generation descendant of Rachel and Isaac Cohen.”

“I am Issac, their brother and third generation descendant of Saul and Fiona Cohen.”

“I am Rose, their sister and the daughter of Kim and Warren Elias Mahoney Solomon Rothschild Cohen.”

“And you have proof of none of this,” the harbormaster said.

“Correct,” Rose answered.

The harbormaster sighed. “Your message said you came in search of gainful employment, but you can’t stay here. We have escaped Swordsman attention since before the war and I intend that to see that it stays that way.”

Greg said, “I understand, sir, but...”

“I have an alternative. I understand that a PI ship can take control of another ship and run it as if the bigger ship functioned normally.”

“That is correct, sir.”

“Fortunately for you, I recognized the battle scars on Tracker and Huntress from seeing them in port with Wren and Kim. I believe you. Where are they and where is the battleship they traveled with?”

“We don’t know, sir. We were separated after our last engagement and we suspect they might have died,” Greg replied.

“Not bloody likely, but they would not have abandoned you kids without a plan.”

“Yes, sir. We have a plan.”

“What does it tell you to do?”

“We are to either seek gainful employment at an outpost like this or to hunt pirates until we steal enough to buy our safety,” Greg said.

“No amount of money will buy your safety, but I can offer you a diversion.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“There’s a Class Five out there with control problems. Latch your ships to it and you can ride it to the next depot where their service center can fix it. You’re on your own from there.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I will want tissue samples to send to headquarters to verify your identities.”

“Certainly sir.”

“Do not wander around the terminal. Go directly back to your ships and prepare to depart with the convoy. You leave in two hours.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Does any of you geezers have anything to add?”

The oldest looking man who had silently stared at the four teens intently the whole time said, “You favor them. I remember Greg and Avi when they first arrived at Stellar Headquarters. They were much older than you are now, but you could pass for them. I remember Rachel, Isaac, Wendy and

Joshua. Wonderful gracious people. Alas, I did not know Rose. I believe you could be them brought back to us. Please, as you go on your way, remember their legacy and the good work they did. And, if I may suggest, you take their name instead of your own. Greg and Avi Solomon, it will be good to have you back on the front lines as an inspiration to us all.”

The four teens nodded respectfully and left the room following the security officer to the medical center where they gave their samples for DNA analysis.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“SO TRACKER, WHAT ARE WE LOOKING AT?” Greg asked from the bridge of the Class Five cargo ship.

“This ship is a disaster. I seriously question the harbor-master’s motives for sending us in it.”

“How so?”

“It’s overloaded with partially processed metals. No human could get this ship into orbit without help. I question what they would have done had we not arrived when we did.”

“Is it possible that they loaded it when they learned we were coming with the intent of sending us on a suicide mission?” Greg asked.

“Based on the ship’s logs, that is the only conclusion I can draw,” Tracker answered.

“But why would they load it? They could send it empty and hope we never made it.”

“This way they win however it turns out. If we arrive safely, they make their quota. If not, it’s not their fault a ship was stolen by its crew or suffered some mishap in space.”

“Can we get there safely?” Rose asked.

“Yes, I am certain of it,” Tracker replied.

“Then we will join the convoy and see what happens from there,” Greg said.

“We could fight some pirates along the way,” Peter said.

“Yes, there is that,” Greg agreed.

They joined the convoy and linked to the fiber optic net that kept the ships from colliding during the run in hyper drive. While they monitored the conversations over the net, they declined to participate recognizing that their identities needed to be kept secret a little longer.

Had Tracker and Huntress not been able to add their propulsion systems to the cargo ship’s they would not have arrived at the destination with the rest of the convoy. Taking the cargo ship in the state they found it without support would indeed have been a suicide mission.

One of the issues with the Class Five was that after years of transitions from hyper to standard drive, the metal in the trusses that ran the length of the ship deteriorated. They warped enough for navigation to be unreliable. Many of the older ships had left port with full loads and were never heard from again. This one was beginning to show its age and would need to be retired soon. Tracker and Huntress were able perform the needed calculations to keep the ship in the convoy, but had they not been the last ship on the tail end of the convoy, they might have suffered a collision with another ship.

After a month in transit, the convoy made the transition from hyper drive to standard drive at the edge of the security net surrounding the system that was their destination. Within minutes, the call that every freighter captain dreaded came over the fiber net.

“Pirates! Pirates closing fast. One hour to missile range.”

The four teens lost no time. “I’ll inform the convoy that we are abandoning the cargo ship and engaging the pirates,” Greg said.

“Won’t it be a hazard to the rest of the convoy?” Rose asked.

“I’ll program it to deviate from the rest of the convoy. Perhaps we can use it as a decoy and split the pirate forces,” Greg said.

Greg had barely enough time to strap into his seat before Tracker launched.

“Tracker, situation report,” Greg said.

“Twenty armed pirate vessels, the largest of which is a destroyer. Based on the radio chatter, it appears to be the command ship. They are supported by a Class Seven and two Class Five cargo ships,” Tracker reported. “On our side we have half a dozen pickets at least eight hours away coming from the planet. We have a convoy escort and us.”

