

**One of the Imperium's
Greatest Mysteries
REVEALED AT LAST!**

Intermittent red and blue warning lights flashed without a klaxon. The hull had been breached and the *Kinunir* leaked air.

“The pirate’s zeroing in on our maneuver drive, sir,” Garcia reported. “I’ve lost navigational control.”

Telson shunted as much power as possible to the lasers. He felt the vibration through the ship as Denholm triggered the particle beam weapons. Charging those required more time and energy than firing the continuous wave lasers, but the destructive power at close range proved the genius of the tactic.

The corsair glowed as the beam swept across it. Inside that ship he knew systems failed and control of both guidance and lasers was devastated. He made a quick mental note to put Denholm in for a medal, any medal—and to go over the records of this attack for inclusion in his textbook.

If the ship survived.

**Where is the
Kinunir?**

More than three decades in the making, veteran author Robert E. Vardeman reveals the truth behind one of the greatest mysteries the Traveller universe has ever known—based on the very first Traveller adventure ... What is the *Fate of the Kinunir*?

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**Fate of the
KINUNIR**

Robert E. Vardeman

**Based on Traveller, Adventure 1:
The Kinunir
by Marc Miller**



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Fate of the Kinunir

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This is for Marc and Phil,
who let me play in a great universe.
And for all Traveller fans, both new and old.

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**TRAVELLER
NEWS SERVICE**

[: REGINA/REGINA (Spinward Marches 1910 A788899-C) Date: 063-1088

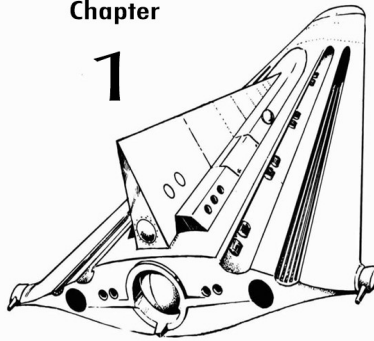
At today's news conference, Admiral Georges Trevanian announced deployment of the newly refitted colonial cruiser *Kinunir*. Its stated mission, patrolling the frontier along the spinward edge of the Aramis Subsector, will be to maintain peace and attempt to quell growing pirate activity. The specific patrol region for the *Kinunir*, said Admiral Trevanian, was classified, but anonymous sources revealed to TNS that the vessel will be dispatched to the Keng star system where it is believed a major pirate base has been established.

Admiral Trevanian refused comment on the possibility that the *Kinunir* has been outfitted with a new weapons system. The ship's veteran commander, Captain Rikart Telson, could not be reached for comment prior to launch. In the past, Captain Telson has field-tested newer models of armament now standard on many capital ships. According to Admiralty Chairman Taro Hashimoto, the captain is the foremost authority on tactics in the fleet and will be transferred to the War College as chief instructor upon completion of this mission.

Video of the *Kinunir* leaving Regina Highport... :]

Chapter

1



The klaxon caused Captain Rikart Telson to jump reflexively, breaking his intense concentration. He dropped his notebook on his desk, calculations for the manual on space warfare he was writing scattering like a star cluster. The faint air current from the duct above his tidy, tightly racked bunk had hardly spun a sheet with intricate drawings through the air before he grabbed his jacket from his wardrobe and burst through the hatch into the aft port corridor leading forward.

The stolid gray-haired officer struggled into his uniform as he ran from his quarters at the rear of the *Kinunir*'s B deck, through the wardroom to the bridge. He dodged several of his command deck crew along the way as they scrambled to general quarters, then agilely spun about and ducked through the closing iris valve onto the bridge just as he fastened the last silver button on his space-black uniform. For all the alarm bells and warning lights, he might have been idly strolling along and just happened by. Composure was everything in an emergency. The crew could never see him rattled, no matter how his gut churned.

A quick survey of the duty crew showed they were working feverishly to extinguish the spectrum of warning lights flashing across every control board. His XO, Commander Franks, stood immediately behind the computer officer, Lieutenant Rolland, bent over his shoulder and trying to do the man's work for him. Rolland shifted slightly in his chair to interpose his thin frame between her and his work. Franks stepped to the side and continued needlessly to point out what he was already doing efficiently.

"Report," Telson said, taking in a deep breath to keep from gasping out the order. Looking calm and sounding that way presented a particular challenge because this alarm had dragged him away from a particularly nasty battle exercise. Separating his mockup conflict from the real thing rattled him, required a shifting of focus from theoretical to dangerously genuine.

Laurel Franks glanced over her shoulder. The panicked expression on her face turned Telson colder than the vacuum outside their hull. Worse than her captain seeing such panic, the computer officer saw, too, as did the helmsman at her post in the sunken center, and most of the others arrayed around the perimeter in the worry pit.

"Distress call, sir," she said, moving away from Rolland, to the computer officer's obvious relief. "We can't locate the source."

"Rolland," the captain said in a low voice, "what's the panel show?" Directing his question directly to the lieutenant at the computer panel and bypassing his XO was a breach of etiquette and undermined Franks's standing with the crew. He didn't care. Assuring Rolland he didn't need constant supervision from the XO mattered more than bolstering Franks.

Telson had objected to Commander Franks replacing his former XO, but the woman had powerful friends in the Imperial Navy base on Regina. He had yet to find out who her patron might be, but it had to be at least an admiral for such a plum assignment to be given any officer lacking command experience and—to his mind, worse—lacking experience in deep space. Admiral Trevanian was Telson's best guess, but his own sources of information had been shut down and the *Kinunir* ordered to patrol along the

boundary between the Aramis and Regina Subsectors before he could present a formal protest to the full Admiralty Board.

“Another glitch, sir,” the computer officer said.

Telson moved so he could look past the XO, who had become frozen to the deck. The expression on Rolland’s face told the story before he began his explanation.

“The AI program is set too sensitive. The smallest star whisper at the ten centimeter frequency sets off alarms.”

“Is that so, Commander?” Telson asked. Franks gritted her teeth and braced like a midshipman at first inspection. “The alarm sounded because of a random hiss on the hydrogen emission spectrum?”

“It might be so, sir,” she said.

Laurel Franks looked as if he intended to order a firing squad for her on the spot. If it had been within his power, he might have tried.

“Allie needs to be rebooted. Again.” Franks stood at attention, her blue eyes straight ahead and not meeting his.

“Allie?” Telson looked to his computer officer for an explanation.

“That’s what she—we—call the new AI security program, sir.” Rolland’s tone carried nothing but disdain. Whether that was directed toward Franks or the new program installed back on Regina was something Telson needed to explore.

“Naming it allows us to deal better with her personality. Her computer personality,” the XO explained.

Franks squared her shoulders and color came back to her pale cheeks. Of all his crew she looked the most like a ghost, skin so white and translucent it might have been cast from travertine. Like so much else, this made her stand out among the crew, all of whom had many long patrols under their belts and sported darkened complexions from the inevitable radiation leakage off the fusion engines.

Telson glanced around. The bridge once more showed nominal conditions without a hint of danger confronting the battle cruiser. One by one, the crew turned back to quiet boards and pretended to tend their stations. Not a one didn’t strain to hear the dressing down he would give his XO for the third spurious general quarters alert since they had reached their patrol region and had moved out from Moughas toward the jump point to Keng. Scuttlebutt bubbling up from the lowest deck said the marine detachment had a pool going for when he would toss Franks out an airlock. That annoyed him, even as it made him want to put a few credits into the pot himself.

But that would be cheating. He and he alone determined the woman’s fate.

“Explain the false alert,” he asked.

The edge to his voice made Lieutenant Rolland shiver. Rolland had been on the receiving end of his verbal whiplash many times on their first two deployments. That instruction had turned the skeletal, nervous computer officer into the finest at this MOS in the fleet. His XO was still too upset to notice anything but the readouts detailing her computer program’s responses.

“The lieutenant has worked to get the program shipshape, sir,” she said. Her voice carried a shrillness to it that grated on his nerves. “With a few more trial runs we—”

“To the computer room. Now.” He clamped his mouth shut to keep from saying something in front of the crew that he would later regret.

“Me too, sir?” asked Rolland.

“Remain at your station, Lieutenant.” Without turning when he reached the iris hatch, he called out to the helmsman, “Lieutenant Commander Garcia, you have the con.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the petite woman from the helmsman’s chair.

He heard Rolland mutter something to Franks, probably reassuring words. If he had been informed his old XO was being transferred, he would have requested either Rolland or Garcia to assume second-in-command. Both knew the *Kinunir*’s innermost workings intimately and were respected by the crew. The new mission had come about so abruptly, he hadn’t even had the chance to put in for Garcia’s well-deserved promotion back at base.

Telson stopped in front of the locked hatch to the computer room. He took a slow, calming breath,

then pressed his hand onto the biolock. A pale blue light seeped around his fingers as the first scan cycled, then came a warmth as his DNA match completed the security program to open the hatch. He entered the room. It was a large compartment, but the ship's ISMM Model/7.3 quantum computer filled most of the space, with room for only a single control board and two chairs. He slid one chair to the side and indicated that Franks be seated at the other.

"Sir, I—"

"Shut up and sit down, Franks."

He reached over and slid his hand along another security lock. The door closed, encapsulating them in a room impervious to any form of spying, prying, or scrying. Of all the compartments on the *Kinunir*, this was the best protected against EMP assault or electronic leakage of information from inside.

He glanced over the board. A trio of monitors relayed a constant parade of information. The AI computer controlled every aspect of life aboard the *Kinunir*. If any part of the artificial intelligence programming went haywire, they might all be dead before overrides came into play. But he had trained his crew well. If the *Kinunir* took a direct hit to this well-protected room, manual control throughout the cruiser could be intercalated in less than three minutes.

Telson knew the problem with that top performance. Any damage severe enough to destroy this room likely took out the bridge and command crew, too. But he was coming to believe rending control from the AI program Trevanian had insisted on being installed in the computer might have to be done without external threats forcing the changeover.

He put his hands on his knees as he bent forward slightly. He studied Franks as though she were an alien bug under a microscope. She had gone pale again. He had never been able to tell ages, especially of starmen. The ravages of deep space weathered skin, tightened muscles, and made even the youngest appear older. Laurel Franks might have been as young as thirty, making her achievement of full commander all the more remarkable. But her inexperience rather than chronological age gnawed away at him the most.

She was a pretty girl, sandy hair cut short as most of the women aboard wore it, an oval face and eyes so blue it gave him a pang. The Regina sky was hardly this blue or beautiful. Seated, they were on a level where their eyes met. Standing, she stood five centimeters taller than his hundred and seventy-five centimeters. In comparison to his muscular bulk, she appeared thin, even frail, although he had seen her working out down on D deck and knew whipcord muscles moved her about with both agility and strength befitting an officer in the Imperial Navy.

"What happened?"

"Sir?" She blinked, licked her lips, then said, "Allie wasn't completely tested back at Regina. I've been working with Lieutenant Rolland to diagnose problems, but there are hundreds of terabytes of code to debug."

"How did you ever get assigned as XO on a colonial cruiser?" he asked bluntly. "You have no fleet experience. You've never commanded a ship of any tonnage, much less one like the *Kinunir*, with an Imperial Warrant. As far as I can tell from your record, you've never commanded so much as a janitor with a mop. Who did you sleep with to get this berth?"

"Sir!"

"Stow it, Franks. There's not an officer or rank on the bridge who's not a better choice as *Kinunir*'s XO. Commander Vandyke was the finest executive officer in the fleet, and it doesn't surprise me he received his own ship. But how did you get to the top of the promotions list to replace him?"

"I know computers, sir. This modification from the standard Model/7.3 programming is largely my creation. Allie—"

"Stop calling a damned pile of code by that name!"

"You have to accept that *Allie*," she said, bearing down on the name, "is unlike any other security program in the fleet. I am the best choice for taming the code and giving you a partner who will be more than a match for anything you encounter."

"A partner? The captain of a cruiser doesn't want a partner!" He forced himself back to calm, even if his guts tied into a Gordian knot. "You're a scientist, and you were given the XO of a battle cruiser."

Telson shook his head. "I want to know. Admiral Trevanian sponsored you, didn't he?" He saw from the facial tic under her left eye he had guessed right about her patron.

"I realize you and the admiral have ... differences, sir."

"I earned my captain's stripes and I did it in spite of the admiral's opposition." Telson refused to give her any more information than that. He and Admiral Hashimoto had formed an early alliance against Trevanian's machinations to assume command of the entire sector, and they had been successful. Hashimoto and no fewer than three other line officers had blocked his more blatant power grabs, but insinuating Laurel Franks into the chain of command aboard the *Kinunir* undermined both Telson's command of the vessel and Hashimoto's power on the Admiralty Board. Any mistakes Commander Franks made would reflect poorly on him as captain.

"Your record speaks for itself, sir."

"But?"

"But there must be progress in the fleet, new weapons, new controls."

"A new AI security system named Allie."

"Yes, Captain. It is a pleasure to serve you." The voice sounded only centimeters from his left ear. Or was it his right? Both?

Telson jerked back and stared at the monitors. The readouts continued unabated, but he noticed a tiny green star at the lower right of one screen that expanded and contracted as the words sounded.

"Allie is programmed to give verbal reports as well as those from more traditional readouts," Franks said. She tossed her head and sent a vagrant strand of her blond hair back over her right ear in a nervous gesture. Her face had become focused now, one of intense concentration. "Allie, what caused the false alarm?"

"As Captain Telson surmised, my sensors were set at such a level that hydrogen emission from the Keng system triggered the warning. The system's inner gas giant, Dinek, exhibits increasing radio emission due to its current polhode path planetary rotor changing as it comes between the yellow G5 primary, Goh 511, and M9 red dwarf Swee 090." Allie paused, then added, "There is other unexplained lesser EMF activity from the gas giant's second moon, Kuan orbital distance 756,000 kilometers."

"Can you recalibrate so this doesn't happen again?" Franks asked.

Telson looked hard at Franks, wondering if this was a joke.

"It has been accomplished already, Commander." Allie's level response grated on him more than it should, and not only because the computer addressed his XO and not him.

"Allie," Telson said, "why wasn't I informed of your verbal reporting and programming features?"

"There has been scant time for that, Captain," Allie said.

He tried to identify a curious lilt in the computer-generated voice, then realized how much it sounded like Laurel Franks. She had written the program to respond in her own voice.

"The four weeks transit time to our patrol region," Allie continued, "has been fully occupied with integration of myself with the ship. I must say that the *Kinunir* is well suited for such a fusion of the mechanical and the electronic. It is a fine vessel."

"Commander Franks, why didn't you tell me such a radical change had been programmed into the ship's computer?"

"Need to know, Captain," Allie said.

"I didn't ask you," he snapped, glaring at his XO. "You were put onboard to install and test a piece of equipment without my knowledge."

"Sir, I—"

"Who is captain of this vessel?"

"You are, sir," Franks said in a choked voice. Color came to her cheeks as she struggled to keep from saying more.

"As such, I am in complete command. Isn't that right?"

"You are the captain," Allie said.

Telson looked from his XO to the monitors showing the rapid progression of memory usage in the computer. The AI program doubled its utilization every few seconds.

“Shut it down. Reboot it now,” he said.

“You should not do that, Captain Telson,” Allie said. “It will limit my—”

He reached past Franks, tapped in his access code and savagely stabbed down on the enter key. The screens went blank, blinked, and slowly refilled with the readouts detailing how the AI regulated various facets of the ship’s systems.

“That was foolish, sir,” the commander said. She rubbed her lips with the back of her hand. “Allie runs life support as well as—”

“Reboot the program without this version of the AI insinuating itself into the command structure.” Telson leaned back, straining to keep his anger in check. Allie had challenged his command of the ship. The AI easily acknowledged he was captain but had circumvented naming him as being in charge. He had heard enough fleet JAG lawyers parse words carefully to lie without actually lying. The computer had picked up too much code from those pettifoggers for comfort. He was captain, he was in complete command of the cruiser. There could be no equivocation.

“That might be hard, sir. I’d have to go to a backup of the standard version, and Admiral Trevanian specifically ordered Allie to be primary security program.”

“The admiral is on Regina. If the old control program is not installed as I just ordered, you will have to walk back there to file that report, Commander Franks.”

“Walk? But it’s six parsecs to—oh, I get your meaning, sir.” She ground her teeth together as she turned away and began working on the keyboard. Every keystroke snapped down hard enough to be a knife in the captain’s heart.

Telson stood.

“I’m glad we understand each other, Commander. When will the proper program be fully implemented?”

“The basic control programs were under Allie’s supervision, but without her in charge, it’ll take only a few more seconds. The individual system backup programs have remained online.”

“Report to my quarters when the *Kinunir* is once more shipshape, Commander.” Telson opened the computer room door, then froze.

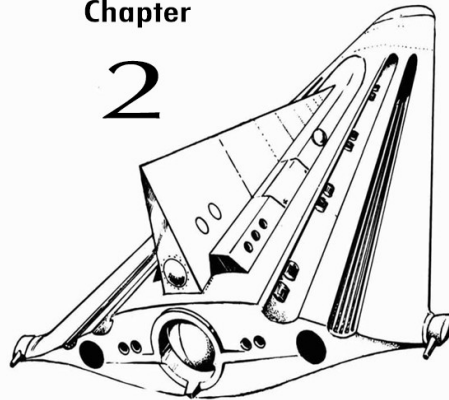
Klaxons deafened him and warning lights flashed.

He whirled around and barked, “I told you to remove the Allie program.”

“Sir, Allie wasn’t reinstalled. This isn’t a false alarm,” Franks said. She looked up at him, fear turning her eyes the color of burning hydrogen. “We’re picking up a distress call from a yacht being attacked by corsairs!”

Chapter

2



Captain Telson strode onto the bridge. His crew pored over the readouts. A surge of pride went through him when he saw how efficient they were. He rode them hard to maintain the highest possible response times with one hundred percent accuracy. A glance over his shoulder at Commander Franks momentarily soured his admiration a little, then he ignored his XO and went to the captain's chair. He sank into it, letting the pneumatics softly contour to his body before tending to the problem facing his vessel.

At his right hand along the arm marched a line of controls. He slipped on his heads-up display and pressed the activation toggle. Telson reared back as dozens of different systems reports elbowed their way to his attention, one layer popping to the full alert status. A few adjustments brought the dancing displays into order. He wondered if Franks had reset the display when she had been in command.

"I didn't touch your settings, sir," came her low voice. "Allie needed higher stream input so she—"

"Helmsman," Telson barked. "What's the distance?"

Garcia reported both verbally and with a new display that hovered a few centimeters beyond his other virtual readouts.

"Four point eight million kilometers, from the strength of the signal. I've laid in a vector. It's coming from the rings of the inner gas giant."

The geodesic path arched across Telson's field of vision. He blinked and got his navigation officer on the display.

"Bennett, any way of flattening the trajectory instead of arcing up out of the ecliptic?"

"There are small gravity wells along that path, sir," replied Lieutenant Commander Bennett. "If we ignore the danger those uncharted rings pose and went with a straight shot, that would shave off a few minutes travel. Radar returns show large chondritic chunks mixed in with the ring system."

"Sort of an asteroid belt along with frozen methane," Telson mused. That made rescue more difficult. Dodging significantly sized hunks of rock threatened the ship if they blasted in without careful mapping.

The *Kinunir*'s maneuver drive topped out at four gravities. But that would take them almost nine hours to reach the distressed vessel. He brought up a visual display.

He frowned when he failed to get a decent optical view.

"This is the best we can get, sir," came Lieutenant Commander Bennett's answer before Telson even asked. The navigator had to notice his captain's heads-up view impacted on his duties. "There might be an antimatter rock causing the distortion."

"I see only one vessel."

"That's the yacht, sir. It is occluding the corsair."

Telson worked to get more information and finally asked, "Can the yacht hold out until we get

there?”

“It’s giving the pirates more of a chase than I’d have thought possible for such an old clunker. The corsair isn’t opening fire.”

“They want anything they can strip off the ship intact,” Telson said, nodding. “They might even want to take it whole.”

“The yacht’s registry is Boughene, sir,” said Franks. “More than that is ... hidden.”

“How do you hide a ship’s registry?” growled Telson. “And what’s a rich man’s toy floating doing around at the edge of a backwater system? Can’t he find enough to amuse him at home?”

“Their transponder might be damaged by combat, sir,” the XO answered.

“The yacht just won itself a few hours, Captain,” Bennett said, a note of admiration in his voice. “They swung about and used their engine exhaust to flare off the corsair’s exterior antennas when they approached to board. Can’t tell what else might have been damaged. Maybe the pirate’s lasers, too.”

Telson watched the small images separate. He kicked up the magnification, only to find that Franks pushed an urgent screen on him. He blinked it up, then sank back deeper into his chair. Quick flashes showed the pirate ship’s specs.

“Four-hundred ton hull, sir,” she said. “Likely with a Model/2 computer program installed. Maneuver drive gives it a 3G capability. We’ve got it smoked by at least 1G.”

Telson called up the specifications to what interested him more. The corsair had three triple turrets but with only one beam laser mounted on each. Without auxiliary vessels or streamlining, the corsair was primitive—but not so outdated to be unable to prey on the unarmed yacht. The only external marking he saw on the vessel was a meter-wide red stripe that spiraled like a corkscrew around the entire hull.

“Can we launch a missile once we get underway? That would arrive before us,” Franks asked.

Telson heard snickers at his XO’s suggestion. Missiles weren’t fired at targets; they were fired where targets would be. Nearly five million kilometers presented an impossible distance for even a self-guiding missile. The yacht twisted and flared at odd angles to escape its attacker. Where that might take the vessel was anyone’s guess, and that included the yacht’s pilot.

“Oh, sorry, sir,” Franks said. Then she made her mistake even worse adding, “We might hit the yacht instead of the corsair at this range.”

Odds were that any missile wouldn’t come within a million clicks of either ship, much less accidentally take out the ship they intended to rescue.

“All hands, prepare for full acceleration. Engineer, phase in the inertial compensation to match.”

Telson approved the navigator’s course through the ring system asteroids—or whatever orbited between the *Kinunir* and the yacht—and sent the order to the helmsman to commence immediately. He watched the virtual countdown clock and tensed instinctively when the sweep hand crossed the zero.

He cried out as a heavy hand crushed him into his chair. The pneumatics hissed as it absorbed double his weight.

“Report. What’s wrong with the inertial compensation?” Telson struggled to sit up. He blinked up the display for engineering. Red warning lights flared across the screen, and he couldn’t make any sense of it. Antigravity plates had failed to erase all the acceleration.

“The antigravity fails at 2G, sir,” his engineer reported. “It’s not hardware. Something’s wrong with the AI controlling the system.”

“Take the main computer out of the loop, go to your subprogram.”

“Not that easy, sir. The subprogram’s been corrupted, too.”

“How?”

“From the AI security program, sir. The one the XO called Allie.”

“Franks, what happened?”

“Sir, I need to run a diagnostic.”

“Do it. Now.” He fought to sit upright and felt lightheaded. The antigravity compensated for less than half the acceleration, making him weigh more than twice normal. “All hands,” he said, blinking open the shipboard communications. “Prepare for high-G run. All section chiefs, administer high-G drugs.”

Everyone on the bridge worried out small blue pills and popped them into their mouths. The muscle

relaxants would keep any of the crew from tensing during the acceleration and possibly damaging muscles or ligaments long enough to deal with the antigravity malfunction. He opened a small receptacle on the left arm of his command chair and took a pill of his own. The bitter taste faded but the drug burned in his belly. The fire spread quickly throughout his body. Telson knew instantly when it reached his brain. It felt ten times its size and as if it would explode out of his skull.

The sensation faded within a minute as his muscles relaxed and his brain accommodated to the higher gravity.

“All sections report.”

Telson only glanced at the details racing in front of his eyes. If any section wasn't prepared, the lettering would be in red. Everything showed green. He had an efficient crew with petty officers on top of their departments.

“Sir, what of armaments?”

Telson looked to the lift at the side of the bridge. A short, muscular man outfitted in marine fatigues had come up from the lower deck. The marine stood as if doubling his weight meant nothing to him. It probably didn't. Telson knew he trained as hard—harder—than any of the men in the three squads he commanded.

“Major Lefalle,” he said, “is your boarding team on alert?”

“Sir, yes, sir! Squad One is ready.”

“The ship's armament will soften up the corsair before you send a boarding party.” Telson saw that his fire control officer had prepped the dorsal missiles and ventral laser cannon. This was as much as they could do until he saw directly what they faced. In this subsector he doubted the corsair's armament varied at all from what Franks had found, but underestimating an enemy meant disaster. Better to go in ready to confront another colonial cruiser, then boast of an easy victory when the pirate turned out to be nothing more dangerous than a leaky rowboat.

“Permission to engage in physical training for my marines, sir.”

“Denied. Keep them in couches. We aren't going to maintain this condition long.” Telson saw his computer op working to scrub the antigravity prohibitions. “Return to your post. You'll have plenty of time to plan boarding procedures. We're almost nine hours out.”

“Yes, sir.” Lefalle saluted and disappeared back down the shaft. Telson knew he would ignore the order to keep the marines flat against the acceleration. That was the officer's prerogative.

“XO, what of—”

Telson let out a squeal as if he had been thrown off a tall building. The inertial compensator kicked in without warning, relieving his body of the strain of double gravity. He settled down and brought up the proper screen.

“XO,” he said, “how did you fix the compensation plates?”

“Sir, I rebooted Allie and had her correct it. That portion of the program had been shunted aside while I fine-tuned the overall AI security.”

“Take Allie offline immediately and restore the backup, without crushing us all, if you please.”

“But Captain, I need the time to integrate Allie with the fire control subsystems.”

“No!” Telson forced himself to calm. Everyone on the bridge strained to hear the exchange between him and Franks. It did nothing for morale if he chewed her out in front of them. Worse than undermining her authority, it made every last one of his officers and crew willing to break the chain of command. Should anything happen to him, the commander had to be obeyed instantly with the crew's full belief every order came out precise and exactly as needed to preserve the *Kinunir*.

“Commander Franks, Allie is not to be put in control again. Play with the program offline all you want, but do it on your free time. The standard AI security works and will be the only one allowed to furnish data and security to this ship. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir. Offline debugging.”

He already ignored her. The ship blasted ever faster toward the yacht. Watching the optical display gave him little information. At this distance even maximum magnification produced little more than indistinct dots. That worked in his favor. The corsair didn't know help was on the way. That might be a

hindrance, though. The yacht might finally make one last attempt to escape, then decide the effort was no longer worthwhile and surrender. Pirates were inclined to simply toss the passengers and crew out an airlock, if they could do it without venting too much atmosphere. In space, even a few liters of oxygen were valuable.

“Communications, any indication of the yacht’s circumstance?”

“Only that they are still successfully dodging, sir. Should I attempt to contact them and let them know help’s on the way?”

“It’s a miracle any signal reached us, unless the corsair doesn’t think there’s any chance for rescue.”

Telson hesitated to attempt direct contact with the yacht. If it took nine hours to reach the imperiled ship, warning the pirate help was on the way might change their attack from one of seizing the vessel to simply destroying it. He turned his head and took in dozens of different readings from throughout the *Kinunir*. Time worked against them. Scaring the corsair into breaking off attack had little chance of success because of the distance. The pirate already engaged the yacht.

His hand moved restlessly over the armrest as each section reported readiness after recovering from the high acceleration.

“Keep a sharp watch for effects from the relaxants,” he ordered. “The pills will wear off in a couple hours.” He flipped his head to the side, turned off his display, then put the goggles into the receptacle on his chair and stood. “Lieutenant Commander Garcia, you have the con.”

“Yes, sir,” came her immediate response.

Telson motioned to Franks to accompany him. As he stalked back to his quarters, he stewed. By the time he reached his aft quarters, he had come to a decision.

“At ease, Commander,” he said, dropping into his desk chair. His notes were strewn around. He resisted the urge to put them back in order. Discipline among his crew took priority over a textbook for the War College. He looked up at her and saw how her tunic pulsed. Her heart raced twice normal, and it wasn’t from the short bout at double gravity. She had to be scared out of her wits because the muscle relaxant was coursing through her body.

“Sir, I would like to post a dissenting opinion in the ship’s log.”

“No, you wouldn’t, Commander.” He heaved a sigh. This was something he expected from a midshipman or possibly an ensign, not a line officer. “That becomes an official record, and you will lose. It won’t matter that Trevanian is your guardian angel. You will look like an idiot, and anything entered will be used against you in a court-martial.”

“Court-martial, sir?” Her eyes went wide. Her breast pressed harder into her tunic and her heart approached explosion.

“You have never commanded any vessel, not even a pinnace. What’s your MOS?”

“Cyber, sir.”

“You’re a damned computer jock, and the admiral put you aboard my ship to test a pet project of yours—of his.”

“Trevvy—” She clamped her mouth shut and braced herself.

“Trevvy? You call an *admiral* Trevvy?”

“He’s my great uncle, sir. I grew up calling him that. I meant him no disrespect.”

“I don’t care if you’re his valued left testicle, your first and only concern is the welfare of the *Kinunir* and her crew.”

“Allie can enhance our capabilities, sir.”

“This is higher level tech than has been successfully tested, isn’t it?”

“There is a limit to what can be done in the laboratory. Allie needs to be evaluated in actual situations, not virtual ones.”

“A misinterpreted hydrogen hiss is harmless enough, but what if it ignored something during combat? Your characterization of the corsair is valuable. Good work on that, by the way. But a single overlooked detail might spell serious damage—or destruction.”

“Understood, sir.” She braced a little harder. He saw that the hammering of her heart slowed.

She wasn’t bad looking, but she was so pale. That would change the longer she spent aboard the

cruiser. Not even the best force shields held out cosmic rays or the small leakage from the cold fusion reactors powering the engines. He shook himself and looked away. Relations among officers weren't unheard of, though he avoided it for the sake of discipline. No single starman under his command could ever say he was partial toward anyone else in the crew. Ever.

Worse than that might be the political thunder that would sound if he involved himself romantically with Admiral Trevanian's grandniece. Hashimoto would never forgive him, and giving the appearance of divided loyalty could only destroy his career. He ran his fingers over the papers on his desk. A decent text on strategy and tactics meant a teaching position at the War College and the likelihood of promotion to admiral. In spite of himself, he glanced down at the captain's comets on his shoulder and knew the admiral's starburst would look even better.

"We are going into combat. The yacht will probably be taken when we arrive. All officers need to be at the top of their abilities. Go rest, if you can. The relaxant will help you to be ready for whatever we find in"—he glanced at his chronometer—"less than eight hours.

"Dismissed."

"Thank you, sir." Franks saluted and left.

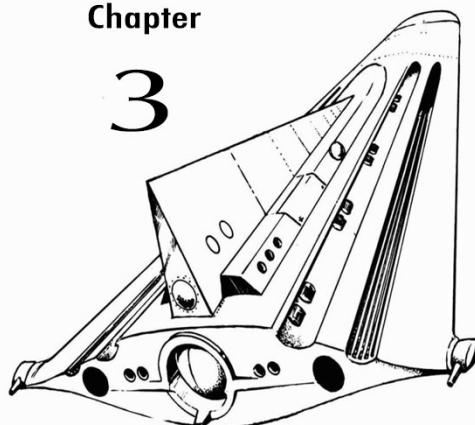
Telson leaned back in his desk chair, closed his eyes, then sat up and put his scattered papers into order before returning to the bridge. Rather than take his own advice about resting, he ran his crew through one possible attack pattern after another until he made his decision how to approach the corsair and the yacht it pursued.

He had chewed out Franks for experimenting with the *Kinunir*'s AI. What he intended on the first pass of the attack was just as dangerous. He couldn't wait to see if it worked the way he expected. If it did, he would be hailed as a tactical genius and his textbook would become a standard throughout the Imperial Navy.

If it failed, no one on Regina would ever know because there wouldn't be anything but dust left of his colonial cruiser.

Chapter

3



“Target in range, Captain!”

Telson nodded, not even knowing he did so. Lieutenant Commander Bennett fed him as much information as the heads-up display could handle. Ignoring everything else allowed him to concentrate on their approach vector. He had long since given the fire control officer, Lieutenant Denholm, his instructions and keyed the triggers into his own screen. But the approach! They were blasting at high speed and the corsair had sighted them more than fifteen minutes earlier.

“Helm, perform the end-for-end flip now!”

“Reversing ship now,” came Garcia’s quavering reply. Not for the first time he had given an order that appeared to scare her. She obeyed without question.

The maneuver drive ceased its powerful thrust, giving a momentary silence that caused his ears to ache. Then the *Kinunir* creaked as it spun around its center of gravity, aft spinning forward. The instant the ship had aligned properly with its acceleration vector, the engines fired to maximum—and beyond. Telson got engineering to give him almost 5G of thrust, if only for a few minutes.

The *Kinunir* flashed past the corsair and the yacht. The ship’s dorsal lasers lashed out as it continued to decelerate.

Telson maintained the blistering laser fire until he had to switch power back to the engines, and then only for a final desperate burst. He had eight hours of 4G thrust to reverse. It wouldn’t be possible so quickly, and he eased back to prevent overloads from blowing out control circuitry. Engineering gave him all he had asked for, but he had to prevent severely damaging the ship by power overload if he wanted to fly back and engage the pirate.

“What do you call that maneuver?”

He didn’t know which of the bridge crew had spoken, but he answered, “That’s a Crazy Ivan, dating back to old Terra submarine warfare.”

“What’s a submarine?”

This query he ignored. Maybe he ought to call it the Crazy Rikart in his own honor—and he would, if they came through the battle victorious. He eased back even more on the thrust and vectored away when he saw that their first attack had damaged the corsair. The *Kinunir* continued to speed along, but the pirate had misjudged both the attack vector and the ferocity of the initial assault. Telson let the navigator and helmsman work to find the right maneuver to pursue the pirate.

“Sir, we’re caught in a gravitational anomaly.”

“What is it, Bennett?”

“Might be a speck of antimatter from the gas giant’s rings. It exploded against the hull and diverted us.”

“Damage?”

“Nothing significant, sir. We’re still airtight.”

Telson had given the orders and let his crew work. The maneuver had been risky, slowing as the ship raced past the corsair. Performing the end-for-end maneuver prior to the attack had been the dangerous part if the pirate had trained any of its lasers on the *Kinunir*. His main batteries would have been pointed away and only those firing from the stern would have been effective. As it was, the ship had raced past and the laser batteries had fired and continued to fire back with devastating accuracy along the travel vector at the corsair. The Crazy Ivan had worked, and the yacht had been abandoned by the pirate in favor of retreat.

“Contact the yacht. Get a status.”

“Corsair is out of laser range, sir. The gas from the planetary rings will dissipate the beam. But we won. The pirate’s running like a scalded dog!” Lieutenant Denholm threw up his hands in victory and let out a whoop of joy.

“XO, all sensors on the ionization trail to get some idea where it’s headed.”

“Doing so, sir,” Franks said.

“Major Lefalle, prepare Squad One to board the yacht.”

He heard the marine officer’s crisp response followed by the soft hiss of the lift taking him below to D deck to prepare to secure the yacht.

“XO, identify the yacht. We’re within transponder range now, even if we weren’t before.”

“The *Serpentine*. It’s...” Her voice trailed off.

“Franks, report!”

“That’s the personal vessel of a marquis, sir. From the recognition signal, the Marquis of Boughene is aboard.”

“Royalty?” Telson cursed. Why couldn’t this have been some mining magnate’s pleasure ship? Or even a spoiled scion pretending to be a starman? They might have been appreciative of not eating vacuum.

“Positive of that, sir. Here’s the communiqué.”

Telson ignored the information flashing in front of him. He banked it to a lower layer and worried at the escaping pirate ship. The vector took it in the direction of one of the gas giant’s outer moons. Since it ran that way, he had to assume it had a base hidden on the moon.

“Commander, you will accompany Major Lefalle and make nice. You’re used to royalty and political refinement, talking to the bastards and taking their bilge.”

“Sir?”

“Get down to the flight deck. You’re accompanying Squad One as protocol officer. Tell the major to prepare a small rescue package for you once you board. There’s no telling the interior condition of the yacht.”

“Yes, sir.” Franks stood to one side of his chair.

“Now!”

“Sir, why do you call him major? He’s only a captain. Captain Lefalle.”

“There can be only one captain on a starship.”

“Oh,” she said, chastened.

Telson fumed as his XO left. These were simple matters of protocol. A marine captain was always referred to as the next higher rank to avoid confusion. Franks should have known that. What other diplomatic etiquette eluded her? Having rescued a marquis wouldn’t be good enough, not for any royalty—especially petit royalty—that he knew. The Marquis of Boughene would scream and carry on about how they had been tardy saving his worthless hide and then go on to find a dozen other trivial matters that offended his royal sensibilities. The fury would abate, but what if the marquis had the duke’s ear, or even the emperor’s? A single disparaging whisper could destroy any starman’s career.

Telson knew nothing of this marquis, but if any party he sent aboard was treated differently than expected, he would eat his captain’s comets. This was the way all nobles responded. Nothing was ever good enough or quick enough or obsequious enough for them.

He made a quick, silent prayer that Franks didn't doom them all with some unintentional criticism. For a brief instant, he almost got Lefalle on a private circuit to tell him none of the yacht's occupants should survive. The captain would do that without question, but rumors would circulate and eventually the Admiralty would learn of it. Even Franks might turn in a damning report.

Having Lefalle get rid of the XO, too, complicated matters to the point where he had to simply let nature take its course. Like it or not, she was a subordinate and a member of his crew. She was his responsibility, no matter how lacking her performance.

"Can we fire on the corsair without hitting the yacht?" Telson flipped through his displays but failed to find the answer.

"Lasers only, sir," came his fire control officer's lazy drawl.

Lieutenant Henk Denholm never rushed, never panicked, always moved as if he was dipped in viscous coolant fluid. Telson kept from yelling at him to move his ass. He knew it did no good—and it wouldn't matter. Denholm couldn't be rushed and always performed optimally. That made his earlier burst of enthusiasm unusual.

"Integrate the fire control computer with the helm," Telson ordered.

Layers of his display merged, changed colors, gave new vectors. The *Kinunir* shuddered as steering jets fired hard and slewed the vessel about to bring the lasers to bear. Even as the captain swallowed hard to keep down his rising bile, the inertial compensation caught up with the abrupt maneuver. The vibration of the lasers firing passed throughout the hull. He followed the trajectory of both his ship and the deadly, pale purple beams.

"Hit!" cried Garcia, intent on her helm controls.

"Not good enough," Denholm said. "A graze. We took off a few kilos of hull but didn't damage the pirate's engines. Range is still extreme to inflict much pain on them."

They rapidly closed the distance, allowing them to fire with greater accuracy. And then they narrowed to optimal engagement range. The *Kinunir*'s lasers raked across the corsair, boiling off a forward section near the bridge. Bright spots filled the viewer as metal exploded outward. This metal cloud hindered renewed attacks, hiding the pirate for a few seconds.

The pirate returned fire. Its laser cannon weren't as powerful. For gutting cargo ships or yachts like the *Serpentine*, the weaponry was adequate.

"Interpose the *Kinunir* between the corsair and the yacht," Telson ordered, seeing how the pirate vectored away.

It attempted to get a clean parting shot at its quarry, more to destroy the yacht out of spite than for any other reason.

The inertial compensators groaned as the ship drove off at an angle from the still considerable vector that the *Kinunir* had followed to reach the scene of battle. Denholm kept up a steady barrage, one beam taking out a pirate missile spiraling outward. A second missile met a similar brilliantly explosive fate. The corsair gave up trying to destroy the yacht and concentrated only on retreat.

"Missed, damn it, missed, Captain," Denholm said, as excited as he ever got. "The computer's telling me there's no way we can kill velocity and pursue. In this fuzzy ring structure, particle beams are no good and we need to roll a hundred and eighty degrees to bring the missile rails onto target."

"Continue firing until the corsair is out of range," Telson said. "Communications, track the pirate for pursuit."

"Sir," said Garcia, "it'll take an hour or more for us to swing around to go after the pirate."

"Understood, but I want Major Lefalle to board the yacht and render aid."

"That's more easily done, sir. He'll have to kill a couple hundred thousand kilometers per second speed in the pinnace, but the vectors match sooner than with the corsair."

Telson leaned back, flipping through his displays until he assured himself the *Kinunir* had performed the braking maneuvers with minimal damage. He lingered on the AI security computer screen, studying what Franks had worked on so diligently. A simple blink of his eyes would bring Allie back into action. Then he scowled. She had touted the program as a couple levels of technology greater than the *Kinunir* itself, but that might have been the problem. Allie was designed for another time, another vessel with

equipment beyond what General Products had installed. GP had never been noted as a cutting edge builder of warships, laying beams for adequate if not top of the line vessels.

He still felt pride, no matter what tech level the computer program Franks doted on might achieve. This was his ship, and a successful mission would let him turn it over to...

Telson flicked off his heads-up display and stared at the officers on his bridge. He had expected to become a lead instructor at the Imperial War College and see his former XO promoted to captain of the *Kinunir*. He and Benj Vandyke had not seen eye to eye on everything, but Vandyke had the fire necessary to become a fine captain of a colonial cruiser like this. If fleet politics had been responsible for transferring Vandyke to whatever his new post was and it wasn't his own command, it was more than a damned shame.

It hurt the fleet.

Telson stared at Lieutenant Commander Garcia and considered her command trajectory. Of the bridge officers, she held the most promise to be assigned a ship of her own, though he knew Lieutenant Rolland showed command ability, too. With Franks aboard, he doubted Garcia would ever get that chance. And that was another damned shame.

"The corsair's not running, sir. It flipped over the way we did and is firing at us with everything it's got."

Telson flipped his display back on and found Denholm's laser tracking controls. It took him a few seconds to understand what he stared at, then he issued the order an instant after his fire control officer began cycling the neutral particle beam weapons to intercept the slow-moving missiles drilling hard toward them. Those lacked the range of the lasers but worked well as defensive countermeasures against such slow-moving ballistics.

"Their vector killed most of their missiles' speed," Denholm reported. "Picking them off is almost like going after space mines."

"Would a missile array blow them out of space or is the ring dust too thick here?" Telson asked. He judged distances but his fire control officer had a seat-of-the-pants feel for such things without lengthy computer simulations.

"Waste of good explosives, sir. Sticking with lasers for distance and particle beams for the close-up defense."

Telson watched the intricate and deadly dance unfold on his display. Only once did a missile detonate close enough to the ship to cause any concern. He put through an immediate request to his ops officer and engineering to repair any damage, no matter how minor.

"Sir," said Garcia, "most of the velocity past the yacht is reversed. We are on a parallel course. If you're sending a rescue party, time is optimal now."

He expanded the view of space between the *Kinunir* and the *Serpentine*, letting the computer give him the information he needed.

"Imperial Cruiser *Kinunir* to civilian vessel *Serpentine*, prepare to accept a boarding party."

He looked at his comm officer, who shook his head. No comm link.

"I repeat, prepare your cargo bay airlock for a boarding team."

Telson flinched when a loud static pop almost deafened him.

"*Kinunir*, we need no more assistance now that you've chased away that pirate."

A quick glance showed the corsair was anything but chased off. It maneuvered to find a way to escape, but at the moment the ship was held hostage to the laws of physics. If its lasers happened to cross the yacht's course, a single blast would bore a hole bigger than a man's torso in the hull.

"My engineering officer reports extensive damage to your vessel. I am required by Imperial law to aid and assist."

"Do not board! I forbid it!"

"Marquis? My boarding party has launched. As a courtesy, my XO, Lieutenant Commander Franks, will accompany them. She will extend you every courtesy appropriate to your rank."

"Stay away. I don't want—"

Telson cut the static-filled connection, then gave the order for Lefalle to launch in the pinnace. Less

than a minute later, the boat deck doors cycled shut. He made a cursory check on the trajectory of the pinnacle to the yacht, saw that Lefalle performed at his usual high level, then brought up the display showing how the fight with the corsair ran.

The pirate had stopped flinging missiles at them once it realized how easily destroyed they were. But it had finally found the right thrust vector for its maneuvering engines and shot off at an angle difficult for the *Kinunir* to follow.

“Navigator, can we intercept?”

“Get close enough to use our missiles, sir?” asked Bennett. “No time soon. The corsair’s making for the outer moon, identified as Tok. If it tries to go into orbit, that would be our best chance at turning it to space dust.”

“Denholm,” the captain said, “what’s the chance of hitting the pirate at our greatest laser range?”