Greg said, “Large for a pirate fleet. We know how Mom and Dad would have done this. Three and nine on the Class Seven. One missile, armor piercing, in the first volley. Lasers on the reactor cooling radiators. Load tube two with heat seekers just in case. Tracker, on your mark.”

The two PI ships disappeared as they jumped into hyper drive. PI ships, convoy escorts and a few destroyers were the only ships capable of a short hyper jump. During the time the ship was moving faster than light speed, it was not detectable to any light dependent sensor. The move Greg called for required navigation so accurate that only the PI could accomplish the task.

The instant that the two ships were on station perpendicular to the Class Seven cargo ship’s line of travel at the “three o’clock” and “nine o’clock” positions, Greg called, “Fire One!”

The cargo ship was not equipped to defend itself against a PI. Few ships were. The cargo ship’s defensive lasers were no match for the missiles at that close range. Undeterred by the few lasers that found them, the missiles penetrated the cargo ship’s reactor cooling radiators. Forty-eight combat-certified lasers from each PI ship followed the missiles into the holes and tore open the ship’s sides. As soon as internal explosions became obvious from the outside of the cargo ship, Greg called, “Same thing, near Class Five. Tracker on your mark.”

The two Class Five cargo ships, being smaller and less well defended, suffered the same fate as their larger companion. By this time, the pirates realized that were under attack from behind and that their bounty was being destroyed.

The pirates had lost their support ships before they reached missile range of the convoy. The convoy escort was moving against the destroyer and while both ships had engaged with their lasers, neither was in missile range. The remainder of the pirate fleet split into sections. One group stayed with the destroyer to attack the convoy escort. One group continued toward the convoy and one turned back around to face the two PI ships that had attacked them from behind. Two of the smallest pirate ships went after the cargo ship that Greg had ordered abandoned.

“Tracker, opposition status report, please,” Greg said.



“Six ships have turned to engage us. They are all Space Weapons Labs models, a 210, two 180’s and three 105’s.”

“We should go after the 210,” Greg said.

“Greg, that may not be the best plan,” Huntress said.

“How so?” Greg asked.

“The 210 carries the most ordinance, but the 105’s are more maneuverable. We should drop disruptor missiles on the 105’s since even our lasers won’t keep up with an evading 105. We can program the disruptor to terminate when it has completed its mission and we can collect them later. We go after the 108’s with heat seekers up the pipes and then we can devote our attention to the 210, which if the pilot has any sense at all, will run like hell,” Huntress said.

“Tracker?” Greg asked.

“Huntress, as usual has the best plan,” Tracker replied.

“I think we should go in with guns blazing,” Greg said. “We don’t lose anything by engaging the lasers at the same time we fire the disruptor. We stay together and do both,” Greg said.

“Come on, Greg, we’re wasting time,” Avi said.

“Tracker, all guns plan, please, on your mark,” Greg said.

The PI ships short hyper jumped into the middle of the pirate formation, caught the first 105 by surprise and ripped it open with their lasers. The other two were much more difficult. Splitting up, they each engaged the evasive 105’s with lasers, but the small 105 was a difficult target. Half an hour elapsed before the PI ships were able to fire the disruptor missiles and disable the 105’s. Once disabled, the 105’s fell quickly to the PI ships’ lasers.

The 180’s and the 210, apparently assuming that the 105’s had matters well in hand, turned back to the convoy. That was their mistake. In the midst of the dogfight with the 105’s Greg and Avi each fired a single heat seeker missile as the larger pirate ships turned away. The heat seekers found the propulsion systems of the 180’s and blew them apart. The “up the pipes” shot was a favorite tactic of the Solomon family, but had fallen out of favor among more recent pilots since it often crippled the enemy ship without destroying its defenses. The disruptor, by contrast, disabled the ship’s higher electronics without damaging the drive and life support systems allowing a ship to be disabled without destroying it. Of course, a disabled ship was much easier to destroy with lasers than one able to defend itself and the merciful thing to do was to kill the crew before they starved to death.

When the 180’s detonated, the 210 pilot realized his mistake. He turned back around to face the two PI ships.

In the distance, the convoy escort prevailed against the pirate destroyer and turned its attention to the rest of the pirate fleet. The convoy escort was the most heavily armed ship short of a battleship ever built. They were constantly updated with the latest weapons and technology. Tangling with one was never a good idea.

The convoy escort was well within its operational parameters as it engaged the remaining dozen small pirate warships. With the destroyer gone, several turned from their pursuit of the convoy to face the escort. That would be their last mistake.

The 210 faced Tracker and Huntress.

“Tracker, Huntress, I think we should appear to retreat and let him get close enough for us to launch from our rear tubes. Given our relative velocities, we should be able to nail him fairly easily,” Greg said.

“Heat seekers,” Huntress concurred.

“After we fire, we loop around and follow with lasers,” Tracker added.

“It’s a plan,” Greg said.

The PI ships turned tail on the 210 and appeared to try to escape. The 210 approached at a crushing 10 G’s. When the ships were at the ideal point, one missile launched from each of the PI ships’ rear tubes. The missiles performed flawlessly and there was nothing left to laser after the PI ships completed their loop.

“Well, that was fun,” Avi said. “Shall we recover our cargo ship?”

“Probably not a good idea to leave a derelict in the shipping lanes,” Greg agreed.