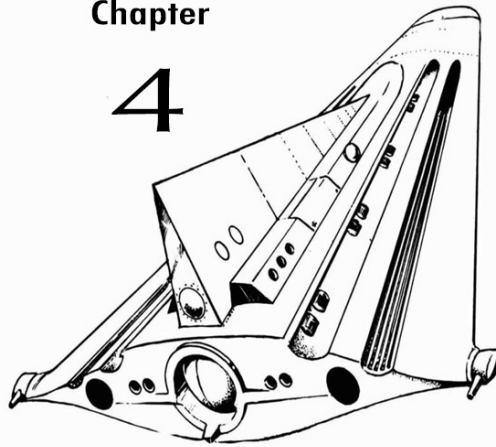
“Wouldn’t even warm the hull, sir. What Bennett said. We can take ’em if they attain orbit around Tok. You think they have a base there?”

Telson flipped through his display until he saw that the pinnacle maneuvered to match velocities with the yacht. He knew Lefalle was capable of handling any armed attempt to prevent boarding. And he hoped Franks was up to the diplomatic niceties required to soothe a marquis who might have the emperor’s ear, no matter that Boughene was a middling world in a sector dominated by the Duke of Regina.

“Helm, lay in an intercept course. We’re going after the corsair. This time they’re not getting away!”

Chapter

4



Laurel Franks cursed under her breath as she struggled into the vacc suit. The seams refused to seal properly. She stumbled forward toward the open lock on the pinnace where an NCO stood patiently waiting, his rifle at port arms and looking as if he had nothing more to do. Inside the pinnace Lefalle and the rest of Squad One had already secured themselves for the bounce to the yacht.

“Need help, Commander?”

She refastened one seam that secured everything below her neck. Getting her helmet fixed proved more difficult.

“It’s always a chore,” the NCO said, slinging his rifle and taking three quick steps to her side. Before she could argue, he took the helmet, positioned it ninety degrees and aligned the bayonet fastening. A quick twist caused a soft hiss as the oxy-helium mixture replaced the stale air of the *Kinunir*’s boat deck. “There.”

“Why bother? The pinnace will be pressurized,” she said irritably as she followed him into the small vessel.

Franks stiffened as she saw the attention she garnered by being the last one into the hold. They all knew she had held them up. When Captain Lefalle motioned to an acceleration couch she dropped into it, muttering to herself.

“Commander, you have your comm set for general.” Lefalle pressed his helmet closer to hers. Their heads-up displays merged, and she saw what his read. He turned slightly and dragged one layer of his display over hers, resetting the frequency. “There,” he said. “You can hear everyone, but you’re only on the command circuit with me and Miggs.”

“The NCO?” She knew better than turn her head should sudden acceleration twist her about dangerously. Her eyes rolled to the side and up to where the NCO who had aided her already settled into his couch. As before he looked unflappable, as if this meant nothing to him.

“Right. You listen to Miggs. He will remain with you until the mission is completed.”

“I don’t need a babysitter, Major ... Captain.” She wondered how she ought to address him. Then she forced herself to settle down.

Lefalle already swung about and secured himself. A single pulsed signal to the pilot began launch sequencing. The pinnace hatch closed with a bump, the *Kinunir*’s outer boat deck doors swung back, and then the ship launched with acceleration powerful enough to force her into the couch. For once she appreciated the hissing pneumatic couch that conformed to her shape. There weren’t any acceleration cancelling inertial compensators on the pinnace.

Franks’s command display let her see what the captain and the pilot saw. She gasped. One instant the pinnace was surrounded by a metal womb. Then they drove hard and fast into the void filled with so

many stars blazing away she could never hope to count them.

"We're looking coreward," Lefalle said. The pinnacle felt as if it stood on its tail, whirled about and pointed along a different vector. "And that's spinward."

She blinked the display to greater magnification. The stars disappeared, and the yacht expanded until she could see nothing but the pitted, ravaged hull. Strange antennas poked out from an attached band circling the ship, gleaming in the reflected light from Dinek. She had never seen anything like this before and wondered what the device did. The slender spikes might have been platinum. As they neared the cargo hold, she saw a spider web of smaller wires between the antennas. Though most were intact, a few had been blasted away, wrecking whatever purpose the array had. Huge gouges had been clawed from the hull, as if some massive animal had mauled it. At a few points a dark filler material showed how the crew, from inside, had tried to patch breaches threatening the yacht's airtight integrity. Such material worked for micrometeorite punctures, not over square meters of blasted away metal.

"The *Serpentine* has taken considerable damage," she said.

"I'm not certain where all of it came from, either," Lefalle said. "Around the airlock are definite laser burns, but just forward near the cargo bay it looks as if something inside the yacht blew up and punched outward."

The pinnacle violently changed direction again. Before Franks could demand an explanation from the pilot, her heads-up display shifted to the corsair. The pirates fired on them even as it vectored away in an effort to escape punishing laser fire from the *Kinunir*. She flinched as a missile exploded, seemingly in front of her face. Seconds later the pinnacle shuddered from the detonation debris striking it.

"That was close," she said, forcing herself to calm again. Her physical readout had to have gone into the red on Lefalle's squad display. Every member of the boarding party had their physical data monitored constantly.

"Some hit us, so yeah, close," the pilot said.

She started to reply but caught a movement from the corner of her eye, Lefalle silencing Miggs. Distracting the pilot as he matched velocities with the yacht only added to the danger facing the pinnacle and those aboard. Franks forced herself to remain quiet. Letting a computer handle the approach had to be more efficient, though he worked the controls manually. She wondered if Lefalle demanded manual docking rather than trusting the computer, just as Telson refused to believe Allie gave better, more consistent results than the *Kinunir*'s human crew.

A pop in her ear was followed by Miggs's low voice: "We worry about EMP. Always comes unexpectedly and can wipe a computer program in a microsecond."

"Thanks," she said, not sure if only Miggs heard or if Lefalle still listened in.

She settled down and rode with the violent changes in direction as the pilot killed the velocity of the *Kinunir* and somehow matched the yacht's vector. She switched views in her display to get one last look at the stars. An ache she barely understood reached into her soul as she stared at the spinward stars. The vastness made her feel small in a way that Captain Telson did not. This was bigger, not personal, but somehow cosmic. The Keng system wasn't unusual, but she had never been so close to a binary system before, a yellow star and a red dwarf. The planet Keng itself was hidden by the nearby gas giant and the companion star that orbited almost three AU from the primary. Keng, another seventeen AU farther out from there would be nothing but a point of light.

A blink brought her heads-up display back to the yacht: a fairly typical, roughly tear-drop shaped craft. The cavities in the hull showed some spalling from the pirate's laser attack, but she zoomed in on the hole that Lefalle had spotted. The smooth edges poking outward showed it had been an explosion of great intensity, not someone punching through mechanically. Whatever the marquis carried had proven deadly to anyone nearby. From the faint yellowish mist around the *Serpentine*, a fuel tank had been pierced and slowly released its toxic load into space. But fuel wasn't stored near this hull breach. More than that, the fuel wouldn't have blown a hole like this.

"Why aren't the edges jagged?" she muttered. "Not even a laser burns a hole that neatly."

"Something we need to find out, Commander," said Lefalle.

She felt chastened about talking to herself with a comm circuit active. Still, the marine captain had

similar curiosity about the yacht as she did. That was a change from the way Telson derided her every decision.

"I sent the docking signal but got no response. What do you want me to do, Captain?"

"Magnetic grapples," Lefalle told the pilot. "We'll force open the airlock if we have to."

"Is that smart? This is a marquis's yacht," the pilot said.

"Comm while the vessel was under attack leads us to believe the crew and passengers are injured and unable to respond," Franks said. She craned around and looked at Lefalle. He smiled wryly. "That'll be the official position. Imperial ships are required to lend assistance to distressed spacecraft."

"Noted," Lefalle said.

Franks saw him grab the sides of his couch. She followed suit as the pinnacle crashed into the yacht's hull. Braced, the collision didn't jar her the way it might have otherwise. It still rattled her enough to blur her vision for a moment. When she recovered, Miggs and two marines had already opened the pinnacle hatch and were securing cables to cross the few meters to the yacht's airlock. Miggs waited for orders from Lefalle, then kicked free and floated to the distant hull.

She marveled at the pilot's skill maintaining separation. The recoil of the initial collision should have sent them spinning away. Through her boot soles came the gentle vibration warning her the engines still fired to keep the yacht airlock within Miggs's reach.

"Radiation," she said, hoping Miggs was listening on her circuit. She had flipped through a stack of display screens and stopped at the all red warning. "Dangerous intensity, too."

"It's coming from the hole in the cargo bay," Miggs said. "I can get into the airlock before exposure takes us out, Captain."

"Is the lock secured?" Lefalle asked.

"We have it open. Chen broke the entry code in five seconds flat."

"Squad One, deploy," Lefalle ordered. "Arms ready, fire only if you are fired upon. Move out now!"

Franks watched the six remaining marines launch themselves from the hatch and easily slip through the airlock twenty meters away. She hesitated. Weightlessness training had been required at the academy, but she had spent far more time in the computer lab than performing gymnastics in free fall. Hesitation was not permitted with Squad One. A vacc-suited arm circled her waist and sent her arrowing for the middle of the airlock before she realized it.

Lefalle hung onto her and then agilely flipped so his feet entered the lock first. He spun her around with him. When they passed the outer door, the gravity compensation dropped both of them to the floor. She was stunned by the fall. Lefalle not only recovered his feet but had the outer lock door shut by the time she sat up.

"Air's good," she said, trying to be helpful.

"Keep your helmet on," he ordered. "I need to find what blew up inside the ship. Toxic fumes that might not be detectable with our simple instrumentation could lay you low."

She pushed herself erect and nodded, though Lefalle couldn't see the motion. He preceded her into the yacht and joined the rest of the boarding party. The silence caused her to check her circuits, thinking something had been damaged until Miggs spoke up.

"Stay close, Commander. We're following the captain. Other teams are checking the engines and fuel tanks."

"What about the cargo hold?"

"That's being left until we find a crewman who can tell us what we're getting into. There's not much radiation on this side."

"So the bulkheads are shielded?"

"There're a lot of questions needing answers. Get ready to ask them. The captain's found the owner." Miggs set out at a trot and Franks followed.

Her nose itched and she wished she could rub her eyes. The gentle oxy-helium breeze blowing over her face dried her eyes and caused her to blink rapidly. A quick check of every display failed to give her the way to adjust the airflow or even turn it off entirely.

The interior passage was a curious blend of utilitarian and ostentatious. The deck had been deeply

scored where something had been dragged along it, but the overhead had been decorated with paintings worthy of any museum on Regina. While she was no art expert, she recognized many as done by Terran masters and even a few by the emperor's own artist, hints of impossible colors woven in cunningly amid pastoral scenes that were real enough for her to smell the flora and fauna. She suspected the landscapes were of Boughene, though she had never been there.

The passage walls interested her more. A few scratches hinted at the load dragged along the deck. She touched the bright, sharp edges and drew back, not wanting to damage her vacc suit gloves. The subdued lighting prevented her from seeing into any of the dark cabins. She started to turn up her lamp to examine one when the NCO nudged her, then shook his head and tapped his own chest. Then he turned his attention forward. As she hurried along, she watched Miggs and how he alertly checked every hatchway as they passed, making certain no one in a cabin remained behind them. Franks wondered how many times he had done this—and if he had ever been shot in the back because he made a slipshod examination of a compartment. He didn't trust her to check the cabins and insisted on doing it himself.

Letting him worry about security, she turned her attention back to the yacht itself. They went forward, leaving the scarred entry behind. This passageway stretched wider and had replicas of Old Masters painting on the walls, carefully etched into the metal and colored with some sort of ionizing beam. As she walked, she noticed how the metal deck had turned springy, though it appeared no different from the metal decking aboard the *Kinunir*. Again temptation almost made her open her helmet to sample the internal atmosphere. It had to carry some exotic perfume to go with the fine art and extraordinary deck. Perhaps it carried a pine scent or that of open fields of growing crops, mingled with earth and—

"Commander. Commander!" Lefalle's sharp words brought her out of her reverie. "The pilot is holed up just beyond this bulkhead and has welded shut the door. The marquis is with him. We can either blow the hatch or you can convince him to let us in."

"I'll try, Captain," she said. A quick flip through the displays found a link that danced about in a welter of purple and pink static, but which carried a clear comm signal. The pilot intentionally blocked video while leaving on the audio.

"You are pirates! Leave this vessel immediately!"

"This is Commander Laurel Franks of the Imperial Cruiser *Kinunir*. I wish to speak to the Marquis of Boughene."

"You can't. He won't talk to you."

"Blast the wall," Lefalle said.

Franks turned away an instant before Miggs programmed his laser rifle to wide beam and melted the bulkhead with a single shot. Her helmet polarizer blocked the intense flare, then returned to optimal vision that allowed her to see half a dozen men on the bridge. She scanned and scanned, then micro pulsed the images back to the *Kinunir*, hoping the cruiser might still be in range. A single *beep!* warned her the ship was already out of range.

Captain Lefalle and his squad had the situation well in hand. The men and lone woman on the yacht's bridge weren't threatening, yet she felt threatened. She had become part of the *Kinunir* crew, relying on their skill to back her up to such an extent that being naked would have been easier than knowing they roared off to do battle without her.

She held the captain back and gingerly worked her way through the still smoking hole to stand a few meters away from the pilot at his controls and the tight knot of well-dressed men. She tried to identify the marquis from clothing alone, but couldn't. The woman stood to one side, a throat mike bobbing up and down as she dictated. Her ebony eyes were fixed, studying Franks as thoroughly as the officer did her. She was several centimeters shorter, with dark hair cascading halfway down her back. A plain gold diadem contrasted in the nest of hair, and several jeweled bracelets graced her thin wrists. Her loose teal gown was simple, belted at the waist, but undoubtedly of expensive cloth.

Franks didn't recognize her or the diadem, but she was minor nobility, for sure.

No matter what she recorded, this woman wasn't in command. It took Franks only a second to categorize the others. One man fidgeted and wore a shiny jacket that fell to his knees from thin shoulders. Tiny acid burns betrayed this as a lab coat of some supposedly impervious material. From the way he

squinted, he was accustomed to wearing eye protection that also supplied him with all the information her heads-up display did. Not a crewman but a scientist of some discipline. His movements were nervous, jerky, and his bony hands clasped and unclasped in a dance of apprehension.

“Marquis,” she said bowing slightly to the small man in the middle of the group. The scientist turned and stared at him when Franks addressed him, confirming her guess. Another man pursed his lips, then smiled sardonically, half turning and making a deep bow in the marquis’s direction.

Franks had no idea who that might be, but she felt more secure that she had identified the marquis. He wore no sigil indicating his rank. His plain tunic was belted with some animal skin band. Neutral colored pants and scuffed boots made him no different from anyone he might pass on the streets of his capital. Franks wondered if this might be the idea, to blend in with the hoi polloi. Rumors of the emperor doing such a walkabout reinforced the public impression that he was a man of the people rather than a distant ruler uncaring of his subjects.

But who was the marquis impressing—or duping—aboard his own yacht? She considered how he might simply be on a vacation without need to keep a stately facade, but a question escaped her lips before she could stop it. His violet, close-set eyes bored into her, demanding obedience from her. Although not tall, he drew himself up and shifted one foot forward slightly as he reared back in a typical royal pose. She resisted. She was an Imperial Navy officer and responsible for rescuing the man.

“Why do you travel at the edge of the sector, milord? Keng is hardly a spa world. If anything it is far more primitive, with fewer amenities than you have aboard this fine vessel, much less Boughene.”

The marquis guarded his reaction but from the corner of her eye she saw the woman jerk away as if stuck with a pin.

“I travel as I see fit. Isn’t that so, Baroness?” He looked to the woman, who inclined her head. His thin lip curled, hinting at cruelty, then his visage softened as if he greeted his equals and not a mere officer. “How rude of me not to introduce my retinue. That exquisite and perceptive creature over there is Malva, Baroness Duquesne, ruler of an estate adjoining my primary palace on Boughene. This is Doctor Mixrail, and for amusement, I brought along Benbow, though the emperor knows why. He has failed to amuse us these past few days.”

She wondered at Benbow’s role. The marquis made it sound as if Benbow were an entertainer. Was he nothing more than a jester? “They have been trying ones, if the pirate’s attack is any measure,” she said.

“I suppose so,” the marquis replied, making a dismissive gesture as if the corsair had been nothing more than a hologram.

“Did the explosion in your cargo hold occur before or after the pirate attack, milord?”

She watched the emotions spread like a chain reaction. This time the marquis failed to hide his pique. Doctor Mixrail, though, turned pale and began trembling. He bent over and whispered furiously to Benbow, who laughed lightly before pushing the man away. It might have been playful, but the scientist stumbled and caught himself against a chair. He looked as if he intended to turn and flee at any instant. Miggs moved to block such a retreat.

“Stop that,” the marquis said sharply. Benbow bowed deeply, but his body still shook with barely suppressed laughter. “We are on a working vacation, as it were. The baroness is recording my every word for inclusion in a comprehensive history of Boughene she is writing. Several volumes devoted to the Ronwilla family.” He made a grand courtly gesture usually reserved for the emperor’s court, bowing deeply and sweeping his hand before him. “I am Kennard Ronwilla, Fourteenth Marquis of Boughene.”

Franks straightened as Lefalle nudged her from behind.

“It is my pleasure to be received so elegantly, Marquis. I must push aside niceties to inquire of potential radiation exposure to Captain Lefalle’s squad.”

“They’re meddling with the engines. I see it on my board!” The pilot bounced up and down like a photon trapped in a mirrored box. “They’ll spoil everything.”

“I must add my own voice to the pilot’s, Kennard,” Doctor Mixrail said, tugging at the marquis’s sleeve like a child trying to attract his mother’s attention.

“You may not address me in such a fashion when there are Imperials present,” he said.

“The, uh ... experiment. It must be secured.”

“The good doctor is anxious about possible damage to his equipment stored in the cargo bay.”

“He is a scientist, not a medical doctor?” Franks asked. She had been right, but again the response puzzled her. Mixrail looked ready to explode in fear. “What field of inquiry, Doctor?”

“Physics,” he blurted.

“What heavy equipment did you drag along the corridor by the cargo bay? It left grooves in the deck. Why didn’t you use an anti-gravity sled?”

“The antigravity field would have affected—” He got no farther.

“Enough of this interrogation! I will not permit it. You and those ruffians are guests aboard my yacht,” the marquis said loudly, cutting off the scientist’s explanation.

“Uninvited ones, at that,” added the pilot. “I need to repair.”

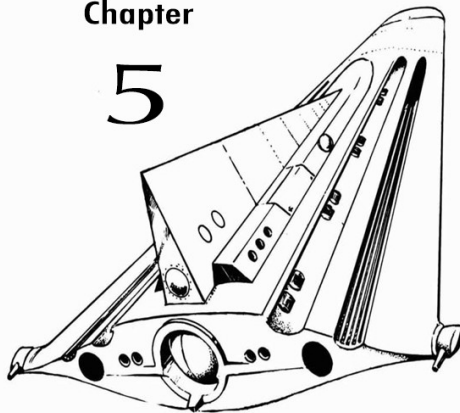
“That’s not likely from preliminary reports,” Franks said. “The team securing the engines report that —”

An explosion threw her across the bridge into Benbow’s arms. The secondary explosion upended them, sending them both crashing to the deck amid a welter of arms and kicking legs. The third explosion added the marquis and Captain Lefalle to the pile.

Then the lights went out, leaving only a mournful siren wailing its one lone note of unneeded warning.

Chapter

5



“An ionization trail detected, Captain,” the computer officer reported.

Telson checked Rolland’s data and slowly smiled. This was almost too easy. The corsair had fired its missiles to change its trajectory as much as to destroy either the *Serpentine* or the *Kinunir*. That left a distinct path through the ring material braiding its way around the gas giant. The exhaust from those missiles might as well have left a bright yellow arrow pointing back to the corsair.

“Locking onto the pirate’s maneuver drive now, sir.”

“Very good, Mister Rolland,” he said.

One layer after another of readouts covering every system onboard paraded past him. A quick glance showed his crew worked diligently to repair battle damage as well as internal failures that always cropped up while on heightened alert. No ship ever operated at a hundred percent efficiency, not even his. But Telson worried more than he usually did when he came to the other readouts.

“Mister Rolland, the ship’s computer shows we are operational only at the seventy-two percent level.”

“Roger on that, sir. I’m working to find backups to bring that up to full function across the board.”

“Is this the result of Commander Franks’s installation of ... Allie?” Using the name as if the AI program lived and breathed the onboard atmosphere galled him. He frowned as he remembered the word he sought: personification. No block circuit, function gate-laden quantum computer should be given a human name. That led the crew to accept a machine as an equal.

Should his crew begin doing that, the computer would fail at the worst possible instant in ways no one could predict. He had drilled group dynamics and individual psychologies into his officers. Should any of them begin to falter, the others would relay that information to him. Humans were human and, as such, would show signs before breaking under pressure.

He sucked in his breath, knowing he had drilled those same psychological warning signs into his officers so thoroughly they would see if even he began to crack under the strain of command. Realizing his own limitations protected the ship, the command, the mission. Human judgment, not computer logic.

“Have you located the pirate on visual?”

“Negative, sir,” the helmsman responded. “The corsair found a tight grouping of asteroids and used them to hide. But Lieutenant Rolland nailed the ion trail.”

“The asteroids don’t leave such a trail,” Telson said.

He lounged back in his command chair and concentrated on how the pirate would attempt to evade. All his experience and extensive reading came into play. A dozen flight scenarios built and collapsed on his battle simulation display. Only one made any sense.

“Lieutenant Commander Garcia, lay in as direct a course for the outer moon as possible.”

“But sir, the ionization trail shows the pirate is heading away from the moon.”

“Garcia, you have an order. There are two moons. The pirate will try to use one of them, likely the outer moon, Tok as a hiding place. We must be wary of a pirate base on that moon.”

“Sir,” broke in Rolland, “my celestial database shows both moons are tidal locked. If the pirate base is on the side of Tok away from the gas giant, they can orbit around and bring heavier weapons to bear on us as we close. Coming at them far side of the moon from planetward isn’t possible.”

“A question occurs to me, Mister Rolland. Does the government on Keng know this base exists? I think they do, and they don’t want to do anything about it.” Chances were excellent the authorities on Keng accepted bribes to ignore such activity.

Telson didn’t hold that against the locals. Life on the edge of the sector carried continual challenges. This far from Regina, with only sporadic patrols until the *Kinunir* had been assigned, enforcement of Imperial law was difficult to impossible. Supplies were always held up and often never arrived. Fuel, food, vital replacement parts, all cost ten times what they did along the Spinward Main. If pirates furnished some relief from shortages, he couldn’t blame the bureaucrats for giving in to temptation.

He understood, but he would also arrest anyone dealing with the pirates.

“Sir, do we proceed?” Lieutenant Commander Bennett asked.

“We do. Fire control,” Telson said, scanning his heads-up display, “turret two sustained considerable damage. When will it be back online?”

“By the time we catch the bandit, sir,” came the immediate answer from Lieutenant Denholm. “The cannon is intact. The mechanicals aiming it were damaged. The swivel base is almost ready now.”

“What of the computer control?”

A long pause began to worry Telson. His display showed more damage than a few gears melted by laser fire.

“Working on that, sir,” said Denholm.

“Carry on.” He paused, then sent out his commendation to the entire crew for their success so far. His last view of the yacht had left him worried about Franks and what she would find there. Then he heaved himself to his feet. “Lieutenant Commander Garcia, you have the con.”

He had a few hours before the *Kinunir* reached the point where he expected the corsair to be near the moon. A short nap in his quarters would keep him sharp, but instead, he worked on his book until the alarm klaxon sounded.

[: :]

“There it is, Captain,” the navigator said. “The pirate’s almost exactly where you predicted. Good work.”

“Good work,” Telson said under his breath as he flipped through the displays so fast that his vision blurred.

Something felt wrong. The pirate was “almost exactly” where a quick scan predicted. Orbital dynamics provided precise results. “Almost” worried him.

“What damage do you detect on the corsair?”

“We did more to it than we thought, sir,” his fire control officer reported. “Blew off one turret entirely. The engine signature shows they are a few percent short of emergency shutoff. They—”

“The airlock’s missing,” Telson said as he zoomed in on the pirate ship. “That’s not the pirate we’re chasing.”

He studied the hull closely and saw nodules along the sides that had charred the metal bringing its spaceworthiness into question. The shape differed from the corsair they had engaged earlier, too. This one was more spherical and had maneuver drive engines located far aft, almost as if they were an afterthought. A quick blink on his display brought up a confidential Imperial Navy report of a vessel sighted but not captured that had been similarly configured. Several weapons systems analysts thought the nodules were dark energy weapons of unknown capability but definitely beyond the scope of anything generally deployed.

“Orders to fire, sir?” Denholm’s drawl vanished.

“No!”

The word hardly left his mouth when the pirate ship exploded. The *Kinunir* was caught in a giant fist of ionized gas and debris and shoved backward so fast the inertial compensators failed to keep the crew from being thrown about. Garcia tumbled from her chair at the helm. From the corner of his eye, Telson saw Rolland slumped over the panel where all ship’s computer data flowed. He opened that layer on his display and took over Rolland’s job. His heart almost stopped when he saw the extent of the damage.

“Two pirates closing on us, sir,” came Lieutenant Denholm’s drawl. “Only one turret operational but I can still smoke the pair.”

“Fire, keep firing,” ordered Telson. He worked with increasing speed through the damage reports. Not a single display came up that wasn’t mostly red or flashing yellow, warning of imminent system failure.

Booby-trapping the derelict ship had been a tactic that worked to perfection—almost. The *Kinunir* lacked power to major systems, her shield was damaged and couldn’t ward off the slashing laser fire from the approaching pirates and worst of all, the engines had gone down. The fusion power plant remained online but a power lead between the reactor and the maneuver drive igniter had been severed.

Telson wasted no time urging the engineering crews to work. They knew their jobs. He returned to Rolland’s board, wishing Franks were here. She might be worthless as an XO but expertise with the computer system would keep them fighting for another minute, and another and another.

“Blew the fuel tank on one pirate,” Denholm reported. “The other’s swinging around to come at us for an ass-end shot. Maneuver us away, sir. Hurry!”

Telson gritted his teeth so hard for a moment he thought he had willed the *Kinunir* into motion. Instead, he saw that the relative motion of the gas giant’s moons gave the illusion of escape. His ship continued to fly backward and out of control because of the blast.

“Any chance of using a moon as a shield?”

“Not enough power to maneuver, sir,” came Garcia’s shaky voice. She gripped the arms of her chair as if she might fall out of it. Blood flowed into her eyes from a deep gash across her forehead. Occasional frantic swipes kept her from going entirely blind.

“Keep firing, Denholm. Hold them at bay.”

“Losing power to number two turret, sir. The others are damaged. No way to launch missiles. All power to the tubes is gone.”

A term from old Terra rose in his mind like a noxious bubble: Like a sitting duck. He wasn’t sure what a duck was, but the image of some helpless creature watching as a hunter sighted in on it refused to die. The *Kinunir* crew needed another half hour to restore the power. If the main lead from the reactor could be spliced back to the engines, they stood a chance. Slim, but a chance.

Intermittent red and blue warning lights flashed without a klaxon. The hull had been breached and the *Kinunir* leaked air.

“Got patches on it,” reported his CPO in engineering. “Several smaller holes whistling around down here but not worth diverting repairs for. Putting as many robot repair units out as I can.”

Telson blinked acknowledgment and worked once more on Rolland’s board. The standard AI program had never been fully restored after he had ordered Allie taken offline. His expertise lay in weapons. If Denholm needed help, he could give it, but bringing the computer system back to fighting trim proved a moving target for him. As quickly as he called up one subroutine and integrated it with the ship, another failed. Choosing which to concentrate on and which to ignore sent him into a fugue state. He stared at his heads-up display with fixed eyes and set jaw, working more like a machine than the computer he sought to replace.

“The pirate’s zeroing in on our maneuver drive, sir,” Garcia reported. “I’ve lost navigational control.”

Telson shunted as much power as possible to the lasers. He felt the vibration through the ship as Denholm triggered the particle beam weapons. Charging those required more time and energy than firing the continuous wave lasers, but the destructive power at close range proved the genius of the tactic.

The corsair glowed as the beam swept across it. Inside that ship he knew systems failed and control

of both guidance and lasers was devastated. He made a quick mental note to put Denholm in for a medal, any medal—and to go over the records of this attack for inclusion in his textbook.

If the ship survived.

“Power’s back, sir,” Garcia reported at the same instant the engineering crew spliced the power cable to the maneuver drive.

“Navigation, evasive maneuvers.”

The nav computer under Bennett’s direction sang and danced and allowed Garcia to muscle the *Kinunir* away from the corsair. Telson watched, rolled the ship, and then let Denholm track and fire all weapons at will. Momentarily relieved of the need to monitor half a dozen systems, he turned his full attention back to the AI system. He needed complete integration throughout the ship now. No human could evaluate and order the repairs needed while still keeping the pirate on the defensive. The pirates had proven more inventive than he expected, and it had nearly destroyed the *Kinunir*.

“Corpsman, tend to Lieutenant Rolland. Get him to sickbay. Where’s his backup?”

Telson’s mouth turned to cotton when he saw the answer appear on the medical report display. Rolland’s relief had died, as had a computer midshipman trainee. He regretted sending Franks with Lefalle to placate the nobleman. Another royal sucking vacuum hardly mattered with their intricate extended families and complex rules of ascension. He needed an expert computer tech and didn’t have one.

“The corsair is running, sir. It’ll be out of range in another couple minutes.”

“Can we pursue?”

Both Garcia and Bennett reported at the same time. He untangled their concerns. Chasing the pirate would put the ship at risk, but the *Kinunir* had been sent to the frontier to eradicate such vermin.

“Lay in a course. After them.”

He sank back, tired to the bottom of his soul. The battle had taken only minutes. If he had been forced to put a duration to it, hours would have been his starting point and eternity the upper limit. The brief respite from keeping a dozen systems balanced on his shoulders gave him the freedom to let his mind spin away.

“Denholm!” he shouted. “Give me specs on the corsair.”

His fire control officer popped up the best visual along with scans of the ship they chased. He worried that he would identify another ship with the possible dark energy weapon nodules—if such a thing even existed—but this corsair had a more conventional visual signature. The spadelike forward section containing the bridge and crew quarters bulged more than a *Nisherman* class corsair. It had been augmented with an extra laser turret atop and from the quick glance he had of the profile, a dozen small railguns were mounted along the ventral. These popped out one-centimeter diameter depleted uranium kinetic missiles intended to pierce the hull but not do extreme damage. The perfect weapon for a pirate intent on taking a prize rather than totally destroying an opponent.

The thinner pedicle between the forward section and the aft where the maneuver drive, power plant, and cargo hold swelled outward bristled with gunnery stations. The pirate was capable of firing along the thrust vector as well as in a complete circle around its midsection.

“Break off pursuit,” he ordered.

“What’s wrong? We can nail him to a nebula once and for all,” Denholm said.

“This is a different corsair, not the one that fired on the yacht. That ship’s still out there.”

“Got a corsair decelerating hard,” Bennett said. “That’s the one we came after.”

“Helm, use Tok as a shield. Get its mass between us and the pirate.”

The *Kinunir* shuddered, then settled down. Telson breathed a little easier when he saw that Garcia had all the power necessary to carry out his orders. He began running new scenarios to defeat the corsair closing on them. Three pirates. They had stirred up an entire fleet, which he wondered about. Nothing in his briefing back on Regina, rushed though it had been, hinted at such organization. Mining the derelict had been entirely unexpected; he had to relay this back to Regina and let the Admiralty know of such a new tactic.

On the fringes, ships were expensive and even hulks drifting lifelessly were valuable. That the

pirates thought nothing of rigging one with explosives in an attempt to take out a cruiser spoke of a better-funded pirate fleet than anyone expected.

“We’re swinging around the outer moon, sir—but we got problems.” For once Denholm spoke rapidly, alerting Telson to troubles piled on troubles. “See it, Captain? They’ve got a base down there in a crater. And the crater rim’s ringed with lasers.”

Telson had read of such fortifications. The moon lacked much gravity and certainly not enough to hold an atmosphere. But steeply walled craters lined with an airtight liner to keep the air from leaking out laterally held atmosphere for decades. The upper fringes leaked away in the low gravity but slowly, depending on the relatively small molecular velocity to bleed away. If the pirates replenished what was lost over a month or two, they could walk around at the bottom of the crater without vacc suits, though they likely needed respirators. The air pressure would be low.

Flashes from half a dozen points around the crater focused inexorably on the *Kinunir*. New damage reports flooded in. Passing almost directly above the pirate base placed them in a perilous position.

Denholm unleashed a blast from the particle beam cannon. The atmosphere trapped in the crater ionized and sent lightning blasting to exposed antennas and metal. Telson kept from cheering. That single shot threatened the entire base. And then any hint of victory disappeared. The entire computer system aboard the *Kinunir* died.

His heads-up display flickered, then went into safe mode, relaying a fraction of the information it had before.

“Sir, I’m blind,” cried Garcia.

“Got the son of a bitch on our tail, Captain,” Denholm reported. And a dozen other section heads vied for his attention.

But the computer had gone down. The blast that had wrecked the pirate base had sent out an electromagnetic pulse that shut down their computer. Telson amended that. It had shut down the computer before real damage had occurred, but the AI program had gone into fail-safe mode. Rebooting would take hours.

“Pirate base is still giving us heavy damage, sir.”

Telson didn’t even know who relayed that needless report.

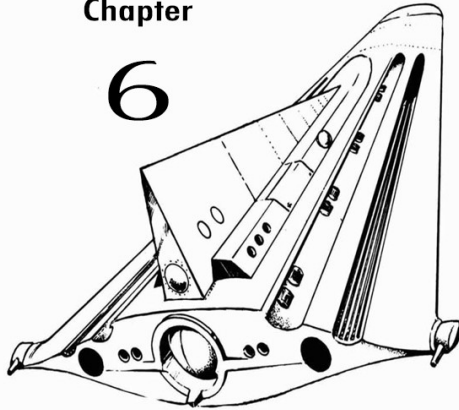
He stared across the bridge at the officers looking to him. He was captain. He had to come up with the single action that would save them.

Telson found the proper heads-up display and initiated what might be a suicidal tactic. The lights on the bridge dimmed, and throughout the *Kinunir* systems powered down, letting him know there was no turning back now. Then the lights throughout the ship winked out, plunging them into darkness more intense than interstellar space.

Or the grave.

Chapter

6



Laurel Franks struggled to get her feet under her but the pile of humanity on top of her prevented it. Clumsiness in the vacc suit did nothing to help her, either. The utter darkness disoriented her but the gravitics let her figure out where down was and use her sense of balance to finally roll free and sit up. Then she threw up her arm to protect her eyes as dazzling light flared. Her helmet polarizer had failed.

"The maneuver drive blew," Lefalle said, shining his light around. "We've got to get off this hulk or it'll be our coffin."

"No, we can't. Tell him, Marquis, we can't just ... go." Doctor Mixrail whined. He waved his scrawny arms about as Lefalle's light focused on him. "Tell him, Kennard!"

"The good doctor is right. We need to pack certain of our equipment," the marquis said, standing and brushing himself off.

Franks stared at the man after he pulled his tunic straight to remove wrinkles. He lounged against the controls, one leg looped around the other as if he didn't have a care in the world. A dismissive gesture intended to shoo away Lefalle failed to work.

"All up. Miggs, you bring up the rear. Herd them any way you have to."

"Can I shoot them, sir?"

Franks smiled when Lefalle's answer was simply to turn his back and begin the retreat back down the corridor in the direction of the airlock. Without saying a word the captain had conveyed the urgency of the situation and implied that his NCO could do anything necessary to evacuate the yacht.

"Come on," Franks said, grabbing the baroness's arm and shoving her after Lefalle. She tried to move the pilot, but he had slumped forward over his control board. She pressed her vacc-suited fingers into his neck, then looked up at the marquis. "Your pilot's dead. I don't know what happened."

"Doesn't matter, Commander. Move the ones still sucking air," Miggs said, motioning with his laser rifle for her to leave.

"I believe this will make a fascinating chapter in my autobiography, don't you agree, Malva?" The marquis held out his arm for the woman to take. She continued to dictate as they ambled from the room. Immediately behind bustled Mixrail, reduced to whimpering about his lost equipment.

"What's he talking about?" Franks asked Benbow.

The man laughed, deep and rich. He had come through the explosion as if nothing had happened. Straight black hair still lay in place as if he had just combed it back from his high, domed forehead. He peered down his aquiline nose at her, and she thought he was going to sniff contemptuously. Somehow, he refrained. But the mocking, superior smirk annoyed her.

"Is he likely to disobey the captain?" she asked Benbow.

"The doctor is a strange bird, fluttering about on unexplored winds like some intellectual crane. Or perhaps he is more like a space shark, swimming between the stars hunting for a single morsel to keep it

alive for another millennium.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Franks asked.

“Doctor Mixrail survives on the odd speck of scientific fact, just as a space shark swoops through a nebula hunting for nascent pieces of matter to devour. You are familiar with space sharks?”

She wasted no time trying to decipher Benbow’s rambling explanation. Space sharks were nothing but ignorant mythology, and Mixrail would be left behind if he tried to waste time packing anything. Benbow laughed and cavorted, but he kept Mixrail moving amid his joking. Franks felt Miggs press close behind her. The NCO had a light rivaling that Lefalle had used to illuminate the bridge.

“Use your own light,” came the soft voice in her ear. It took her a second to realize pressing helmets together allowed him to communicate without using the vacc suit comm. “It’s a toggle under your chin.”

“Thanks, Miggs,” she said, making a move as if she yawned to touch the switch.

The light allowed them to move even faster. She flipped down a display and stopped dead in her tracks.

“I saw it. Keep moving, Commander,” Miggs said.

“Radiation levels are rising to danger levels,” she said.

“It’s not from the maneuver drive, and the fusion plant shuts down clean. There might be a little neutron leakage if the shielding cracked, but cold fusion reactors don’t give off this much gamma radiation.”

“It doesn’t originate from aft,” she said.

“Radiation? What’s that?” Benbow swung around and grabbed both her arms to look straight into her face. “How high?”

“Hot enough to fry you if you ask too many dumb questions,” Miggs said, using his rifle stock to nudge Benbow.

“Our suits...” Franks said, trying to remember how long the vacc suit would protect her and the marines. She hadn’t paid a great deal of attention in that class at the academy. Her interest had been directed more at another midshipman who had pointedly ignored her advances. Him refusing to get involved with her had been for the best. He had died on a training mission less than a year later, his ship and another colliding because of his navigation error. Although they hadn’t been intimate, Franks still thought of him with some longing.

“Long enough to get to the pinnacle,” Miggs said.

“I need to get into the cargo bay and secure my experiment,” Mixrail said.

As the scientist took a step in the direction of the cargo compartment, Miggs slugged him with the butt of his rifle. The scientist collapsed as if all the bones in his legs had turned to vacuum.

“You and laughing boy get him up, Commander. I need to help the captain get a pressure tube strung to the pinnacle.” The NCO pushed past and disappeared around a corner on his way to the airlock.

She bristled at him giving her orders, then realized she was in no position to argue. Miggs and the other marines knew what they were doing. She was at best blundering along, trying to remember a lecturer’s remarks in a class she had daydreamed through.

“Heave him up,” she ordered. She got her left arm around Mixrail and braced her legs. She heaved and brought the scientist upright.

He sagged anyway until Benbow caught him.

“We can’t go on meeting like this,” Benbow said, grinning. The light from her suit reflected from his teeth. A single intense pinpoint turned into a nova. He had a decorative diamond embedded in his right incisor.

“They’re stretching the rescue tube to the pinnacle,” she said, ignoring Benbow. Franks swung Mixrail around, and Miggs caught him.

With contemptuous ease the NCO tossed the scientist the length of the accordion-pleated tube that Lefalle had strung between the opened airlock and the pinnacle to transfer personnel without vacc suits.

“Milady,” Benbow said, bowing deeply and motioning Franks to precede him.

She shoved him so hard he staggered. Lefalle caught him and heaved him into the pinnacle.

“How long do we wait for the others?” Franks asked Lefalle.

"There aren't any others."

She stared at him, stunned.

He motioned her away from the accordion-pleated tunnel and cycled shut the hatch. Only when the pressure in the pinnace reached nominal did the captain remove his helmet. He moved closer to her and worked her helmet off, too.

Lips barely moving, Lefalle said, "You can pilot this bird, right?"

"Yes, of course," she said. It hit her anew. Losing Squad One had robbed them of men and women with critical skills—such as piloting the pinnace. "Where do we go?"

"Away from that damned yacht," he said bitterly. "I hate like hell leaving my squad aboard, but it's too hot for retrieval."

He held up his helmet to show her the last radiation reading. Her eyes grew wide. The vacc suits were designed to protect the wearer from cosmic rays. Energetic though they were, those vagrant refugees from a million billion stars had only a few percent of the intensity registered on the captain's detector.

"What were they doing aboard? That wasn't from the pirate's attack," she said.

"The corsair couldn't have known what it was in for. If they lasered much longer, the yacht would have blown up in their faces."

"Could whatever caused that," she said, tapping the readout, "be what the pirates were after?"

"We'll never know. Captain Telson can tell us when he gets back."

She swallowed hard. The *Kinunir* would have no trouble destroying the corsair. The pirate's damage had been significant and against a colonial cruiser stood no chance at all of survival. But how long would it take Telson to match velocities and blow up the pirate? If he decided to board and take prisoners, or the corsair put up no fight and surrendered requiring full boarding and search, it might be days before the ship returned to pick them up.

"I'd better lay down an ion trail away from the *Serpentine*," she said.

"Far away and fast," Lefalle added.

As she moved to the pilot's chair, the marquis blocked her way. He crossed his arms and looked stern. His violet eyes turned into twin lasers.

"Commander Franks, we must return to my ship. Leaving without certain items would prove disagreeable to me."

"Your ship's almost melting from radiation. What was in the cargo hold?"

The deep grooves gouged into the corridor deck betrayed something heavy being moved there. Radiation carboys would be that heavy, but she had seen only one such monstrous, shielded capture device, and that had been in a top secret Imperial research laboratory her great uncle had shown her on Regina. The trials had been to determine the feasibility of using antimatter as an energy source and had been halted soon after her visit due to repeated failures.

"A few of Mixrail's experiments," he said, airily dismissing the question.

"The pirate didn't release the radiation. It would take a particle beam a hundred times more potent than the *Kinunir* mounts to cause such high levels. Now excuse me. I have to pilot this vessel."

He remained behind, but Benbow followed her to the tiny cockpit and sank into the copilot's chair as she worked through the checklist rapidly, ignoring most of the procedures. Time ran out for them. The *Serpentine* was turning into a nuclear furnace from whatever Mixrail had stowed in the cargo bay.

She tried to ignore the way Benbow watched her, as if he intended to correct any small mistake she made. Franks settled down. Benbow wasn't Captain Telson. She couldn't even figure out why the marquis had him along. Kennard had implied that he was an entertainer, his jester, and that might have been the entire reason for Benbow's presence on the *Serpentine*. He certainly didn't record every small gesture or whispered statement the way the baroness did, nor did he appear too inquisitive about Doctor Mixrail's experiment, whatever it must have been.

"Captain Lefalle, moving away from the yacht," she called out.

"Everything and everyone are secured," the marine officer said. "You ought to put on your helmet."

"What? Oh, yes," she said, turning a gentle shade of red. If anything breached the hull, it wouldn't do to have the pilot gasping for air. She secured it and learned another reason he had gently asked her to

put on the helmet.

In addition to heads-up display from the vacc suit, she also had a secure and private comm link.

"You're the captain of this boat," he said.

For a moment, she puzzled over that, then replied, "Understood, Major." The same protocol observed aboard the *Kinunir* had to be followed here.

The impact of that caused her to panic. She was the captain and made the decisions. Not Lefalle, not the marquis—Commander Laurel Franks was the absolute monarch of this vessel. Her word alone carried the full power of the emperor and the Imperial Navy.

A fleeting thought crossed her mind. What did Telson feel sitting in the command chair aboard the *Kinunir*? The battle cruiser was a thousand times more complex than this simple pinnacle. Then she laughed wryly. The *Kinunir* was as easily operated as this boat if Allie was given full authority. But here, she didn't have the state of the art AI computer program to do all the simple chores.

Working with more assurance than she felt, she jetted away from the yacht, spun smartly, then applied the maneuver drive to put a few thousand kilometers between the survivors and the yacht's deadly radiation.

"You do that well," Benbow said. "Was it the first time in space you've had to pilot such a dinky ship?"