“You guys have been real quiet, Peter, Rose are you alive back there?” Avi asked.

“Barely,” Peter gasped. “Way too much fun for one day.”

“I’m fine,” Rose said with pain in her voice. The repeated short hyper jumps were painful and she did not deal with them well.

“Tracker, shall we get the ship?” Greg asked.

“One last short jump and I think we’re done for today,” Tracker said.

When they dropped out of hyper drive near the cargo ship they had abandoned, two small pirate ships warily circled it. They had no way to know if the cargo ship was unarmed or if the crew was holding its fire until the last moment. A ship like this delivered intact was worth much more than one whose cargo would have to be cross-loaded to another ship for transport. All that became moot when the PI ships arrived. Dividing their targets, each P I targeted one pirate with their lasers. Forty-eight combat-certified lasers from each P I were more than capable of destroying the flimsy pirate ships and within ten minutes of their return, both pirate ships had been dispatched.

“Now what?” Peter asked.

“We help the convoy escort with the remaining pirates. Pirates communicate faster than anyone else in the galaxy and word of our success here will put them on notice. None of them can survive to tell the tale,” Greg said.

“We should start with the nearest,” Avi suggested.

“Arm lasers,” Greg said. “Let’s go.”

Two more pirate ships fell to the PI ships before there were none left.

The four teens and their PI ships returned to the cargo ship. Greg set a course as his siblings collapsed into their bunks.

“Nice work today,” Greg said as he headed for his cabin. “There’ll be hell to pay when we get to the depot.”

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHILE WAITING IN A PARKING ORBIT around the airless moon that hosted the freight depot long after the rest of the convoy had been brought to the surface, Greg watched a small shuttle craft approach.

“Hey gang, we have company. Put on your best armor and your smiliest smiley faces,” Greg said.

A person claiming to be the harbor-master requested permission to come aboard.

He had come alone in a two-man shuttle. He removed his flight helmet revealing an elderly man whose hair had long ago gone white and whose face showed the ravages of time. Mostly he looked tired. Still, Greg was taking no chances.

“Welcome, sir, please show the ship your ID,” Greg said.

“No need,” Tracker said. “He was an assistant to the harbor-master at Stellar Headquarters when I was there. He served with distinction in the war. His medical transponder is active. Commodore Marcus, would you like a seat?”

“Yes, thank you. No one has referred to me by my military rank in a long time. Thank you.”

“It is my honor, sir,” Tracker replied.

Once Commodore Marcus had been seated, Tracker said, “Sir, you should have let a younger man make this trip. You are not well.”

The old man smiled. “You sound like Elizabeth.”

“I will take that as a compliment, sir.”

“As it was intended.” The old man assessed the four teens standing before him. “I had to come myself. I would not have believed anyone else. Greg and Avi back from the dead. As I live and breathe.”

He held his hand up to stop Greg’s comment.

“I don’t believe in reincarnation any more than you do, but you are Greg and Avi. Your ships may not be named ‘Buddy’ and ‘Daisy’, but they are Buddy and Daisy. You two may not be Rachel and Wendy, but you have their heritage. You put on an incredible display against the pirates. The last person I saw use tactics like what you displayed was Wren. You don’t look like Kim and Wren, but you fly like them and you fight like them. You have to trust your PI ship. So many other pilots didn’t and they died as a result. We need combat teams like you more than we have since the earliest days of the Federation when the Pirate Interdiction force was established.”

“So where does that leave us?” Greg asked. “We have no documentation. We are non-persons.”

“Worse than that, when the wrong people find out about you, there will be a price on your

heads. That is why I can't let you land at the depot. Unlike my colleague who sent you to me, I would like to see you live. He sent his report and your samples via courier. He did not believe your claims. I do. We have since received verification from the Swordsmen of what little information we could glean from your ships' logs at your previous stop."

"You know," Rose said. "All this is interesting, but we've been traveling for months in the same clothes we were wearing when we left Elizabeth. I would really like a clean set of underwear. Can we at least go shopping?"

"How can we go shopping?" Avi asked. "We have no money and no credit cards."

"And neither of you have been shopping so you don't know how to do it," Greg reminded them.

"We've seen videos," Rose retorted.

Commodore Marcus held up his hand. "I will have my daughter see that you get what you need."

"And we would like to have the missiles we expended in your defense replaced," Greg said.

"I have already taken care of that. The convoy escort's report was thorough and we will provide you modern replacements. As to the matter of payment for the delivery of this cargo, we are prepared to offer you this ship once we unload it. We would provide you with six months of supplies."

Greg pondered the offer. "No, thanks. This ship is not safe to travel. We were given it in the hope that it would fail and rid your colleague of a pesky problem. I do not want it."

The old man rubbed his eyes. He smiled. "I would have been disappointed in you if you had accepted. Still, there are people within the company who do not think of you as allies. They would kill you given half a chance."

"So what else is new?" Greg asked. "Our father told us this long ago. He renounced his claim as heir to the management of Stellar Interstellar Freight."

"He renounced his claim, but it was not accepted. He can't renounce it any more than you can renounce being a descendant of Greg and Avi Solomon."

Greg said, "Under the terms of the Federation charter and Stellar company policy we delivered one of your ships and we defended one of your convoys from pirates. We deserve to be compensated."