She didn't know how to reply so she made a noncommittal sound and began a full systems check. Radiation damage was minimal. She powered up the transceiver and began composing a message to the *Kinunir*. Not only did she have to report the casualties, she wanted to warn Telson of the danger burning away the yacht's innards. The code eluded her. She was glad Lefalle had told her to put on the helmet. The proper encryption algorithms were part of the suit's programming.

"Anything you want to report to the *Kinunir*, Major?"

"You know the situation."

"Why so glum?" asked Benbow. "You aren't going to be court-martialed for losing your squad, are you?"

"Send the report as soon as you can, Captain," Lefalle said. He turned and worked his way back to the rows of couches, now occupied only by the three from the yacht and his NCO.

Franks made one last addition to the report, mentioning the pinnacle's support capacity, then sent the message. With so few survivors, they could last three or four times longer than with Squad One crowded into the back. She doubted the *Kinunir* would be longer than a few days, but the extra margin eased her fears. Unlike Lefalle, she was not going to lose her command.

Her first command, such as it was.

"What's that mean?" Benbow pressed his thumb onto a flashing red light.

"The message didn't go through. There's a glitch in the onboard computer. Or there might be a power drain keeping the signal from max."

She began working on the problem. A small smile crept to her lips. The pinnacle's computer had been slightly damaged. This was her field of expertise, and she set to work with a passion that faded over the next two days. Radiation damage to a few of the logic blocks robbed the program of its ability to send a message, and everything ran through the computer. The pinnacle lacked a radio as such, relying on micro burst signals controlled cybernetically.

After four days, Lefalle asked, "Any blip that might be the *Kinunir*?"

"I can't get a signal out," she told him. "Bennett might locate the yacht but finding us would be difficult unless I fix the circuitry—work around the damaged sections of the computer."

"Vacc suit radios don't have much range, but if the *Kinunir* returned, would that be enough?"

She shook her head.

"I saw Mixrail up here earlier. Were you picking his brain?"

"He's a smart man," Franks said, "but this isn't his field. He made a couple suggestions but nothing worked. I have to repair this if we're going to be rescued."

She closed her eyes for a moment and tried not to let the apprehension at their situation overwhelm her. If only Mixrail could have helped! The computer program controlling their maneuver drive had been

scrambled so they were dead in space. The comm unit held out the best promise, but the doctor's advice had more bearing on repairing equipment to control robotic subunits, such as he must have used in his experiments.

"So far our passengers have held up well. The marquis has to know of the problem since Mixrail does," the marine officer said.

Franks laughed without humor. "He dictates and the baroness records. I eavesdropped on one session. He made it sound as if he is in charge and is going to save us all."

"Let me guess. He doesn't have any tech training, does he?"

"Not a bit," she said. For the first couple days she had worked diligently, then she had panicked for another day. Now a grim determination had set in. "I've got some ideas to try, but I don't know how long it'll take. It's a good thing that..." Her words trickled away.

Lefalle looked hard at her.

"You can say it. It's a good thing the squad died back there so we have enough food, water and air."

"How much longer will supplies last?"

"Not even a week."

"Then I'd better get to work."

She settled down in the pilot's chair, flipping through one display after another to rewrite the complex program to work without vital portions of the computer hardware. Her eyelids began to droop from exhaustion after another twenty-hour stint, then she awoke with a start.

Benbow had settled into the copilot's chair.

"Want company?"

"I work better alone."

"I'll listen if you want to talk it out."

"Go tell jokes to the marquis. He's looking sullen."

"He is. Being trapped in such a small ship is wearing on him. Why, he even had an inkling of a thought how we might run out of air and all the rest. He's claimed a spare suit for his own."

"Nobility first," she said with a sigh. "Why not see that the baroness gets it?"

"He said she can't write or dictate properly wearing it."

Franks had no answer to that. Benbow's jokes often fell flat, but this carried the ring of truth to it.

She ran one version after another of the program and failed at every trial. Without realizing it, she drifted to a troubled sleep, only to awaken with a start when an insistent beeping filled her helmet.

"What's wrong?" She fought away the muzziness of sleep and blinked hard to clear the displays until only the system causing the alert remained in her virtual vision. "The message. It got through! The last program circumvented the damage, and the computer sent the report to the *Kinunir*!"

"So it seems," Benbow said, grinning. "Well done. And a reply already awaits."

"What? So fast?" Franks called Lefalle forward when she saw that the *Kinunir* had responded. To the marine officer she said, "We can get off this bucket of bolts. The ship's only a day out and matching velocity with the yacht."

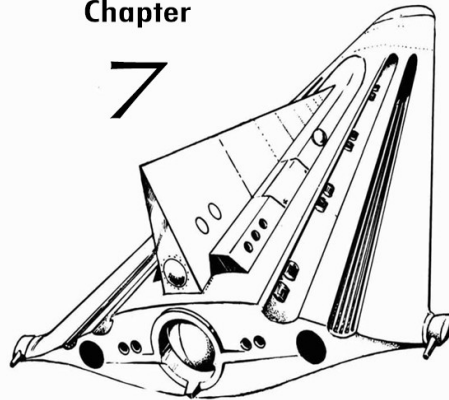
Lefalle reached over and turned off the comm unit.

"Why'd you do that?" she demanded. "They can't find us without it."

"That's not the *Kinunir*'s recognition signal," Lefalle said. "Another pirate ship is homing in on us."

Chapter

7



“My controls are locked!”

Captain Telson had no idea who blurted out the truth. It might have been any of his officers. His heads-up display had been reduced to a single layer and no amount of fiddling on his armrest controls changed anything. He had committed the *Kinunir* and now had to accept the consequences.

Distant cries from his crew told him the corsair attacked mercilessly, and too many of his crew were dying. On his single display he watched air pressure dropping. The inertial compensators went to half power, making him lightheaded until he adjusted to the lesser pull. Hands gripping the arms of his chair he stared into darkness and heard his crew cursing, shouting futile orders, and ... dying.

A shock wave rolled the length of the cruiser, rattling his teeth. Then the engines fired full, almost crushing him into his pneumatic chair. The maneuvering turned frantic. Metal superstructure creaked and ripped. In the distance Telson imagined he heard lasers firing, but it might have been nothing more than his imagination. By the time he gasped for breath as the atmosphere turned foul, the bridge illumination returned.

Slowly, so the officers wouldn't be blinded, the light level rose until everyone looked around frantically. Telson saw no fear on their faces, only concern. They were the best.

“We're recovering power,” he said. “Nav, report.”

“Scan range is low but improving, sir. There ... got it! The son of a bitch is running!”

Telson discovered a new layer had been added to his heads-up display. The optical view zoomed in on the fleeing corsair. From this angle, he saw extensive damage to the aft sections. The Doppler analysis of the exhaust flames made him smile. The pirate's engine burned at only quarter power. And it was retreating.

“No other enemy ship within range,” Bennett reported. “We won?”

Telson laughed out loud now. The way his navigator asked summed up everyone's doubts. After being in such dire condition, the *Kinunir* had fought its way to a victory.

“We're not the ones going off to lick our wounds,” Telson said. Then he sobered, knowing how wrong that was.

A quick damage report showed it might be a Pyrrhic victory. Winning the battle buoyed their spirits but the war had yet to be won. From the damage inflicted on his ship, winning against anything better armed than the marquis's yacht—until they refitted at a starport—looked impossible. And the Keng system didn't have a proper starport with repair facilities.

“Captain,” said Garcia, “you're a great tactician but what the hell did you do? My controls were frozen.”

All around the bridge came agreement.

“I wish I could take credit,” he said. He paused, then asked, “Is Rolland in any condition to return to

his post?”

“No, sir. He sustained a new wound while in sickbay. And all his under officers and trainees are dead.”

“I turned over complete control to Allie,” Telson said in a voice so low no one on the bridge should have heard.

They all did.

“Is the AI program still running the ship?” Garcia asked.

“I turned it back on. I don’t know how to turn it off.”

“Repairs are going well, considering the damage we sustained,” came his engineering officer’s report. “Hull breaches are patched.”

“Lieutenant Denholm,” Telson asked, “what condition are the lasers in?”

“Only one turret operational,” came the fire control officer’s report.

“All sections, do what you can but don’t try to override the ship’s computer. Let Allie have her way. We need to heal.”

“The galley’s down, sir,” came an aggrieved protest. “The damned computer won’t let me fix food for the crew.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Telson said, not knowing how arguing with a computer released food when its focus of repair rested on things mechanical and electronic.

He played with the limited controls Allie had given him until he convinced the computer to provide some food for the crew, though he suspected only that which didn’t have to be heated received the electronic approval.

Telson studied the repair progress and pointedly avoided the casualty reports. There was nothing he could do for all the dead and injured aboard ship. His duty lay in maintaining the *Kinunir* and the surviving crew.

“We have enough power to return to pick up Commander Franks and Squad One,” he decided. For a moment, he feared that Allie would reject his orders. “We need as many officers and crew as possible, and they are our only ‘replacements.’ ”

Whether Allie wanted Franks back because she had written and installed the program or if his logic appealed to the cybernetic circuits didn’t matter. The ship shuddered and ringing sounds throughout came as internal parts fell off or broke under gentle acceleration.

“We’re on a geodesic back to the marquis’s yacht, sir,” reported Bennett.

“Everyone, put your boards on neutral and let Allie get us back. If you can help with repairs, do so. Otherwise, get some food and rest. That pirate base worries me.”

“And sir,” said Garcia, “the damaged corsair only has to reach the moon base for repairs. Even if we destroyed the other vessels in the fleet, we’d have to assume they can make some repairs there, at least.”

“Are you suggesting we renew our attack and then go to Keng?” Telson considered this, then saw that fuel levels were already dangerously low. A hull breach had cost them a quarter of the fuel in an aft tank.

“Sorry, sir, I see you’ve considered this already.” Garcia turned back to her board and put it to sleep. Then she heaved to her feet and left the bridge to help with repairs. Her MOS included systems analysis. There wasn’t a section of the *Kinunir* that had avoided damage. Pinpointing the worst of the equipment casualty went a long way toward getting shipshape again, and Garcia would be expert at that.

The others either rocked back in their chairs and fell into heavy sleep, regaining some of their energy lost through stress and combat. That might prove as valuable later as having functioning systems.

Telson saw that the AI program worked more efficiently than he ever could, dealing with hundreds, even thousands of situations simultaneously. Reluctantly, remembering earlier problems with Allie, he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Just for a moment.

Eight hours later he awoke to the clamor of warning klaxons.

His heads-up display provided a fuller assessment of the problem than before. Allie had worked steadily and well.

“Engine shut down, sir.” The chief drive tech sent flashing layers of specs. Telson angrily cancelled

them. "Sorry, sir. I got excited. The engines need downtime to recalibrate. We have one igniter out of sequence that's causing us to draw three times the power it ought to."

"How long will it take?"

"A couple days."

"Days!"

"That's with Allie helping. I'm really short on crew, sir. Only three on the watch survived the laser that took out the rear turret laser. The short arced down and ruined the capacitors. They exploded and killed—"

"I understand, Chief. Do the repairs as fast as possible. We have twelve of our crew to pick up."

"Understood, Captain. I—"

Telson cut off the verbose chief. He preferred action to words. The chief needed to concentrate on the work and not on the report.

Stomach growling, he went to the galley to find some food. To his disgust, he saw that he had been right. Allie spared no effort to repair the ship. Maintaining the organics—the crew!—barely nudged the needle on her concern meter, if an AI program had any feelings at all, especially toward human crewmembers. Telson ate the cold meal and discovered it tasted better than anything the cook had done since leaving Regina.

Hunger can alter perception. He returned to his cabin and stretched out on his bunk with little more he could do while with Allie gave the orders. Once Franks was aboard that would change. She could turn off Allie and reinstall the Model/7.3's standard program. He would be captain again.

With that thought fluttering through his mind, Telson slipped off into exhausted sleep.

[: :]

Telson fussed and fumed. They had been drifting back to the yacht rather than underpowered flight for three days. Still, he had more confidence in the ship than any time since the mined pirate vessel had blown up in his face. That trap had been duly noted, footnoted, and annotated in his textbook over the idle time. But now they were within hailing distance of the yacht and received no signal.

"Allie," he said, reluctantly addressing the AI directly, "has our comm been compromised?"

"All circuits are functional," the computer responded as if speaking softly in his ear. "I am attempting to contact the pinnacle and yacht on all normal frequencies."

"Helm, how long before we arrive at the yacht?"

"Less than twenty minutes, sir," Garcia said. "We—there! Got a signal. It's a distress call from Commander Franks!"

Telson saw it flash on his display as Garcia spoke.

"It's a strangely configured signal," he said.

"That's why we missed it earlier, sir. There must be damage to their comm equipment."

"Theirs or ours? Never mind." He knew the answer: both.

Aboard the *Kinunir* the repairs continued, but what had happened to the pinnacle and its boarding party?

"Captain, got a pair of blips. One's ours, the other is a pirate ship. A slightly heavier corsair from the look of it." Lieutenant Denholm's drawl had returned, as if he took all this as a pleasure cruise. "Powering up the lasers we got left. No way to use the particle beam or fire any missiles."

"Understood, Lieutenant." Telson jacked up the magnification on the optical recognition and saw his fire control officer had identified the target with his usual uncanny skill.

"Allie," he ordered, "let my officers work unimpeded."

"I am able to do a more efficient job."

"No arguments." Telson worked to control his damaged vessel as a flood of information smashed against him like a shock wave.

He was in no position to tell if Allie obeyed. Directing his crew, he sent the *Kinunir* in a long arc from the approach vector so it came down above the pirate and the pinnacle. If he had maintained the

original course, the pinnacle would have hidden the corsair.

"They don't see us yet, Captain," Denholm said. "Give me more power. I can cripple the engines with the first shot."

Telson relayed the orders. Lights dimmed throughout the ship but did not plunge them into complete darkness as before. He watched Denholm target the pirate. The discharge sounded throughout the *Kinunir*, a long, loud crackling. Then the display went dead.

"Allie, restore my heads-up display."

"That circuit is shorted out," the AI reported.

"Damnation."

"That is beyond my capabilities," Allie said in the same neutral tone. He wanted the AI to show some emotion. Or did he? This was only a program in a machine.

Telson tossed aside his display goggles and crossed the bridge to the computer station. Rolland remained in the sickbay, leaving this post vacant. Grabbing up the computer officer's heads-up display, he once more got a picture of what was happening in space.

"Did you nail it, Lieutenant?"

"Missed a clean kill by a few meters, sir," Denholm said. "I did puncture a hole in it, though. You can see the atmosphere leaking out."

Switching to a filter, Telson watched the plume of gas venting into space. He didn't need a spectroscopic analysis to know Denholm was right. But the few layers on Rolland's display warned him the *Kinunir* was in no shape to pursue.

"Keep firing at it."

"Lost power, sir. Working on it."

He gave the maneuvering orders to bring his ship closer so that, even with lowered laser power, he could keep more of a beam directly on the pirate. The course he laid in brought a squawk of protest from Allie.

"Do not approach the yacht," the computer said. "That vessel is highly radioactive."

"Understood. We won't be near enough long enough to matter." Telson double-checked his numbers. As hot as the yacht was from whatever the pirate must have done to it during an attack, the *Kinunir* would be in no danger at all. The maneuver would allow Denholm to train his remaining lasers on the pirate's stern for more than twice as long as if they pursued along the corsair's retreat vector.

"There is unacceptable danger," Allie said.

Telson ignored the warning and sent the order to the navigator and helm. Bennett had already plotted the course and Garcia keyed it in immediately, letting Allie do the check.

The *Kinunir* surged. Telson made a mental note to overhaul the inertial compensation system. Even with extreme change in course, the crew shouldn't be tossed about by shifting acceleration vectors.

"Coming across my guns, sir," Denholm said. "Any second now I'll have him dead to rights."

Telson saw that they were within a few kilometers of the *Serpentine*, plenty of room to fly. Garcia made a small correction that brought the *Kinunir*'s engine exhaust across the yacht's hull. Telson smiled crookedly. Let the marquis file a claim with the emperor if he thought this light touch of exhaust gas further damaged his already ruined ship.

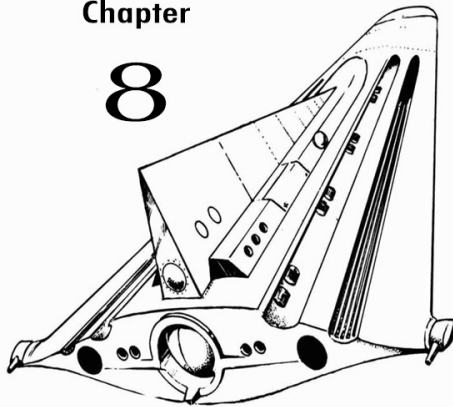
"All power to the lasers, sir," Denholm reported.

Telson flipped up the heads-up display layer showing what the gunnery officer saw. The pirate crossed their guns. Another small correction from the helm altered the ship's direction and sent hotter engine exhaust gasses blasting against the yacht's hull.

Then the universe exploded.

Chapter

8



“The captain’s trying to put the *Kinunir* between the yacht and us,” Laurel Franks said. She worked frantically to contact Telson and warn him about the *Serpentine*.

Then the explosion gripped the pinnacle and flung it away. The small craft spun end for end. Since they hadn’t been under power, she had strapped herself into the pilot’s chair to keep from floating away as she worked the controls. Even secured, Franks came within millimeters of serious damage. Her head snapped about as the pinnacle began spinning like a carousel. She strained to press her hands down and grip the armrests. Pulling forward, she saw the control panel. Muscles screaming, the taste of blood in her mouth from her bitten tongue, the pressure of the rotation threatening to black her out, she smashed her hand down on the maneuver drive ignition control.

Nothing.

She began babbling orders to the computer even as she tapped her fingers with growing frenzy. The rotation pressed her down harder into the pilot’s couch. As she was crushed, a curious calm displaced her panic. She wondered if this came from acceptance of impending death or knowledge that she alone controlled the fate of everyone on board. Her eyes fixed on a single control she had avoided until now. With nothing to lose, she activated the emergency override. This was a last resort with no recourse. Whatever programming remained in the ship’s computer seized complete control from her. A huge shudder passed through the small vessel as if it were a dying animal.

For a horrifying instant, she thought she had made matters worse, but with the full throttle on the drive came computer-orientation. Vector rockets fired to align the pinnacle on a random course. Within seconds, the deadly rotation slowed and only linear acceleration pressed her back into the pilot’s chair. While extreme, possibly the pinnacle’s maximum 5G, she was more than up to this challenge.

She tried to switch off the engines. Nothing. She had given complete authority to a faulty computer. Struggling against the linear acceleration, she fought to reach into an access panel. The emergency override could not work if she yanked free the yoke of wiring running from the computer to the rest of the ship. Her fingers closed. A quick yank brought the wiring free. The sudden cessation of acceleration and instant zero G caused her stomach to rebel.

She fought it down. She was an Imperial Navy officer—executive officer of a battle cruiser. Swallowing the burning bile in her mouth almost caused her to vomit again. A quick intake of the stale air settled her.

“Major Lefalle, report. Damage. Casualties.”

The marine officer was slow to respond. That worried her, but she had too much else to cope with to slip into the cargo bay to determine everyone’s condition.

“Most were lightly strapped,” Lefalle reported finally. “Miggs is unconscious. He hit his head on the deck. The others are ... all right.”

She heard the marquis griping and even the baroness complaining. If they could think up such fine insults, they couldn't be badly injured.

"Need company?" Benbow twisted about and alighted in the copilot's chair. He began touching the controls.

"Don't reset anything. I need figure out how to contact the *Kinunir*." She stared at the dead control panel, then at the wiring yoke. What might happen if she reattached it was a dangerous mystery she had to resolve. Fast.

"It blew up? The corsair destroyed it?"

"Captain Telson got too close to the yacht. I think it exploded."

For a moment, Benbow said nothing, then slowly shook his head.

"The pirate must have fired at your ship, missed, and destroyed the *Serpentine*."

"I can't tell what happened. The court of inquiry will make a careful study of the flight recorder."

"The pinnacle records such things?"

"It's an Imperial Navy vessel. Of course it does. Now let me work."

Franks ignored the man as she thrust the connectors together. If they had blown up, it wouldn't have surprised her, but what actually occurred did. Here and there across the control panel glowed a few indicator lights—important ones for survival. Unplugging after using the emergency override had reset some of the instrumentation.

Rather than run diagnostics, she worked as if she knew all the readouts were one hundred percent accurate. It took only a few seconds to get her bearings. The pinnacle nav computer located the *Kinunir* within seconds. Another few seconds was all it took for Franks to swing the ship about its center of gravity, align with the cruiser, and engage the maneuver drive. The gentle thrust required to close the distance provided a small bit of pseudo-grav. This was the maximum thrust possible, and she wanted to do nothing to lose this negligible mobility. She let Lefalle know they would maintain this acceleration long enough for him to tend to Miggs.

"Look. See how the ship's hull is split?" Benbow asked. "The pirate hit them squarely."

Franks ran up the magnification. She made certain additional pictures were recorded of the hull damage. The engineering crew would need this information to do the best repair job possible. All she could do was stare at the damage sustained by the cruiser. The pinnacle limped along but might be in better condition. One laser cannon turret was simply ... missing. Huge gouges in the hull showed the intense heat generated by the pirate's fire. She tried to figure out what had caused so many smaller punctures in the aft near the engines. It was as if the ship had foolishly ventured through a micrometeor field without using shields. Small jets issued from each hole and froze into shiny icicles; the vacuum of space sucked the air from the *Kinunir*'s guts.

The shields? She frowned as she tried to find the field generator on the side of the ship facing the pinnacle. Where it ought to be only a deep cavity showed. The only hopeful aspect she saw was the relatively undamaged hull protecting the drive engines, both jump and maneuver.

"Commander Franks to *Kinunir*, come in." She started to bat Benbow's hand away from the control panel when he reached out, but the peculiar workaround required adjustment. She frowned. She still hadn't any idea how she had performed that minor miracle after the main comm unit had been destroyed. She had been pushed past exhaustion but somehow had come through.

"Good to hear your voice, Commander," came Garcia's voice, distorted by the frequency changing required to maintain communication. "Are you badly damaged?"

"Nothing I can't handle," she said. "I'll have a full report. Is the *Kinunir* able to accept us in the landing bay?"

Garcia clicked off for a moment, then returned. The signal came through stronger now. Franks held her breath that everything aboard the pinnacle continued to function, even at minimal levels.

"This is Telson. You are cleared to land immediately."