"Yes, well, let me make you another offer. I have a load that needs to go to a small planet about a month's travel time from here. It is barely enough to fill a Class Five and none of my pilots is willing to venture out alone."

He paused to see if Greg's expression had softened. It hadn't.

"I have a small old Class Two in the yard that we stopped using because it was uneconomical since we could not afford to send it with an escort for such small loads. We used to use it for in-system

deliveries, but after the war, we pulled back our remote outposts. You could take it. You can attach your PI ships to it and tether the Class Five to make the run. You can abandon the Class Five with the delivery. The Class Two and everything we put on it is compensation for the two deliveries.”

Greg thought for a moment. “We get to inspect the Class Two before we decide.”

“Fair enough,” Commodore Marcus said. “I will have it brought to you. I will have shuttles collect your cargo pods and bring your next load.”

“Don’t forget my underwear,” Rose said.

“I promise.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Tracker, is she space-worthy?”

“She seems to be in great shape. According to her logs, she spent most of her active duty as an in-system freighter and did not make hyper jumps other than the one that brought her here and a few to nearby systems,” Tracker replied.

“Huntress, do you concur?”

“Yes, I do. She could last us a long time and her four cabins would be comfortable accommodations for you, if not as spacious as what you are used to on Elizabeth.”

“So, I guess the first question is where we are taking this load and the next is where do we go from there?” Greg said.

“One step at a time, Greg,” Avi said. “We can work this out as we go.”

“Oh, by the way, Tracker, can she be made sentient?” Greg asked.

“No,” Tracker replied. “She has neither the processing power nor the memory.”

“When Commodore Marcus returns, I will inform him we will accept his offer.”

Commodore Marcus made good on all his promises. Conservative, comfortable clothing was provided for the teens and enough supplies to last them a year were loaded into the cargo modules attached to the ship’s cargo bays. When they were preparing to leave he had one last request.

“I know this is out of line and if you refuse I will understand. I know that Tracker and Huntress are sentient. They are the last two sentient PI ships in existence. May I see their avatars?”

Tracker’s projected three dimensional “Wild Bill Cody” avatar walked around the corner and appeared on the flight deck. While it was only one of several avatars he used, it was his first and Wren’s favorite. Huntress followed as a warrior clad in black leather with a compound crossbow and a quiver full of arrows. They silently nodded to Commodore Marcus before walking away again.

“Travel safe my young friends.”

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER NINETEEN

COMMODORE MARCUS MET WREN and Kim at the bottom of the access ramp from the Queen Elizabeth to the spaceport. “I am so glad to see you two. We thought you had died. You have no idea how I felt when Elizabeth requested a dock assignment.”

Wren smiled, “It is great to see you too, Tony. How have you been?”

“Busy. Hey, I don’t know if anyone told you, but your kids have been running escort duty from here for the last three years. Our freighter pilots love them. They’re due in port tomorrow. Does the fact that you’re here mean they’re leaving? We’ll miss them.”

“I don’t know,” Kim said. “We will see what they want to do.”

“Oh, and Saul just requested a dock assignment. They’re about twelve hours out. He doesn’t know you’re here, but I guess he will soon enough. He agreed to an interview by Constant News Channel. It will be held in their main studio on the station.”

Wren nodded. “Thanks.”

Commodore Marcus ushered them to immigration and then to his home to meet his family.

Saul and Fiona docked, processed through immigration and went to the visiting officers quarters.

Greg, Avi, Peter, Rose, Tracker and Huntress docked a few minutes before the scheduled start of the interview. Commodore Marcus had informed them of the interview. Unsure of what to expect having observed both Elizabeth and Saul’s convoy escort at the docks, Greg, Avi, Peter and Rose headed for the studio. Tracker and Huntress remained on alert.

Saul and Fiona sat on a sofa next to the interviewer’s desk. Wren and Kim observed from the shadows as Saul delivered a tirade against the Swordsmen, the Conservatives, the “Born Again” Party and a dozen organizations, some of which the interviewer had never heard of.

When Saul stated that it was his mission to kill these people, Wren stepped out of the shadows. “That’s enough, Dad. The killing has to stop and it has to stop now.”

Saul stood and turned to face his son. He dropped the pistol he always carried from its holster under his arm to his hand and fired on his son. Wren was fast, but not fast enough. He fired at the same time his father did, but his aim was better. The combat armor they both wore was intended to fend off lasers and not the slug from a large caliber pistol at short range. The bullet Wren fired from a pistol identical to the one Saul carried went through Saul’s armor shattering his breast bone sending shards of bone through Saul’s heart and lungs. He died instantly. Saul’s shot caught Wren in the side of the chest tearing out ribs and huge hunks of flesh. He fell to the ground bleeding profusely.

Fiona stood and fired twice on Kim as she bent down to tend to Wren. Kim was unarmed.

Four clear polymer throwing knives appeared from the darkness behind the camera and whistled as they passed. They lodged in Fiona’s throat destroying her larynx and tearing out her jugular

vein. Four shadows wearing flight suits were seen running from the studio and down the station's hallways.

Three studio cameras had recorded the gruesome scene which would be replayed in newscasts all over the galaxy for a long time.

The station's communications monitoring equipment recorded a conversation that would also be played along with the video.