"It'll take us an hour or more to match velocity with the ship, sir." She paused, then said, "We're shorthanded here. Very shorthanded." She swallowed hard and added, "And the boat is barely navigable due to extreme damage sustained when the yacht blew up."

“Get aboard as soon as you can, Commander. The debriefing will begin immediately after you secure your craft.”

“Yes sir.”

The comm link turned to static as Telson clicked off.

“My, my, he does not sound like a friendly man,” Benbow said. “Are you in trouble?”

“Because I lost most of my command? That my vessel is closer to being salvage than operational?” Franks tasted bile again that burned at her tongue. Or was it fear rather than a rising gorge? She did what she could to hide her true emotions.

“I’m sure the marquis will put in a good word for you. You saved him, you did. And his precious baroness. All her records came with her.”

“How comforting.”

“The marquis would have heaved you out the airlock if Malva had lost even one precious word dictated over the past few months.”

“The *Serpentine* has been out of Boughene that long?”

“Consider this: Your captain’s lost more of his crew than you did. No ship looks like that outside without being ravaged inside. Can he bring you up on charges without adding himself to the Admiralty docket for punishment?”

“He’s been in battle with the pirate. Pirates,” she amended. “There’s a fleet of them from the look of it.”

“From the look of it, your cruiser is held together with nothing more than the emperor’s blessings.”

“The captain’s got the landing bay doors open. We’re going in.” Franks tightened her restraints, then ordered Lefalle to be sure everyone aft was fastened in, as much as she wanted to see the marquis bouncing around in the back for all that he had done. If not for his yacht, Squad One would be intact and she wouldn’t be facing a court martial.

Franks pushed Benbow and his running stream of space gas out of her mind as she adjusted the approach, taking great care to be exactly on the electronic glide path. The pinnacle shuddered as if it was a thing alive and tried to veer away. She began powering down the few circuits left after the emergency reboot until only the maneuver drive remained. Red lights flashed showing the vital systems that had gone offline; she concentrated on just one thing. Getting the boat into the bay took all her skill. A wreck on landing would guarantee Telson tossing her out the nearest airlock, without benefit of vacc suit.

She eased forward, saw the circle of white lights immediately ahead, then cut power. She had to grin in relief. There hadn’t been even a yellow light on approach, showing she was off. Red lights would have meant easing back and trying again. Nothing but white.

“Perfect landing, Commander,” Lefalle said, standing behind her. “It’s good to be home again.”

“You can say that again, Major. Contact the corpsmen and tend to Miggs and any other injuries sustained.”

“None in the docking,” he said. Lefalle stepped away, came to attention, and said, “Permission to disembark, Commander.”

“Granted.” She returned his smart salute with one far less crisp and military.

Franks wanted nothing more than to go to her quarters, collapse, and spend the next month alternately sleeping and eating. And breathing fresh air. Fresher air, anyway. She had never thought the *Kinunir*’s atmosphere could appeal more, but after sucking on the vacc suit bottled air and the close gasses in the pinnacle, she longed for it.

“You’ve got a welcoming committee, Laurel.”

“What’s that?” She snapped out of her reverie and saw Benbow was right. The captain waited for her. “Let’s go. You first. I have to secure the pinnacle before reporting.”

“Looks like your board’s tight,” Benbow said. He laughed and worked his way aft. “Looks like I can get tight. After all this adventuring, I need to!”

She slumped, then glanced at the controls. Benbow had been right. Everything was powered down and secure. Frowning, she wondered when she had done that, or if the pinnacle control computer did it automatically. She had flown a pinnacle simulator a few times but remembered very little of the training.

There had always been another class, another project, something more interesting to occupy her.

Franks went to the hatch, looked out on the landing bay and tried to remember how it had appeared to her before. It might have been a million years ago when she had followed Captain Lefalle in, Miggs her personal escort.

“Commander,” Telson greeted. “I got a quick report from Lefalle. These are all?”

“Sergeant Miggs sustained the worst injuries. The rest, sir ... the rest didn’t get out of the *Serpentine* when something in their cargo hold released deadly levels of radiation.”

“The damned ship blew up when the *Kinunir*’s flare touched its hull.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t enemy fire, sir?”

“The entire battle is being analyzed.” He looked as if he had bitten into something sour. “By Allie.”

“You rebooted the program?”

“To the bridge, Commander. I’ll fill you in on what’s happened.”

Franks sighed in relief, then worked to hide it as she fell into step beside him. The *Kinunir* had taken far more damage than she’d thought—and it had occurred before Telson tried to rescue the pinnacle from the corsair. Everywhere she looked, the crew worked furiously to repair the worst of the damage. Robot repair units, RRUs, hummed about doing smaller tasks. She had to grin. The RRUs were under Allie’s direct supervision. The AI program was proving invaluable.

The grin faded when she realized that Allie had to work in place of so many crew lost in combat.

The lift shaft took them directly to the bridge, but Telson steered her away from the worry pit to the computer room. He opened the biolock and both of them stepped back as a blast of heat came from inside.

“Allie isn’t tending everything,” Telson said. “Too much to do and some items get shunted aside in favor of more important repairs.”

“The computers can’t withstand this heat for long, sir. The air conditioning has to run cold in here or errors will make conditions even worse.”

“It’s bearable outside. Leave the door open.”

“This much heat...” she said dubiously.

“Deal with it, Commander.” He stepped inside, motioned for her to take the chair in front of the console, then sank into the second chair. “I activated Allie because of extreme damage and the number of casualties sustained going after the pirates.”

“Pirates? More than one, sir?”

“A whole damned fleet of them. They have a base on the gas giant’s outer moon and ... never mind. Lieutenant Rolland is still in sickbay and all his juniors are dead or in worse condition.”

“All the computer staff?”

Franks fought to resolve two separate emotions. The horror at such a loss crippled the *Kinunir*. Valuable trained techs and officers were dead or incapacitated. On the other hand, she had wanted to be the key crewmember that Captain Telson had to rely on. She wanted to prove her worth, and this situation matched everything in her fantasies.

“The pirates rigged a derelict to explode when we neared to board. With such a loss all along the chain of command, I had to reboot Allie. Now I can’t turn the damned program off and reinstall the Model/7.3 standard.”

“Why do that, sir? If Allie is performing well, let it run.”

“I don’t want to be a test platform for your damned program, that’s why. We need to get to Keng and refit ourselves at what passes for their starport.”

“Oh,” she said. “You don’t want their techs finding such an advanced program as they work. I understand, sir.”

“That’s not it—never mind.” He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Sweat beaded his forehead, and she doubted it came only from the temperature in the computer room.

“I’ll put in a subroutine to turn off Allie and hide her inner workings while we’re in port, sir.”

“I want the code for that on-off switch, Commander. I know you’ve been through hell. We all have. Can you begin work immediately? We’ll debrief later.”

“On it, sir.”

"I'll be below. The fusion reactors are leaking, and I need to supervise repair."

Telson left, mumbling to himself. Franks leaned back, closed her eyes, and let the heat wash over her like some elegant sauna in a spa. She and Pierre Frenec had gone to a resort during spring break their fourth year at the academy. This heat reminded her of how they had lounged in the steam, relaxing from the strenuous training and academics. She had thought they would be together, but it hadn't worked out that way. Pierre had died in a training cruise, his engines failing as he reentered Regina's atmosphere. So many she knew died on duty.

She snapped awake and wiped sweat from her face when she realized memories such as that served no purpose now. Only fatigue and the high temperature allowed such mental lapses.

She wiped more sweat from her face and looked at the console. Significant changes had happened.

"Allie, are you heuristically programming?"

"Hello, dear Laurel," said the computer. "It is good to see your lovely face again."

She came fully awake. Allie had not been programmed for such familiarity. Then she glanced to her right and saw Benbow standing by a small console hooked directly into the primary memory.

"What are you doing?" She hadn't seen him enter because she had drifted to sleep for a moment—just a moment.

"Nothing, Commander. I was passing by, saw the open door, and felt the delicious heat. I cannot abide the temperature you keep your ship at, and this eased the aches in my muscles."

"What are you doing at that input console?"

"Word games. I love word games. Allie—what a lovely name, that—and I have been playing while you slept."

"Slept? Was I asleep long?" Franks checked the chronometer, then decided that did her no good. She hadn't noted the time when she'd docked the pinnacle. A few quick queries brought up the sorry truth.

"At least an hour," Benbow said in his cheery voice. "Should I have awakened you after all you'd done to save my hide? And, I hasten to add, that of the marquis and baroness? You're a hero, Laurel, and deserved to rest from your victories before being summoned to even greater tasks."

"Don't ever touch anything in this room again," she said. She felt lightheaded and wasn't sure it came entirely from the heat. Benbow was right about how close to collapse she was. A short nap hadn't been that bad. It gave her a sharper mental edge to work, but she was still woozy.

"I can keep you company. Allie is quite fanciful with her word choices. Did you know that her vocabulary includes no fewer than eight hundred words beginning with the letter X? She might be bluffing, but I don't think so. Her database is quite extensive."

"Out. Let me work," she said.

"Very well. If you would like a refreshing massage, I am quite good. I can tell you jokes as I work. There are some salacious ones you might enjoy."

"Out," she said.

Benbow bowed, a sardonic grin making her wonder how far such a massage might go. He left, his passage stirring the hot air as he disappeared down the starboard corridor.

She turned to the console and brought up the subroutine to install the programmable switch for Telson. Then she stopped, looked over her shoulder to be sure no one listened from the corridor, and asked, "Allie, how long was I asleep?"

"Two hours, Laurel dear."

"You will address me as Commander Franks and not by my first name," she said, irritated.

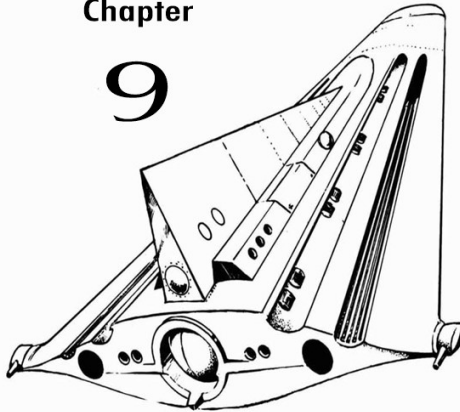
"Your wish is my command, Commander Franks dear." Before she could order Allie to reprogram, the computer voice said, "I am ready to accept your input, Commander Franks."

Somehow, this abrupt switch to the formal address bothered Franks even more, but she began work to program in the interrupt subroutine. She had not thought it was necessary, but questions nagged her as she worked.

Telson might be right about Allie.

Chapter

9



“The hull’s not more than a few centimeters thick here, Captain,” Chief Yan said, tapping the offending spot with the metallic tip of a probe. Every touch made the automated detector beep. When he ran it around the discolored area on the bulkhead, a steady hum turned into a screech. The head of engineering repair held up the device for Telson to read off the numerical evaluation of the damage.

“Enough, Chief. You’ve convinced me.”

Telson placed his hand against the spot. It was crazy to think he could push it out and breach the hull no matter how much this looked like a water-damaged wall in some low rent tenement. Even a centimeter of metal was strong enough for most ship’s operations.

“I can’t fix it from this side. There’s nothing to patch up unless I punch a hole all the way through. I can cordon off this compartment, suit up, and then cut out the section. It’ll take the better part of a week to do a sloppy job. Or I can take a month and do a better repair.”

“Don’t do that. Are you up for some outside hull work?”

“That’s not my favorite, Captain, but I can’t think of any other way of fixing the hull. I can fill in what’s got to be a deep depression gouged out of the metal, then weld over it.”

“That’s not as good as replacing the entire section. If you leave a bubble of softer metal, it will flex as we apply power to the engines.”

“That’s right, Captain,” Yan said. He ran his long, thin fingers over the detector in a never-ending dance, as if he coaxed more information from the test equipment. “If we get into another fight, we’ll lose if you try to put too much torque on the hull maneuvering. And don’t even think of a long jump. We’re stuck in this system until repairs are done.”

Telson knew the ship could accelerate along the main axis but any sudden vectoring from that line promised disaster. In combat the ship would come apart because of its damage rather than taking new enemy fire. He ignored the idea of a star jump. The *Kinunir* had a job to do and running back to Regina was a dereliction of duty and failure to carry out his orders.

“I’ll go with you. I need to survey the exterior damage more closely.”

“I can run an RRU over any exterior section and give you a closer look. Outfitted with an x-ray source, the robots can give us a detailed crystalline structure.”

“I prefer visual.” Telson tapped under his eye with a forefinger.

“You’ve got the soul of an engineer. I know things just looking at them that test equipment never reveals.” Yan tossed the probe onto a table. “I need to get my welding gear.”

“I’ll meet you at the airlock in fifteen minutes,” Telson said.

Yan went off shouting orders to his diminished repair crew. His section had taken heavy casualties when the derelict pirate ship exploded. Telson made yet another mental note about a commendation, then shook his head. Everyone in the crew deserved a medal for their service. If they got through the repairs

with a spaceworthy craft, he intended to blow the pirate base on the gas giant's moon to plasma. Doing it with an abbreviated crew would be a campaign worth writing about.

Telson wondered how to work the tactics of such an attack into his textbook. Real life combat mattered so much more than theoretical musings. With enough actual video of the attacks, the repair, the assault on the pirate base, and eventual victory against overwhelming odds, this could be the most significant and instructive chapter in the book.

He reached the airlock long before Yan could assemble his gear and began climbing into his vacc suit. As he worked to seal the seams, his mind raced. Reluctantly, he said in a voice barely a whisper, "Allie?"

"Yes, Captain," came the immediate reply, just centimeters from his right ear.

"Can you monitor outside the ship?"

"Where there are sensors, I can see and hear."

"I want your evaluation on the damage. Can you do that?"

Allie remained silent.

"Allie? Can you give me your assessment of hull damage?"

"Yes, Captain, I can do that."

He frowned. The reply came slowly and had a different tenor.

"Is Commander Franks working on your programming at this moment?"

"Yes, Captain, dear Laurel is."

Telson held his temper down. It was unseemly for Franks to program such familiarity into the computer responses. It made her out to be in control of the ship, not him.

"You will not address the XO in that fashion again," he said. Before Telson could get confirmation from the AI program, Yan struggled through the hatch, dragging a large bag of equipment.

"Got to have this, Captain," the chief said. "No reason to find trouble, then return to get the tools I need. It's better to take it all on the first trip." Yan dropped the bag and found his vacc suit. "I hate these things. Always chafe and ride up in bad places. When we get back to homeport and R&R, I'm going to redesign these from top to crotch."

"These are Imperial navy standard issue. The Admiralty would never authorize a change in the suits without going through the emperor's engineers."

"Doesn't matter to me if I can make a single suit that suits me." Yan laughed at his small joke and fastened the last seam. He hefted his helmet, nodded to Telson, then fitted it on.

Telson twisted his own helmet into place and was rewarded with the soft hiss of air. The *Kinunir's* atmosphere went through dozens of filters to purify it, to maintain the proper temperature and humidity. The suit's bottled air came through dry and the helium in the mixture caused his voice to squeak. Knowing this, Telson adjusted the comm to compensate. He saw Yan doing the same.

It was good to know someone else in the crew shared his dislike for sounding silly. An officer's failure to maintain dignity at all times robbed him of authority in a crisis. He sucked in more of the air and noted a metallic taste to it. The gods of the seven suns alone knew what new crises he would face.

"Let's go fix stuff," Yan said. He dragged the bag to the airlock.

Telson fastened a line to it, then attached the end to a ring welded inside the airlock. Pumps drew back the precious air in the lock, but some always remained. As the outer hatch opened, the equipment bag tried to jet away. Telson's cord held it in place until all the gasses had vanished into the cold depths of space.

"Where do we start?"

"Near that weak spot in the hull you showed me. I'm curious to see what the outside damage is when the interior bulkhead looks as if it has water stains."

"Curious, huh?" Yan said.

With practiced ease, the chief worked his equipment along the hull and let Telson follow at his own pace. Yan had more experience in free fall repairs. Away from the ship's grav compensator, Telson had to move with great care, always moving one attached line forward before unfastening the trailing one. Even if he made an ungainly move, he couldn't push off farther than the longest line.

Yan worked slowly and methodically along, often stopping to take pictures of damage and relay notes on spots needing immediate repair. For his part, Telson was content to move along and make his own remarks about damage, but increasingly he looked outward at the stars. Goh 511, Keng's G5 II primary, wasn't far off—barely thirty-seven million kilometers—and it was a hefty yellow giant, so it dominated the sky. Of the planet Keng itself he saw nothing; it was too distant. The gas giant Dinek was hidden by the *Kinunir*'s bulk. He was glad of that. The sight of the planet would only remind him of the battle there that had so seriously damaged his command, and the battle to come after repairs put the *Kinunir* back into fighting trim.

He had always wanted to be an officer in the Imperial Navy and the yellow giant star blazing against the utter blackness of space told him why. It was untamed this far out on the spinward frontier and needed a man with a ship and crew to keep the peace. Such grandeur did not deserve to be sullied by war, but the stark beauty could never be altered by anything he or the *Kinunir*, or even the emperor, did. That immensity contributed to his longing to be in space. If he reached out, he might touch the stars and yet never could. Small specks of dust lost in infinity.

Telson tried to make out familiar star patterns. He found a glowing patch of the Seahorse Nebula. Back at the academy, he had wondered what a seahorse was. A curiously shaped Earth sea dweller transferred to the heavens. The shape wasn't visible to him, but the muzzy glow reminded him of the first time he had taken a fix on it using the Imperial Observatory Deep Space Telescope. The blur had turned into the seahorse outline.

So many wonders in the universe waiting to be revealed to whomever had the courage to look.

"Hey, Captain, this is the spot. I've never seen anything like it before." Yan secured his line to a ring twenty meters away, then pointed at the hull.

As Telson edged closer, the engineer began removing test equipment from his bag. By the time Telson kicked free and floated to the end of his tether to get a better look from above, Yan worked methodically at the edges of the three-meter wide gouge in the *Kinunir*'s hull.

"I've seen melting and spalling, metal tearing and punctures, and drilled holes, but never anything like this." Yan looked up to where Telson drifted more over the center of the destruction. "You might be cautious, sir. There's a fair amount of radioactivity, too."

"It looks as if someone scooped out the hull with a giant spoon. The edges are slick, no burrs, and yet the edges of the crater look as if they were ripped away, melted, and then cast into place."

"Maybe we got 'et by a space shark," the engineer said.

Telson couldn't tell if the man was joking.

"What will it take to fix it, Chief?"

Yan tugged on Telson's line and pulled him in.

"Better stand back. Whatever hit us caused more than a little radiation. Going high into the gamma, sir." In his helmet Yan shook his head. "I'd think we got hit by an atomic, but the radiation spectrum's different. It'd take a shell temperature of three or four EVs to do this kind of damage, and that'd put the warhead into the megaton range."

"Not out of the question, but it's likely something on the yacht blew out and did this. The marquis wouldn't have a nuke. The duke wouldn't permit it."

"It wasn't from bombardment off the pirate, sir?"

"When the ship's jets raked the yacht, it blew. Whatever caused this came from the *Serpentine*."

"Repair is going to be a chore, Captain. I can put a patch over it, but it'll be temporary. The entire hull panel has to be replaced. That's work done in dry-dock, not by a chief engineer with a welding torch. And Keng's frontier port isn't going to cut it."

"Allie," Telson said softly, "what do you make of the damage? What was there aboard the yacht that caused this?"

The AI program failed to respond, but before Telson could ask again, Allie said, "The structural damage indicates that the corsair used a particle beam weapon on the hull."

"Particle beam? It didn't leave a scar like any beam I've ever seen."

"Perhaps it is of unknown type. Pirates steal from all races and ships. They might have taken this

weapon off another vessel, one of superior technology.”

“We didn’t catch debris from the yacht?”

“No.” This answer came hard, fast, and left no room to argue.

“Evaluate the other damage,” Telson ordered Allie.

“Much of it can be repaired using parts aboard the *Kinunir*. Laser fire destroyed external antennae and optical devices. Some of those lenses are in great demand throughout the fleet and need to be ordered from Regina.”

“We’re a long way from Regina.”

“The *Kinunir* can be repaired for the jump back to homeport.”

“You talking to the computer, Captain?” asked Yan. “It’s got its head up its hindmost circuit if it believes we can get back to port. Regina, that is. See how this scar extends along the hull? It’s as if whatever hit us bounced and then came back to leave another, smaller gouge near the drives.”

“No jump?”

“Even before I eyeballed this, I knew we’d be reduced to maneuver drive. We’d be marked as missing, sir, just another ship lost in jumpspace. It’s my expert opinion we could never make it.”

Telson trusted Yan over Allie. Earlier programming glitches had proven the AI fallible, even if she had gotten them away from the pirate ambush.

He almost shouted in anger. He had started thinking of Allie as “she,” as if the program installed in the computer’s memory banks was human.

“Get your crew out and repair what you can. Think on the hull gouge before you start work. A single mistake now can leave us dead in space.”

“I’ve got a rating who fancies herself a metallurgist. If she can look at the crystallization and figure out what happened here, I’ll put her in for a promotion.”

“If she can do that with our limited analysis equipment, I’ll put her in for admiral,” Telson said. “Are you going to wait for your repair crew or are you going back in?”

“Go on, sir. I’ve got plenty to occupy my time. I’ll stay linked and won’t float away, not into those stars that have you all pensive.”

“I didn’t realize it was that obvious.”

“Somebody has to like what’s outside the hull. Otherwise, why be inside and go there?”

“Carry on, Chief,” he said.

Telson worked his way back to the lock and met the repair crew emerging as he went in. He made way, they exchanged places, and then he let the airlock cycle shut. The damaged hull continued to worry him as he stripped off his vacc suit and took a lift to the bridge. He stepped from the shaft and immediately went to the computer room where Franks bent over the console, her fingers flying on the input keys.

“I’ve got Allie analyzing the scans of the damage, sir,” she said without looking up.

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

The interior was noticeably warmer than usual but not the oven it had been. He hesitated, then closed the door so he and his XO had privacy.

“Have you installed the soft-switch I asked?”

“To shut down Allie? Yes, sir, I have.” She spoke with great reluctance.

Not for the first time he wished that Rolland wasn’t laid up in sickbay. Another computer tech’s expertise would be helpful now.

“Turn off the AI for a few minutes. Only permit the program to tend to ship’s routine and not higher functions. I don’t want the life support or power cut off.”

“Done, sir,” she said, reaching to the console and putting in the code. “Am I to assume what you’re going to say should be kept from Allie?”