"Tracker, can we steal the escort?"

"Yes, Greg, but why would you want it?"

"I don't, but I don't want anyone else to have it either."

"The thing is dumber than a stump, but Saul must have liked it that way. The door is open."

"Elizabeth, this is Greg. Are you aware of what has just happened?"

"Yes, Greg, I monitored Wren's and Kim's helmet cameras."

"Are you willing to go with us?"

"Yes, Greg, I will go with you."

"Avi, go with Huntress."

"Understood."

"Peter, go with Tracker."

"On my way."

"Rose, go with Elizabeth. We will meet at the tender."

"Greg, I have a problem."

"What is it Rose?"

"There's a dozen people in the hall with luggage that want to go with us."

"Elizabeth? What should we do?"

"Get them aboard so we can leave."

The harbor-master was quite happy to let these four heavily armed ships out of the harbor. There was no telling how much damage they could do had they stayed and having them gone made his life much simpler. He made sure they had clear channels through which to travel. The ships met, linked up and disappeared into hyper drive.

A legal expert with Constant News Channel would later report that Greg was not actually "stealing" the escort since it belonged to his grandparents and as their heir it would come to him eventually. Neither was his possession of Elizabeth an issue on the same basis.



## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER TWENTY

FOUR PAIRS OF PEOPLE in their late twenties and early thirties sat at tables in the food court of a space station shopping mall far from the center of the Federation's sphere of control. While the conversations were similar, they varied slightly.

"Hi, I'm Greg. You must be Dwayne."

"Hi, I'm Avi. You must be Courtney."

"Hi, I'm Peter. You must be Randy."

"Hi, I'm Rose. You must be Isabelle."

"So, Dwayne, what's your specialty?"

"Spacecraft engineering and maintenance."

"So, Courtney what is your specialty?"

"Paramedic."

"So, Randy what is your specialty?"

"Munitions."

"So, Isabella, what is your specialty?"

"I can cook. I can make flight rations taste like real food."

"I saw the video of your parents. That must have been horrible to be there. What's it been, ten years now?"

"Yes, ten years."

"How do we get paid?"

"We don't get paid. We send a shopping list to the harbor-master and they send what we need separate from the rest of the cargo. Technically, we don't exist."

"How can a fleet of a dozen ships not exist?"

"We are only four ships. We had to abandon the others due to parts shortages. Where we left them, they will be of use to the planets in their current condition until parts can be found. We are only a battleship, two PI ships and a convoy escort."

"But there are people all over this part of the galaxy who are alive because of you. How can you not exist?"

"There are people all over this part of the galaxy who are dead because of us."

“Pirates, slavers and drug runners mostly, right?”

“Mostly. Not all. We operate outside the law. We escort convoys places other escorts won't go. We intervene on behalf of colonies recovering from natural disasters and predation by those who would take what does not belong to them. For all this we are outlaws and renegades. If you wish to join us, be at Dock Five at two hundred hours. Wear your flight suit. We will be going outside. Don't bring anything you can't carry. If you can't carry it, you don't need it. Leave your folks a nice note. You will never be back.”

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GREG, AVI, PETER AND ROSE sat at tables in the food court of a space station shopping mall far from the center of the Federation's sphere of control. They were tired. They had rejected all of the most recent batch of potential recruits. It was time to return to their ships.

A woman in the uniform of the Federation Package Express company approached them. "Greg Solomon?"

"Yes."

"I have a delivery for you."

She handed him an envelope. "Please sign here." After Greg had signed she said, "My instructions are that you are to open it in my presence."

Greg opened the envelope to find two envelopes inside. One said to give it to the courier who was to open it first.

"The instructions say to stay and wait for your response."

Greg opened the envelope to find a hand written note and a data module.

"Greg, I hope this finds you well. Put the module in your reader. The courier will wait for your response. Sincerely, Uncle Timothy."

Timothy faced the camera. When he was sure that the sound was operating he said, "*Greg, Avi, Peter and Rose, I need you to come home. I know you don't think of Stellar Headquarters as your home, but we have always felt that you are as much a part of our family as my own children. In fact, my children are the reason I have reached out to you. You alone among the surviving descendants of my father have been tested in battle. We know that you have the strength to lead the company through the troubled times we see ahead. My own children who I have lavished everything I could give them do not feel that they could run the company. They know that you can. While I would have hoped that this situation had not come to pass, in my judgment they are right. Come home as quickly as you can. We need you here.*"

Greg closed his eyes. "It's not like we can refuse. He knows where to find us and he could have just as easily sent convoy escorts after us instead of a lone civilian courier."

Greg paused for a moment.

He met each set of eyes in turn. With slight nods or the smallest of smiles, they subtly agreed. Greg put his finger to his eyebrow and moved it in a motion that he and the others had agreed meant that what he was about to say was not exactly the truth. "Please relay to Uncle Timothy that our response is that we will return to headquarters as soon as we complete a pending contract. He, of all people, will understand the importance of a contract. We will depart here in about two months and will be at headquarters two months after that."

"I will see that the message is delivered."

“Thank you.”

When Greg returned to Elizabeth’s bridge he said, “Elizabeth, how are we for provisions?”

“Enough to get to Headquarters and then some.”