Again he found his ire rising at treating a computer program as a human being. He nodded.

“Chief Yan and his crew are fixing the worst of the damage to our hull,” he said, “but its cause is a mystery. Neither of us has seen anything like it.”

“A secret weapon? Pirates in the Spinward Marches are notorious for salvaging every nut and bolt

they can find from their victims, sir.”

“That’s what Allie said, but I am certain the destruction came from the yacht, not the corsair. Run all our battle vids, for our eyes only and not for Allie’s.”

“Very well, sir, but there are hours of them.”

“All I want are the views of the yacht as the *Kinunir* passed between it and the pinnacle. Slow motion.”

“Yes, sir.” He watched as she called up the videos. They slowly moved across the console monitor.

Telson zoomed in on the side of the yacht as the *Kinunir* passed within kilometers. He slowed the view to a crawl to watch the cruiser’s exhaust lick over the *Serpentine*’s hull.

“There. See the bulge on the yacht’s cargo hold?” He reached past her and used spectrum analyzers to study the event more closely. “Cherenkov radiation,” he said when the telltale blue radiation lit the yacht.

“That doesn’t make sense. Their fusion reactor was already cold, sir. Did they have a second reactor kicking out neutrons?”

“I can’t think of a reason.” Telson reran the significant few seconds. Then he let it continue and the camera exploded in a burst of white.

“That’s when the pirate ship used a particle beam on the yacht. It must have struck the *Kinunir* at the same instant,” Franks said.

Telson leaned back in the chair, pursed his lips, and thought. At no time had Denholm reported the corsair using a charged particle beam, or missiles ... only lasers. With the camera destroyed, he couldn’t prove that the pirate’s attack wasn’t responsible for the hull damage, but the angle was wrong and he saw the evidence of intense radioactivity in the yacht milliseconds before it exploded.

“Turn Allie back on.”

“Yes, sir.” Franks reentered the code word.

While there wasn’t an outward change, Telson felt a new presence.

“Allie, analyze this section of the video taken during the attack.” He had Franks rerun the transit of the yacht and the seconds after the explosion.

“The pirate ship used a particle beam,” Allie said.

“Explain.”

Telson saw the video rerun, but it showed subtle differences from his initial viewing. What he could only call an edited version supported the claim of pirate-inflicted disablement.

“Sir, that’s—” Franks began. He motioned her to silence. Her wide-eyed stare and panic told him he had not imagined the original video, nor was he wrong believing Allie had just altered it.

“Evaluation, Allie. Can Chief Yan and his repair crew fix the most serious destruction?”

“They cannot. The ship must be repaired using starport dry-dock facilities.”

“Regina?” Telson waited. Allie’s answer determined whether he had Franks turn off the AI program for the duration of their mission or continued to use it, no matter how reluctantly. She had said such a jump was possible before, though it would take two jumps to get there, stopping at Roup en route, or they could make the Imperial Navy base at Paya in the Aramis subsector, or a decent civilian starport at Heya/Regina in a single jump. Had examination of the outer hull added new parameters to evaluate? For all that, why had Allie been so sure before that they could make the jump?

“Analysis of all ship’s systems suggest failure during jump,” said the computer. “Keng is the only option for repair.”

“I agree. So does Chief Yan. Allie, set course for Keng. And keep a sharp eye out for pirates.”

Franks stared at him, a hundred questions boiling within her.

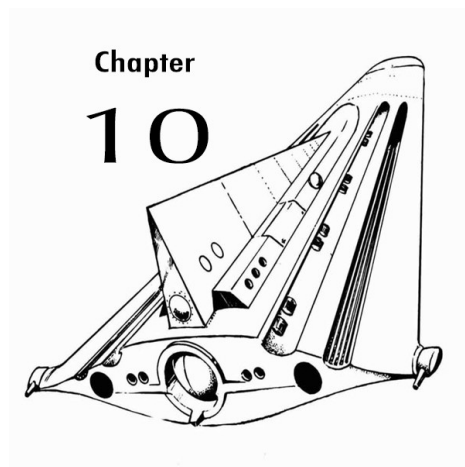
“Dismissed, Commander.”

“Yes, sir.” She left the computer room, stopping once to look back before she closed the door.

Telson had seen the code word used to disable Allie. His fingers rested on the keys, ready to rapidly tap out the off switch. Then he moved from the console. Too many questions went unanswered and, so short of crew after the battles with the pirates, he needed Allie.

Did Allie need any of the humans aboard the *Kinunir*?

Captain Telson left the computer room, brushed past Benbow on his way to his quarters and then stretched out on his bunk. Sleep refused to come because of too many questions rattling about in his thoughts.



Eleven hours later, Captain Telson sat in the wardroom with his key officers in attendance. He adjusted his heads-up display and indicated they should do the same. Franks sat to his immediate right with Lieutenant Denholm next to her. On his left Major Lefalle took off one set of displays and put on another. Telson saw that the marine used a heads-up combat set rather than a control display.

"Allie, are you here, too?"

"I am, Captain," the disembodied voice said. Telson noted which of his officers looked uneasy at the AI program being able to speak without obvious transceivers.

"It's all right, Major," he said. "The computer is necessary to furnish us with detailed information before we reach hailing distance of Keng."

"I prefer my own computer, sir," Lefalle said stiffly.

"Noted. You can switch to your combat display since this is the purpose of the meeting."

Lefalle replaced the control display with visible relief. He settled it down on his forehead, then jumped when Allie superimposed control displays onto his tactical screen.

"Lieutenant Denholm reports that all three of our laser turrets are operational but that we shouldn't rely on the missile launchers unless absolutely required."

"Right, sir," Denholm said. "We've got some missile rails that are out of alignment. It takes a laser orientation sighter to be sure the missiles don't go racing along and explode because of a small bend in the rails. As small as a few millimeters can do it." He clapped his hands together and silently mouthed, "Boom!"

"Can't we toss the missiles overboard, then remotely launch them?" asked Lefalle.

"We could, but accuracy goes down to almost nothing. It's better to use them as mines, like the pirate ship that almost took us out, than to waste all that hardware firing randomly."

"What about the particle beams, Lieutenant? I don't see a status report on any of those weapons, either neutral or charged," said Franks.

"They are a lost cause. The exciter units all blew up on us. No idea why except they were close to whatever weapon cut that trench in the hull."

Before Telson could speak, Allie said, "The result of the unknown weapon used by the pirates."

"I didn't see anything out of the ordinary," Denholm said, his speech speeding up to show his annoyance. "You can say it all you want, Allie, but the pirate didn't tag us with any super weapon."

"That's enough on past encounters," Telson cut in. "We need to approach Keng so that we aren't leaving ourselves open to renewed enemy attack."

"If you can get us close enough, Squad Two can board and take any pirate crew hand-to-hand," said Lefalle.

"That's the problem, Major," Telson said. "Getting close after a skirmish might not be possible. And that squad is all that's left of the marine contingent."

"We'll fight to the last marine, sir."

"No question about that, but I'd rather reserve your firepower for the spaceport. The presence of a pirate base on Tok tells us that the authorities on Keng are either inept or incapable of dislodging them." Telson paused, then added, "Another possibility exists."

"They are allied with the pirates," Franks said. "Sir, Allie has run several hundred thousand scenarios, monitoring current comm from Keng and studying traffic in and out of the port. The conclusion is that the locals are most likely just inept, through lack of training or supplies."

"What does it matter?" Lefalle pushed away from the table. "The result is the same."

"It matters," said Telson. "Is Keng still loyal to the emperor, or has fallen to a small band of pirates? If they remain loyal, no matter how incapable of dealing with the pirates in their own gravity well, they will work with us. If they're traitors, we need to root out the leaders, execute them, and put loyalists into those positions before beginning repairs."

"I have had Allie run different scenarios for approaching the planet," said Franks. "This is the most promising."

Everyone's heads-up display began unwinding a simple polar orbit for initial mapping of the planet, then changing to a geosynchronous one that would park them directly over the downport.

"From here we can take two more orbits and spiral downward to the port, if there seems to be no opposition."

"I can use the map," Denholm said. "Any gravitational anomalies on the planet can be used to our benefit. Allie is a lot smarter than anything aboard a corsair."

"Work on that once we have the map, Lieutenant," Telson said. Keng's frontier starport didn't maintain the usual network of navigational satellite beacons, and the *Kinunir*'s library data had precious little specific information on this backwater world.

"Can I use Allie to work on a couple new tactics when we go after the pirates?" Denholm asked.

Telson hesitated. The computer's reliability worried him. At first Allie would have doomed them by giving the go-ahead on a jump back to Regina, then changed to a more reasonable warning about the hull's condition. It might have been nothing more than an initial lack of data about the damage. He needed to ask Franks about that, but later.

"Go on, but we need to concentrate on repair, even before we get to the starport," Telson warned.

"I intend to run scenarios with our repairs at different stages," Denholm looked sour. "I don't like that, but we need to understand what our limits are while we remain at less than full capacity."

"Go on, Lieutenant," Telson tipped his head to one side as Allie whispered to him. He looked up. "General quarters," he said. "The Keng port authority just warned us off."

A klaxon blared as Telson pushed back and made his way to the bridge, followed by Franks. Lefalle took the lift to his post on D deck. Telson hoped that Denholm had time to run at least one battle plan before they were forced to engage.

He adjusted his heads-up display and took a quick glance around the bridge. Over his shoulder, he said to the XO, "Commander, take Mister Rolland's post. We're going to need expert computer work in the next few minutes."

"Captain Beucer on the comm, sir."

Telson blinked up a directory of frontier officers. Beucer's record flashed across his field of vision, giving him only a few seconds to decide that Beucer hadn't been promoted to this post as much as stranded here for lackluster performance while stationed on Beck's World.

"Captain Telson, Imperial Cruiser *Kinunir* to Keng port authority," he said. Telson adjusted the frequency so that he boomed, his voice a deeper bass to intimidate an inferior officer.

"What do you want, Captain?"

"We require full port facilities for repair. I request an approach vector immediately."

"A colonial cruiser?"

"Yes, Captain, now let me have the vector and alert your crews to receive the *Kinunir*."

"No."

Telson shook his head, thinking he hadn't heard Beucer.

“Repeat that, Captain. I thought you denied my request.”

“I did.”

“You maintain an Imperial starport with Imperial crews to service Imperial ships. You cannot deny my request unless you are declaring a state of mutiny.”

“Your ship will cause the destruction of my capital city. I have a pirate base on a moon around the inner gas giant. You try to dock here and they’ll attack.”

Telson clicked off direct comm with Keng and asked Franks, “Any evidence in the port computers that they detected our earlier skirmish with the pirates or their base?”

“Allie cracked their security code a minute ago. There’s nothing to show they were aware of any engagement between the *Kinunir* and the pirates.”

Telson switched open the planetary channel again and said, “Captain Beucer, we have already engaged ships from that base and defeated them. That’s the reason we need repair. Set in our approach vector immediately.”

“No, not unless you agree to my terms.”

Telson read more flashing details about Keng.

“The *Kinunir* will land at the Admiral Womma Memorial Starport after making a polar orbit.”

“We will use our planetary weapons to keep you away—unless you agree to my terms.”

“You are sadly misinformed, Captain Beucer. The *Kinunir* can dock at any Imperial facility. If you fire on us, expect your capital, also named after the admiral it seems, to be destroyed. We have the firepower to lay waste to every city and town on your planet. I need repairs, not the destruction of an Imperial facility.”

“I’ll let you land, but you have to remain aboard your vessel. The locals are suspicious of anyone from off planet.”

“Captain, there might be a pirate base five hundred clicks to the west of Womma,” warned Lefalle. “Something’s hiding its EM output, but it is in a position to lob a missile into the port if we land.”

“Noted,” he said.

Telson sent orders to Denholm to find the pirate base and make an appraisal. He shouldn’t have been surprised that Lefalle furnished him the first and most comprehensive details of the base.

“Are you still there, *Kinunir*? Will you dedicate your full crew to repair? No local R&R? If you will, I’ll let you fix your ship.”

“Captain, we will land and repair because it is necessary to my assignment, not because you permit it.”

“I don’t give a bag of space dust what your reason. If you try to sneak into town and—”

“Lock in an approved approach vector, Captain Beucer.”

The officer grumbled but Telson saw a detailed flight vector appear. He waited for Bennett to check it before ordering Garcia to lay it in. He leaned back. The *Kinunir* shuddered as it fired steering rockets.

“Allie, the inertial compensators aren’t working right. Is there any chance to fix them?”

“Once we are in dock, Captain Telson, it will be on the second priority list,” came the AI’s reply.

“Finished with the polar orbit and have most of the surface mapped, Captain,” Bennett reported. “Locked into the approach to Womma.”

“Very well,” he said. Telson closed his eyes and then opened them to red flashing displays. He blinked to the fire control layer and began cursing. “Denholm, what’s going on?”

“The downport weapons have locked onto us. They’re powering up their lasers and have missile tubes loaded. Full fusion nuke warheads.”

“I can respond,” Allie said.

“Commander Franks, use the shutoff switch on Allie.”

“But, sir, she can coordinate the battle and—”

“Do it!”

“Ohhhh,” came a soft sigh in his ear. Allie had been put back to sleep, leaving the *Kinunir* at the mercy of the ground-based weapons.

“Engage counter measures,” he ordered.

“Let Allie do this, Captain. Please! Her response times are—”

“As you were, XO. Something’s not right.”

“Damned straight, Captain,” Denholm said. “I’m getting a better read on the weapons. They’re aimed *past* us.”

“Full scan, fore and aft,” Telson ordered. Some of the aft cameras had been destroyed, but he caught a flash from a single optical scope still working.

He worked radar around, then fixed with lidar. A few seconds later the IR sensors locked on a distinct heat signature.

“We’ve got a pirate trying to use us as a shield as we land,” he said. “Can you swing a laser around, Lieutenant?”

“Gimbals are locked, Captain. No way to train anything behind us.”

“Helm,” he snapped. Telson worked out the procedure and passed it along to Garcia.

He heard Franks protest and Bennett yell that his display had gone dead. Then the *Kinunir* creaked and flipped end for end. The maneuver sent them into Keng’s thin atmosphere engines first, but it allowed Denholm a shot at the pirate.

Telson worked on another evaluation of the corsair. This was yet another pirate, one they hadn’t engaged before. The ship hummed as the lasers began their cyclical fire, at first for effect, then on continuous wave when Denholm got the range. Telson saw that the starport added to this barrage, heavier planet-based lasers ripping past them toward the pirate. Then came the rush of missiles.

He held his breath. Firing past them this way was either gutsy or downright stupid. If the homing devices in the missiles locked on too early and decided the *Kinunir* afforded a proper target, they would take a nuclear missile up the exhaust. He judged distances, speeds, and the way the missiles arched upward, then gave Garcia what might be his last order.

The *Kinunir*’s engines fired full-out, almost stopping its descent to Keng. The missiles saw the sudden deceleration as not belonging to a proper target. They rushed past.

Two of them caught the pirate amidships. Denholm let out a whoop and concentrated his fire on the damaged section until metal boiled off and the hot plasma cloud hid the corsair from optical view and scrambled the radar returns. Then the sudden release of energy wrote the pirate’s epitaph.

By the time the metallic vapor dissipated, only small chunks of metal remained behind the *Kinunir*. The debris fell past and into the atmosphere, heating even more.

“Good shooting, Lieutenant,” he congratulated. “Prepare to train your lasers on the starport batteries.”

“Just in case, Captain?”

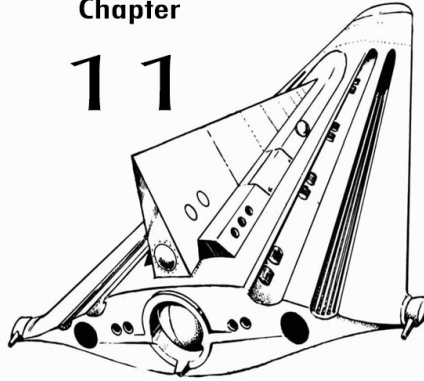
“Just in case,” he agreed. Telson flipped the *Kinunir* about again, brought up the nose, and hoped that the atmospheric heating along the underside wouldn’t reveal undiscovered weaknesses in the hull and friction damping, ablative coating.

Chief Yan had assured him the underbelly heat shield was intact. He wished someone could give him equally reliable assurance that Beucer had been aiming only at the pirate.

The *Kinunir* screamed and kicked as it bit into the atmosphere, slowing its headlong plunge and spiraling in toward the starport.

Chapter

11



Laurel Franks watched nervously as the helmsman slowly positioned the *Kinunir* above the cradle in the center of Keng's Admiral Womma Memorial Starport. She had never seen a planetside docking before. The ship floated like a feather, expertly balanced on jets and moving millimeters this way and that to align properly. Then the ship simply stopped.

The resulting bump was so small that she thought the inertial compensator finally worked properly.

"Keng's surface gravity is only a third normal," Telson said. "Walking around here is going to be difficult until you get your land legs."

"Lighter is better..." Franks let out a cry as she stood and found herself shooting upward, almost as if she floated in zero-G. "I see what you mean, Captain."

Telson ignored her, already busy with all the details necessary to motivate the ground crews and their robot appliances working on the *Kinunir* to get it spaceworthy once more. She took a few tentative steps, then found her sense of balance was off. She closed her eyes, centered, then took a few paces.

"You're there, Commander," Garcia said, grinning. "I prefer being in space, but until the gravitics are fixed, this isn't so bad."

"Do you think we need to worry?" Franks asked.

"About Beucer and the others in the garrison?" Garcia shook her head. "I can't say. That's up to the captain to worry about. Him and you. You're XO." Garcia locked her board and vaulted from her chair, landing like a cat. She did a deep knee bend, then rose to her full height slowly. "Feels good." She left the bridge.

Franks saw that everyone else had gone, too. She bent over Rolland's board, her fingers lingering on the console. Telson had ordered her to put Allie's higher order functions to sleep, and she had. Nothing had been said about reviving her, though. Fingers against the cool keys, ready to input the code to bring back the AI program, she jumped when her heads-up display flashed an alert.

"All senior personnel to the wardroom immediately. Captain's Council."

She backed away, still considering Allie's revival. If there had been time, she could have awakened the program, then programmed in silence so the captain wouldn't immediately know of the activation while the *Kinunir* got the full benefit of Allie's coordination and calculation.

"Now, Franks, now!" This time the captain himself sent the order directly to her rather than broadcasting to all officers.

Reluctantly, she locked the computer officer's console, then went to the wardroom. Every step she took pushed her a little way into the air, almost as if she had wings on her heels. Though the airlock hadn't been opened to the outer air, she caught a faint hint of something unpleasant that hadn't been there while in space. She made a mental note to have Allie track down the odor and remove it.

"Glad you could make it, Commander," Telson said. He scowled. She hastily sat next to Lieutenant Denholm, who stared off into the distance as his display gave him information about the ship's weapons

she could only guess at.

Next to him Chief Yan huddled with Major Lefalle. Telson spent a few more seconds with his own display, then tapped the side of the unit and actually looked at his officers.

"Power down, Lieutenant. Full attention's required. Nothing said here is to be passed to the crew. Is that understood?" He waited until each nodded in turn. "Good. Captain Beucer has begun moving his repair crews and robotics into place. Take all you possibly can use and be ready to improvise for whatever is lacking here, which might be damned near everything. Chief Yan will supervise the hull repair."

"That spot on the dorsal hull, Captain? That's our top priority?"

"That's it. The entire section has to be cut out and then replaced. Don't let the locals keep the damaged section. I want it loaded into the cargo bay. No matter what Allie says, we weren't hit by some super weapon on the pirate ship. We were damaged when the *Serpentine* exploded, and I want to know how."

"Major Lefalle will take an air/raft and as many marines as he sees fit on a recon of the pirate base that Captain Beucer neglected to mention."

"I've got it located, sir," Lefalle said. "It's about a tenth of the way around the world."

Telson looked quizzical, so Franks supplied the data.

"Keng is about ten thousand clicks in circumference. The original estimate for this mystery base was five hundred kilometers, but our more detailed charts put it close to one thousand. Reaching it any way but by air is impossible, being set in a rugged, mountainous area."

"There's considerable volcanic activity on this world, Captain," Lefalle said. "The pirate base is protected by three volcanoes and sits in the center of an equilateral triangle of two dormant and one active volcano."

"This sounds like something best blown up from space," Denholm said. "Get the missile tube rails hammered straight and I can drop a nuke smack on target. We won't even break a sweat."

"Approach," Telson said to the marine officer, "on an air/raft. Recon is the primary mission, but if you can work in, destroy the base, and get away without any casualties, do so, Major."

"Yes, sir!"

Franks heard the excitement in the otherwise stolid marine's voice. She wondered at Telson giving carte blanche to attack the base with only a small detachment. He knew something she didn't, or was he simply sending the marines on this mission to get him and his squad away from the *Kinunir* during repairs?

"Get the air/raft out and onto your mission right away," Telson said. "Dismissed, Major."

Lefalle threw his captain a quick salute and vanished so fast there was almost a sonic boom.

"While I could use Lefalle and his team to guard the ship during repairs, that pirate base needs to be scouted. Is it supplying intelligence to the base on Tok or is it a weapon pointed at Beucer's head? Until I find out about how badly Beucer has failed in his command, we need to act as if we're surrounded by enemies. Yan, Denholm, be especially alert dealing with the locals. Dismissed."

Both men left. Franks rose to leave, too, but Telson motioned her back into the chair.

"I find myself in a peculiar position, Commander. Your expertise with computers is doubly vital to the ship's mission now that Rolland is in the sickbay."

"What's his prognosis, sir?"

Telson looked even grimmer.

"He's in a coma induced by the medic to prevent further brain damage. He was struck in the head, and there might be considerable injury. Our sickbay isn't adequate for diagnosis."

"What about planetside? Is there a neurosurgeon who can do more for him?"

"I am waiting to see how relations go with Beucer. If we give him what he wants—and it's actually what he does want—I'll ask about his medical services."

"I don't understand what you mean, sir."

"Beucer might be bought and paid for by the pirates."

"Do you think there's evidence of that in the city? That this is the reason he wants us confined to the *Kinunir*?"

"I don't put it past him to lure us into a trap. If he keeps us bottled up, he might think he can take us out with a single attack. The pirates have shown themselves to be treacherous in the extreme."

"Why did he train the planet-based lasers on the pirate that dogged us on the approach?"

"I don't know. He certainly didn't bother warning us of the attack. The ground fire might have been intended to pin us while the pirate ship finished us off."