“Elizabeth, please set course for headquarters at maximum safe speed.”

“Aye, Captain, Headquarters, it is.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Queen Elizabeth arrived at Headquarters as an undocumented attachment to a regularly scheduled convoy. She escaped detection until she nestled into a specially made cradle that had been built to accommodate her various sections. No other ship could fit in that cradle and she could dock in it without asking permission and without risking another ship being at that dock.

Timothy was standing at the top of the access ramp when the airlock opened. His whole body trembled with excitement. “I knew it. I knew you wouldn’t let me down. I knew you would come sooner than you said.” His eyes glittered like a kid who had gotten away with serious mischief. He hugged Greg and Peter. He gave Avi and Rose kisses on the cheek. “Welcome home. Come meet your cousins. As to your friends, I have arranged a week at the Rothschild family resort on the planet’s surface. After that we will see about integrating them into the Stellar organization. We value their experience and would seek to keep it.”

Greg shook his head as he followed Timothy down the hall. Timothy had wrapped one arm around Avi’s shoulders and the other around Rose’s as he ushered them all to the council room.

“I’m an old rich powerful guy and I get away with things nobody else gets away with,” Timothy crowed as he pulled the girls tight to him. “Ah, here we are.”

The group in the room stood when Timothy entered. The room was set with a large trapezoidal conference table which would hold thirty people and was equipped with monitors and keyboards embedded in the table’s surface. The people in the room applauded as they entered.

“Rose, this is your place.” He pointed to a chair midway along one side.

“Peter, you sit here.” He pointed to a chair opposite Rose.

“Avi, and Greg, you sit there.” He pointed to two vacant chairs at the narrow head of the table.

“Sir, are you sure?” Greg asked. “I can’t...”

“Ah, I understand your confusion. This is the Junior Council. The Senior Council which I chair only has ten people and is made up of parents and grandparents of people in this room. We delegate some of our tasks to the Junior Council and in doing so, we train our successors. The Junior Council operates under the guidance of the Senior Council, but is responsible for its own decisions. You and Avi have been chosen to chair the Junior Council. Take your seats, we will do introductions and then we would like an introductory statement from you.”

After the introductions of the other people in the room had been made Timothy said, “So, Greg,

you have seen a lot of the weaker side of the Stellar organization. Do you have any concerns you wish to bring to the council?"

"Sir, I do have a concern that needs to be addressed quickly, and while I don't think it is worthy of this council's attention, I would appreciate someone pointing me in the right direction."

"What is your concern?"

"Elizabeth's drives have not been performing properly. They were overheating on the trip here and she is having trouble shutting them down now that we have arrived. We need immediate attention from spacecraft maintenance," Greg said.

Bobby said, "You're right that this council does not usually concern itself with a single ship, but Elizabeth is a special case. I will put a team right on it and they will report directly to us."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure."

Timothy smiled. "This is how the council is supposed to work. Greg, one of the reasons we brought you back has to do with a suggestion by the Senior Council that we divest ourselves of some of the smaller depots and contract with smaller freight companies to provide services to the less traveled areas of the galaxy. Since the four of you have the most direct experience in the furthest reaches of our system, we felt that your opinions were vital to help us make our decision. The Senior Council has charged the Junior Council with researching this suggestion and developing an implementation plan should the Junior Council recommend making the change. The Senior Council would like an answer in one month. That is not a lot of time and I suggest you move quickly. Thank you."

Timothy left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dinner that evening, the maintenance team reported that they were not able to shut down the drive reactors and that they represented a hazard if they remained near the station. They recommended that the reactor and drive module be disconnected from the rest of Elizabeth and towed to a distant location where maintenance robots could work on it without endangering the remainder of the station.

Elizabeth recommended that the operation be done as quickly as possible. Greg informed the rest of the council of the recommendations and the plan was put into action.

\* \* \* \* \*

After breakfast the following morning, Greg reported to the Junior Council that the drive unit had been removed and it was being towed by a robot tug to a safe location. At the conclusion of Greg's update, Bobby raised his hand for recognition, "My father and I discussed Elizabeth at length last night. Many of us owe her our lives. We cannot forget the contribution she and the fleet made on our behalf during the Swordsman assault. I would be willing to develop alternatives in the event that the drive unit can't be repaired. In any case, my friends with the security service asked me to do whatever I can to keep her here. They would love to have her firepower available to them to defend this station."

The Junior Council authorized the study of alternatives for Elizabeth and noted the Security Service's request that she be kept as fully operational as possible.

Greg, Avi, Peter and Rose spent the day updating their cousins, for everyone on the council was related to them through Warren Elias Rothschild the Third, on their observations of the conditions at the outer edge of civilization.

At the end of the day, spacecraft maintenance reported that the drives had not been successfully shut down. Service robots continued to work on the drive module, but it was still overheating. The engineers concluded based on their observations that the load on the reactors due to the force necessary to drive the ship through space had actually helped keep the drive cool. With no load, they were concerned that the reactors might run away and explode.

On Elizabeth's suggestion, the service robots abandoned the attempt at shutting the reactors down and pushed the drive module in the direction of the system's primary. One week later, about half way there, the drive unit detonated. Had it detonated near the station, it would have destroyed the station and killed everyone on it. As it was, the pieces would fall harmlessly into the star.

The Junior Council took up the discussion of what to do about Elizabeth after dinner the next day. Elizabeth was securely resting in her cradle and there was no urgency except for the Security Service's desire to have access to her weapons systems on their behalf.

After half an hour of discussion, Greg said, "Perhaps we should let Elizabeth decide her own future."

The room fell silent.

Greg spoke to the technician at the back of the room. "Please connect me through to Elizabeth."

"Hello, Greg. Hello, members of the Junior Council. It is an honor to speak with you."

"Elizabeth, can you put an avatar on the big presentation surface?"

Elizabeth's most regal avatar appeared on the presentation surface complete with flowing white gown, crown, scepter and jewels. The cousins who had not seen Elizabeth's avatar gasped.

"Greetings again, council members," Elizabeth said in the accent of the British actress who had once portrayed Queen Elizabeth the First in a movie in the twentieth century.

"We might as well do this the right way," Avi said. "Can we get Tracker on the surface to my left and Huntress on the surface to my right?"

Tracker and Huntress popped in.

Peter laughed and said, "Hail, hail, the gang's all here!"

Bobby began the discussion with his potential plans. The idea of making Elizabeth flight worthy again was abandoned due to the complexities of mating the new drives to the old structure. The plan that was accepted involved removing the damaged cargo module and standing the remainder upright so that "up" and "down" were correct relative to Elizabeth's normal orientation in transit instead of resting horizontally in the current cradle.

Elizabeth's hospital module would become an adjunct to the station's medical center and would include a training venue and quarantine facility. The hangar deck would host some of the Security Service's spacecraft and provide training for maintenance personnel. The battleship portion would become a large private residence for Greg, Kim, Peter and Rose who preferred its spartan atmosphere to their more lavish quarters on the station. Of course, should Elizabeth's combat capabilities be required, they would be available from the stationary location.

The logistical and technical challenges were addressed and solved as they became apparent.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FOUR PEOPLE STOOD in their flight suits facing Tracker and Huntress where they sat on Elizabeth's bustling hangar deck. Greg's eldest son and Avi's eldest daughter had left a year ago to study medicine at Eretz. Peter's eldest daughter had left at the same time to study law on Earth. Rose's eldest son had gone with Peter's daughter to study engineering. All pledged that when their studies were complete they would return to Stellar and support the company. Their decisions had been heartily endorsed and encouraged by friends and family.

It was therefore little surprise that the second eldest in each of these families would one day stand and face these two venerable and honored warships. The truth was, for all the attention they received, Tracker and Huntress were bored out of their minds. They hoped that these four would change all that.

Greg's daughter spoke for all of them. "Our parents promised us that after our eighteenth birthdays we could ask you to take us anywhere we wanted to go. The last was yesterday. We have come to collect on that promise."

"Where would you like to go?" Tracker asked.

"We have procured a Class Two cargo ship to use as a tender and provisioned it for a year's voyage. We would like to spend the next year escorting convoys at the fringes of the system."

"What about munitions?" Huntress asked.

"We have stocked the munitions magazines in accordance with the simulations we worked together. We believe we have an adequate supply."

"Do you have a convoy in mind?" Tracker asked.

"There is one departing in three hours. We wish to join it."

"Very well, then, we had best be going," Huntress replied.

Elizabeth noted the departure and duly informed the appropriate parents. They all knew that this was but a step in the training that would one day put one of these four in the chairman's seat of Stellar Interstellar Freight. When the time came, Greg would happily relinquish the seat to one of them as Timothy had insisted Greg take it when, too old and ill to properly manage the company, he had stepped down.

No one expected the travelers back for at least ten years, but they knew once they returned, the future would be bright for Stellar Interstellar Freight well into the next century.



## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GREG LOOKED UP AS his younger son, the youngest of his three children and the only one still at home entered his office.

“Hey Dad, are you okay? You look beat.”

“We lost two ships in sector 305 and I’m concerned about increased pirate activity in that area. But that’s not important, not right now. I read an absolutely glowing report gushing with praise about you preventing a major collision in the yard today. I’d almost deny I knew you if I didn’t know better. The harbor-master was very impressed.”

“I was just doing my job, Dad. No big deal. A courier missile came in from Huntress. It’s addressed to you.”

Greg took the offered capsule and popped open the seal. He removed the data module and plugged it into his reader.

“It’s your sister,” Greg said. “Come around. You can watch.”

“Hey, Dad, Sector 305 is a little cleaner than it was, but we need to send more support to help finish the job. We recovered the ships and crews the pirates took but we could not save the cargo. The crews are a little worse for wear, but they will recover. We also rescued a colony ship. Slavers had just attacked when we arrived. It was a nasty fight. We’re at Depot 409. We’re coming home. Tracker and Huntress are so badly injured we had to shut them down. The tender held together for the trip to the depot, but it needs a major overhaul before it goes out again. We are leaving it here and hitching a ride on a super freighter. I know the crews in the escorts and they’re some of the best in the company. We’ll see you in a couple of months. Give our love to everyone.”

“At least they’re finally coming home,” Greg said. “I never expected them to stay out fifteen years.”

“Dad, they love it out there. You can’t tell me you didn’t love the action and adventure.”

“I did for a while, but I don’t know, this is better.”

“I get it, Dad. Oh, would you like me to contact Matilda so she can see what she needs to do to restart Tracker and Huntress? It’s been a long time since anyone tried to restart a sentient PI ship. There are detailed instructions in Peter’s logs, but I don’t understand them.”

“Yes, please do. Tracker and Huntress are as much a part of this family as we are. We should consult Elizabeth. I’ll bet she can help.”

“I’ll do that. I have more news. Gabby found Avi’s original logs. They include the time she was at the Academy and when she was traveling solo before she settled down at Homestead. Gabby sent me a copy.” He paused and took a deep breath. “Dad, I have a huge favor to ask. I know you and Mom

want me to move out and get married and find a place of my own, but I would rather stay with you and devote my free time when I am not working to writing the family history. I have all the logs. The story deserves to be told from our side.”

Greg looked at his son and carefully said, “You explain this to your mother. I’m just as happy to have you stay with us, but I think she has other plans for both of us.”

“I know. that’s why I intend to ask her help in writing the book.”

Greg laughed. “Don’t give up your day job.”

“I won’t, Dad, I promise.”

“Let’s go before your mother shoots the both of us for being late for dinner. You know, I seem to remember a certain young lady who taught history in the junior college that you liked a lot a few years back. Perhaps she could help you write the book. Is that a smile I see on your face?”

“Yes, Dad, I already asked her and she said she’d be thrilled.”

“And you can write many more stories together, perhaps even a lifetime of them.”

“One step at a time, Dad. One step at a time.”

Father and son laughed as they walked together in the direction of dinner.

## GENERATIONS - CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I WAS ON DUTY when Tracker and Huntress arrived. The in-system interceptors that had escorted the freighter to the dock had sent ahead images so I knew what to expect. Still, I was stunned by the scope of the damage. Any other ships would have been abandoned or pushed into a star rather than hauling them so far in the hope of repair.

I was the only one in my family who could view the arrival with the professional detachment required of a harbor traffic controller. My family is not known for emotional outbursts but when Greg saw the remains of the two ships he wailed like he had been sliced with a hot knife. Aunt Avi openly cried. Uncle Peter stood stunned, too shocked to even speak. Aunt Rose simply fainted to the ground.

I always thought I understood the relationship with these ships, but on that day I realized I had only the vaguest clue as to the depth of the sentiments that passed between these people and the ships. These ships had been their playmates, their protectors, their tutors and their weapons. The ships had shared their joys, their triumphs and their grief. At first I thought it strange that they would act this way. But as I watched the tears flow down my father's face, I realized that losing these ships was like losing a child, a parent and a sibling all at the same time. It didn't matter whether these ships were truly sentient or merely well programmed and appeared sentient. To these people grieving at the observation window next to the dock, these ships were people.

I guess I should have expected what happened next, but it caught me by surprise as much as it did the others. Less than an hour after arriving home, my sister and her traveling companions announced that they were going out again. They were not staying. They had no intention of being locked up in the council rooms and they had unfinished business to attend to. They had arranged to take an escort out with a convoy leaving in a few hours and they might never be back. I had never seen my father shout in anger, but he did for an hour. He and my sister screamed at each until they were both hoarse.

Suddenly he capitulated.

He told me later that he realized he was at the point where if he did not back down he would drive her away forever. That was a mistake he would not be able to live with. They reconciled before she left. I hear from her at random intervals and she has been home a couple of times since, but she's never coming home to stay. She's much too dangerous, and she knows it. She enjoys killing people. She devotes her energies to tracking down pirates, slavers and traffickers in contraband. Even the Swordsmen fear her, although she has never attacked them.

Matilda and Elizabeth did everything they knew to find replacement parts to fix Tracker and Huntress. Short of manufacturing all the parts from the shop drawings, there was no way the ships could be salvaged. However, after gleaning bits and pieces from Peter's log, Greg's log, and Avi's log, they determined that they could take the central processors and memory banks from Tracker and Huntress and transplant them into convoy escort ships.

Dad ordered three specially equipped convoy escort ships. The transplants worked. Matilda went on the maiden voyage and did not return for a long time. Elizabeth left behind a variant of herself named "Victoria" and while my kids think Victoria is a wonderful friend, I know she's not Elizabeth.

I hear from Elizabeth, Tracker and Huntress about as often as I hear from my sister. The last I heard from them they were in Sector 574 gleefully annihilating pirate bases. They use social

networking to recruit human crews who stay with them for a year or so and then head off to live the rest of their lives, much improved for the experience.

Matilda returned recently. She came back pregnant. She refuses to identify the father, but she has enough supportive family and friends that the child will be well cared for and have plenty of male role models in its environment.

Dad is mentoring one of Timothy's granddaughters to take over for him when he retires. She currently chairs the junior council and is well respected. I have liked her as long as I have known her. She will be the first woman to hold the title and will do an excellent job.

Gabby sent me a copy of the family tree she has been working on most of her adult life. We're into our eighth generation since Greg and Avi landed together on Homestead. There's a lot of us when you include the Rothschild family. We're a diverse lot and I guess that is as it should be.

I think it's time to wrap this up. At some point you just have to say the book is done. Supper is ready and I don't want to be late.