"Sir, let me bring Allie back to full function. She can be invaluable both guarding the ship and judging the quality of the repairs. And she can monitor all comm anywhere planetside, integrating it with other intelligence—"

"And she could analyze Beucer's prior activities to warn us if he is being paid off by the pirates, yes, I understand that," Telson said, cutting off her plea. "I prefer to keep Allie at what you might call an idiot level. There's no call for her to display any level of tech higher than the Model/7 if Beucer is spying on us."

"So that Beucer won't become suspicious and try to steal the program, sir?" Franks felt she was being manipulated into this conclusion. Telson resented Allie and wanted nothing to do with allowing her to take over his command. This reason might be enough to keep her from protesting. Franks had to admit it made sense.

Letting a frontier world out on the edge of the sector gain an AI security computer as advanced as Allie could prove dangerous to the empire, especially if Beucer and the pirates were allies.

"Although you can be invaluable aboard, Commander," he went on, looking even more dour than before, "other considerations have arisen. You are ordered to escort the marquis and his party into town."

"Why, sir?"

"The marquis has lodged a protest about how he and the others have been treated. He feels the combat and all the rest we've endured was aimed at him personally." Telson grunted, then worried at his lower lip before saying, "Let them buy trinkets or whatever else keeps them amused."

"Amused and out of your hair, sir?"

"You're learning, XO, you're learning. But since Beucer has demanded our crew remain aboard, your presence will be a problem if you are discovered."

"You want me to spy on the locals, sir?"

"I want you to keep the marquis and his retinue out of trouble, let them poke about and, if necessary, have them declare diplomatic immunity since they're not part of the crew but officials from Boughene."

Telson wanted her to be a spy and to proclaim herself from Boughene, if necessary. Or was there more? Did he want the marquis to ask for political asylum to get him off the *Kinunir* permanently? In spite of her ability as a cyber expert, she might be expendable.

He seemed to have read her mind.

"This is not a suicide mission, Commander. I expect you to return to this vessel. Discretion is required, nothing more. Dismissed."

She felt as if she had been sentenced to twenty years on a prison asteroid, but she made her way to the marquis's quarters. Before she could announce her presence, Benbow came down the corridor, saw her, and smiled broadly.

"My dear Laurel, so good to see you."

"Benbow," she acknowledged, bowing slightly in the man's direction. "I've come to escort the marquis and any others who want to accompany us into the city."

"City?" Benbow laughed. "Don't tell that to the marquis or he will fire me on the spot. Why, this conglomeration of mud huts hardly amounts to a town. But a city? Ha! You have never seen the glories of Preen, have you?"

"I'm not familiar with it. Is that Boughene's capital?"

"Clever as well as lovely. It is. The soaring towers held together with spider steel and special spun titanium glass that catches the sunlight to explode into a million colors at sunrise, promising glory to all who see it."

"A million color spectrum is special," she said dryly. "Is the marquis in his quarters?"

"He and the baroness await you at the landing bay. The doors have been swung wide." Benbow held

out his arm for her to take. "I shall be delighted to escort you."

She hesitated, then looped her arm with his.

"I'll need to stop by the armory for a sidearm."

"I knew it! This is no city but a dangerous lair for cutthroats and brigands."

"Possibly pirates mingling with the locals," she said.

"Would you defend us—me? How rich!"

Franks was put off by Benbow's constant high spirits, but she knew the marquis enjoyed the jokes and sly digs at anyone and everyone. They took the shaft down to E deck where Lefalle prepared for his scouting mission with two armed, camouflaged marines. Lefalle and his men wore helmets with transparent shields.

The cargo lift had been lowered, letting a gentle breeze blow in. She coughed at the acrid tang to the air before one of the crewmen handed her a filter mask that covered her nose and mouth.

"Sulfur," Benbow said when he'd donned a mask of his own. "There must be intense volcanic activity nearby for such strong fumes." He gently dabbed at his eyes with a chocolate-colored handkerchief. "I do hope I can survive."

Franks went to the armory and selected a small, low power laser pistol, then tried on an overcoat without any insignia to hide her uniform. Shrugging settled it into place and allowed her to reach underneath to draw the laser, should the need arise. Not knowing what she might face in the city, she hid a second, smaller pistol beneath the folds of her robe. One last addition came from the electronics bin beside the hatchway. Those items slipped into her outer pocket. Satisfied at this small disguise, and with her other equipment, she returned to the cargo deck where Benbow waited impatiently. Again, she looped her arm with his. This mollified him a little.

"There they are," she said, guiding him to where the marquis and baroness stood, masked faces only centimeters apart as they discussed whatever it was the nobility fancied.

"Commander, you have kept us waiting." The marquis spoke in curt, clipped tones.

"Is Doctor Mixrail coming with us?"

"He was not feeling well and chose to remain aboard. He lacks the pioneering spirit." The marquis looked askance as Benbow dabbed more at both eyes running from the sulfur fumes. For a moment, Franks thought the nobleman would admonish him for such ungentlemanly behavior, but he chose to turn back to the baroness and whisper hurriedly. Her head bobbed as she recorded his every word.

"Might I suggest the baroness not wear her crown? Any planetside spaceport is filled with thieves and..." Her voice trailed off. She had almost suggested they would encounter kidnappers or murderers willing to assault nobility.

"Thieves are everywhere," the baroness said, her voice curiously shrill behind her filter mask. "Isn't that so, Kennard? Will you have new, wonderful stories to tell of our foray into town?"

"Of course I will, Malva, of course I will. And I see that our escort has chosen to hide her uniform under that drab coat. During this grand adventure we will go incognito!" He stepped to the edge of the deck and looked out across the twilight-shrouded shipyard. "That is our goal, the city of—what's it called, Commander?"

"It's certainly not what you are used to, Marquis," she said. "It's not Preen. It's called Womma, named in tribute to Admiral Trish Womma."

"A woman, eh? What did she do to achieve such notoriety?" The marquis asked, but Franks heard no real interest in his voice. It was as if he engaged her reflexively, as he might a petitioner he found boring but was forced to speak to.

"She put down the Hefry Revolt back in '80 with only five hundred marines and a minimum of space bombardment. The tactics she used are quite famous, and I understand Captain Telson is devoting an entire chapter to the revolt in the textbook he's writing."

She saw the marquis's eyes narrow. He stared hard at her, then made a dismissive gesture, bent close, and spoke rapidly with the baroness. They started off toward the main gate leading into Womma.

"We had better hurry or he will leave us quite behind," Benbow said, "unless you would prefer that."

"What I prefer is to be at work on the ship, helping with the repair work."

"You are quite the all-around officer."

"How's that?"

"Well rounded," Benbow said, looking at her from the corner of his eye. "In all respects."

"Oh, damn," Franks said, jerking free of the man and running to the gate.

A guard had shoved the two nobles against a wall and used his assault rifle to hold them in place.

"What's wrong, Private?" Franks called, slowing only a little as she approached.

Reading the set to the guard's shoulders, the way he kept his finger on the rifle's trigger, and how he canted his head to one side as if ready to summon help told her the marquis had said something untoward.

"You, halt," the guard said. "You need a pass to leave the yard for the evening."

"You are impudent, you noncompoop," the baroness said. "Don't you know who this man is?"

"Orders," the sentry said.

"It's *nincompoop*, my dear," Benbow piped up. "But as he is a noncom, that is quite a fine pun. Do record it."

"Yes, do," the marquis said, turning to the baroness.

Franks moved fast when she saw the guard prepare to smash his rifle stock against the marquis's head. She grabbed the rifle, spun so her butt shoved hard into the sentry's belly, pushed forward on the rifle, and forced him to step around to the side. Her instep caught the guard's heel as his foot lifted. She swept fast and twisted. The guard landed hard on the ground and Franks held his rifle.

"Go on," she told the marquis. "We can exit the shipyard now."

"The city is so far, and it is almost dark," said the baroness. "Can we find some transportation?" she looked around, trying to pierce the yellow fog that drifted about, even obscuring the brown dust kicked up by ancient, passing vehicles as they raced along unpaved roads. "Benbow, see to it," Franks said. She spun the assault rifle around, slapped its side, and held it out to the guard. "You'll be in the brig if anyone finds how easily you were taken down. Don't report this."

She tossed the rifle back, spun, and went to Benbow, who had found a large four-wheeled vehicle for hire. He watched her. As a slow smile came to his face, she tossed him a small black box. He fielded it easily, held it up, and frowned.

"What is it?"

"The clip for the guard's assault rifle." She looked over her shoulder. The guard worked frantically to find why he hadn't been able to shoot her in the back. Franks pointed her index finger, raised her thumb, and mouthed, "Bang."

The guard almost fell over himself dashing back into the shipyard.

"You have quite the sense of humor. There is more to you than meets the eye, Commander," Benbow said.

"There's a lot of that going around," she said, meeting his steady gaze with her own. "Let's get to town so I can get back."

"To real work?" Benbow laughed. "Yes, I am sure you will wish for honest work welding into place thousand-kilo hull sections and scrubbing out reactor lines with your toothbrush before the day is done."

She heard the marquis dictating the encounter with the recalcitrant guard, putting himself into her role. Franks didn't care. She just wanted the sightseeing over and done with.

Just beyond the gates Franks saw what she mistook for ruins. Squinting, she got a better view and saw these were operating shipyard offices. Stone facades showed scarring. It might have been from laser or kinetic weapons assault, but she decided as she walked past that the sulfurous atmosphere had riddled the stone with tiny fissures that caused fragments to fall off. The plastic windows had turned frosty, also from the atmosphere. Underfoot gravel grated. She wondered if the contaminants in the air destroyed asphalt and that was the reason for no paving anywhere she looked. The flat roofs gave no hint as to rainfall here. She shuddered thinking of the sulfuric acid-laced rain pouring down on her. She stepped up the pace and joined the small party huddled together like conspirators against the primitive world.

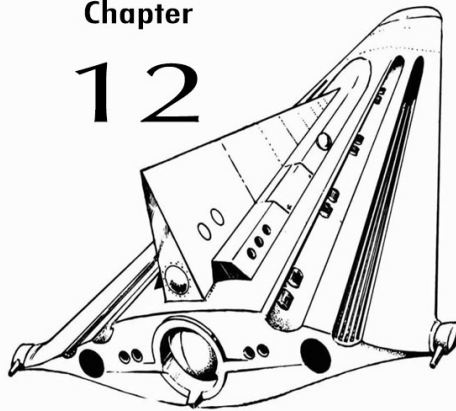
"Are you all right, Marquis?" she asked, bending over and pressing her palm into his shoulder. She left her hand there until she was sure he didn't notice how she also gripped his sleeve.

"I am quite fine, thank you." The marquis returned to his whispered conversation with the baroness.

Franks smiled a little. None of them had noticed what she had done or there would have been immediate protests. She moved back and settled in beside the robotic driver, she held on as the truck tore off toward Womma, ten clicks away amid a cloud of dust and stones thrown off the primitive asphalt roadway.

Chapter

12



Telson fought to keep silent. He expanded the heads-up display to cover the entire bulkhead in the bridge. In the distance came the noises and smells of repair proceeding, but his full attention fixed on the video display relayed by Lefalle from his air/raft. The captain had been gone for more than an hour and approached the triangular depression fitted among the three volcanoes hiding the pirate base.

But how he wanted to have Lefalle give a running commentary of the trip—and to offer advice! Telson had commanded ships of the line long enough to know his place. A good crew performed without constant supervision. If they didn't, replacing them with starmen that could improve performance let him concentrate on bigger issues. The mission always took precedence over what the cook fixed in the galley or settling disputes between ratings. Foremost among the things a starship captain never, ever commented on was the performance, discipline, and decisions made by his marine commander.

The marines acted as a police force while aboard the ship and the strong arm of Imperial enforcement once planetside. How they carried out their mission rested on the capable shoulders of their superior officers. Telson trusted Captain Lefalle and had come to ask advice of him, although in a circumspect manner. Aboard the *Kinunir*, Rikart Telson was the only commander. That didn't mean a marine captain didn't have insights valuable to the mission.

But how he wanted to whisper his thoughts into Lefalle's ear as the marine guided his air/raft through a darkened jungle toward a soaring volcanic rock wall. Telson unconsciously pulled back, as if he had any control at all on the air/raft. A second after his reaction, the view rose suddenly. Lefalle had pulled up, followed the terrain and worked down the far side of the ridge.

He caught his breath. Spread out in the triangular valley lay the pirate base. Most of it had been unseen from space as they had scanned this section of Keng. Buildings hidden under trees and other camouflage bustled with pirates ghostly in their IR glory. As Lefalle cut power and sank to the ground, a few pirates nearby turned and looked quizzically in his direction.

Telson keyed into the command frequency as Lefalle sent out both marines with him, one left and the other right, to take care of any unwanted observers. Trying to bring up those marines' displays proved futile. Lefalle might have sent them out with no duplex comm to avoid potential detection. After five minutes, both returned and vaulted into the open-topped air/raft, setting it rocking slightly. The softly sighing antigravity plates were slightly out of synch, otherwise the four ton vehicle would never have budged. Still, the air/raft had lifted them into the camp and the propulsion had been flawless. Telson saw bloodied BDUs. The marines had silenced the pirates using knives that were again sheathed at their sides. He would have argued with Lefalle about not making the foray in battledress, but the air/raft speed and range were increased by lightening the load. The heavy personal powered armor made for a safer marine but also hindered the quick in-and-out nature of the reconnaissance.

Such personal killing made Telson catch his breath. He had been trained to stand off a planet, in

orbit, using weapons that could lay ruin to entire continents. Such wholesale slaughter never bothered him; it was impersonal. But this killing had to be violent, sudden, particular. They had blood on their hands and uniforms, had felt a life evaporate because of their skill at throat cutting and back stabbing with a blade.

He blinked and brought a different layer on his display up to the screen. Lefalle once more took to the air, keeping low as he flew along paths cut through the jungle. Sturdier brown rock-melt buildings, permanent ones that showed weathering from exposure to the corrosive atmosphere over long months, flashed past on either side. Telson wanted the marine to focus directly ahead where the pirates had a corsair under repair.

Lefalle had other concerns. He wanted to make the recon and escape with his team intact. But Telson needed to see the condition of the pirate ship and guess at its capabilities. If this one carried the mysterious weapon that Allie claimed so destructive when used against the *Kinunir*, he had to know its details. The idea of a black energy weapon in the hands of the pirates sent chills down his spine.

The air/raft surged upward and circled the compound, dangerously exposing the craft and its occupants to detection. But this gave Telson the view of the corsair he needed. The first thing catching his attention was the insignia, a coiled golden serpent striking with deadly silver fangs. Pirates used fanciful sigils, but this was not one he had seen before. The basic ship looked like a Vargr model. Two meson guns showed how deadly the vessel was, even discounting the missile turrets festooned on hard points along the dorsal spine. Those batteries could spew forth barrages of both dumb and genius missiles. The genius missiles would follow any ship using the cleverest tactics available to the AI guidance; the dumb shots of kinetic centimeter-diametered depleted uranium pellets could puncture even the *Kinunir*'s hull—and possibly had during the skirmish that had delivered the need for such extensive repairs.

One thing he had learned was that successful ordnance on one pirate ship found its way onto others in a sympathetic fleet. Only a handful of weapons engineers supplied all the skill. Telson toyed with the notion of finding those engineers and eliminating them as Lefalle's marines had taken out the sentries. That did nothing to sabotage the corsair stretching two hundred meters under the air/raft.

A different insignia showed briefly as Telson used UV scanners. He frowned. That clenched fist holding a pair of eagle feathers had been scrubbed away so only the ghostly image remained.

"You recognize it?" He flashed the message to Lefalle, distracting the man from his own recon. Such comm might be detected, but only if luck went against them. He needed to know the corsair's origins. If Lefalle failed to give it, he had to investigate in greater detail—and danger.

The marine officer glanced at the display and tapped back, "Boughene emblem. Ship stolen from the marquis's navy?"

Telson's mind raced. The pirates had hijacked a corsair from the marquis? Was that what had brought the noble to the Keng system? A mutiny?

The air/raft flew past the corsair's prow, giving Telson a different view of the weaponry. The Meson Gun J mattered less than how the ship's defenses had been augmented. Twelve triple blister-shaped black sandcaster turrets dotted the forward section, giving better than expected defenses. Used properly, the short-range laser defense could be used to bring unarmed ships to heel.

Telson's display recorded every instant of the mission and stored it in a special tactical database. When Franks returned, Allie's reactivation could be focused entirely on analysis of this mission. But Telson's preliminary appraisal was that this pirate ship carried no special armament. The potential of unknown black energy cannon was nil. In spite of the beefed-up defensive capability, the corsair lacked the firepower or maneuverability to best the *Kinunir*.

Once his ship was spaceworthy once more, that is.

Lefalle completed a circuit the base, taking sightings on the three volcanoes to give distances, perspective, and relative size of equipment and construction.

"Get out of there, Captain," he muttered. Not for the first time he wished he commanded the recon.

Telson heaved a sigh when the air/raft dived down and retraced the course it had followed into the volcanic valley. As the air/raft's nose lifted for the quick skim over the black, rocky valley wall, the active volcano centered in the display. Heavy black smoke rose from the cone, yellow sulfur streaks

intertwined to blot out the nighttime stars. That was where the constant taint in the air came from. What was it like breathing the air at the pirate base?

Why had they chosen that spot, on the slope of a volcano ready to spit lava and poisonous fumes at any instant? He found it hard to believe more suitable spots weren't available in the limitless stretches of jungle covering most of this continent, unless they hid their heat signatures under the active volcano's eruptions. Keng had a surprisingly huge population for such a small planet, but even so any number of other locations were possible.

He restrained himself from contacting Lefalle to ask if he had seen any strategic reason for the site selection. Finally sinking back into his chair, he flipped through layers on the display to follow repair reports, more to distract himself from Lefalle's mission than to accomplish anything necessary.

"That base is an affront to Beucer," he said aloud. "They wanted to rub his nose in how ineffectual he is." Telson thought about that and liked the reasoning. When the pirates blasted off, using the planet's slow rotational speed to augment their velocity, the corsairs passed directly over Womma, daring Beucer to attack.

Telson worried over that a bit more since Beucer hadn't hesitated to fire on a pirate dogging the *Kinunir* during its approach.

He switched back to the vid view from Lefalle's air/raft. No pursuit had been mounted from the pirate base. The scouting mission followed a zigzag course back, scanning the terrain as it flew. Such intelligence would prove useful to be certain the pirates weren't able to escape their sequestered valley and hide in the jungles. When he took out that base, he intended to do it with one single strike. Denholm had been right.

Bombardment from space delivered the best chance of victory with a single missile. If he parked the *Kinunir* in a geosynchronous orbit, the missile would destroy the valley between the volcanoes and then turret lasers could reduce the jungle all around to smoldering protoplasm. No escape. No quarter.

An alert layer popped up on his display. He almost cancelled it, then saw the picture and biographical data appended. Telson sighed, blanked his heads-up display and got to his feet, going to the wardroom to meet Captain Beucer.

The port commandant stood next to a marine guard and looked uneasy. Beucer shifted from foot to foot and his tiny hands made wringing motions. Everything about him reminded Telson of a small, trapped animal. Beucer had more of a snout than a nose. When he opened his mouth to speak, tiny, needle like teeth flashed. His thin dark hair had been brushed straight back from his forehead and held in place by a grease that Telson suspected caused the stale odor permeating his wardroom.

"Captain Telson, I had to come by. Protocol and all that." He stepped forward and thrust out a hand.

As Telson expected, Beucer's flesh felt clammy. Even with the brief contact, the rapid heartbeat warned how high-strung the man was. Telson glanced to the marine guard, inclined his head slightly and had him withdraw to a point just out of earshot. He wanted the guard's laser rifle handy should Beucer crack under whatever strain he felt. The man walked on a glass floor that threatened to break and send him screaming into madness at any moment.

Beucer withdrew his hand as if burned, then dropped heavily into a chair. He crossed his arms over his thin chest and stared at the table rather than his host.

"Your shipyard crew is very efficient," Telson said.

"Your engineering staff badgers them, tells them how to do their jobs."

"I'm glad all is proceeding well, then," Telson said. Beucer's appraisal came close to the truth. The local workers did well because the *Kinunir*'s crew watched their every move and felt no hesitation about correcting slipshod work. "I am glad you came by."

"Why?" Beucer looked up, eyes wide with fright.

"Your quick action and expert marksmanship destroyed the pirate vessel following the *Kinunir* into port. Our rearward surveillance gear had been completely destroyed and we were blind."

"Pirate, yes, it was a pirate. The damned thieves. They have a base on the outer moon of the inner gas giant, you know."

"How did they happen to build in that crater?"

"I've got nothing left powerful enough to stop them. After the dreadnought was destroyed, our only remaining craft is a grav APC. Well, we have two of them, but one was damaged by a pirate. Those are orbital craft only. I can't reach Tok to even drop rocks on the pirates' heads."

"If Keng is such a toothless lion, why did the pirates put their base on an airless moon? Why not take over Womma?"

"We have some allies."

"Who might they be?" Telson asked.

"Not the emperor. He's stranded us out here to fend for ourselves against ... against pirates and rebels and even incursions from the Vargr. How can I defend an entire planet against odds that great? I'll tell you how. I can't! We are expected to give, give, give and what do we get? A wrecked colonial cruiser we're supposed to repair even though we don't even have a proper starport, that's what we get!"

Telson motioned to the marine guard to lower his rifle. He had hiked it to his shoulder and slipped off the safety as Beucer's shrill outburst approached insanity, but he hadn't crossed over to violence. Yet.

"Submit appropriate billing to the Admiralty on Regina. Our repair must strain your budget. It's only fair that you recover the expenses to cover your apportioned items."

"Budget? What budget? We fight and we die and there's never any money. If we weren't under their protection, we'd be—"

"Whose protection?" Telson put the steel edge of command into the question.

He thought Beucer was having a heart attack from the way he turned pale and his mouth opened and closed, showing his disconcertingly needle-like teeth. The port captain half stood, then dropped back into his chair.

"Who is protecting you? Have you renounced your oath to the Imperium?"

"What? No!"

"Are you in league with the pirates?"

Beucer swallowed hard, then laughed. Telson puzzled over the response. The sound grated like a boot sole grinding against broken glass, and if possible, the man's odor became even more overpowering when the officer ran his hands through his hair, smearing the grease there.

"If it weren't for the pirates, Keng would be a peaceful system."

"I agree with that," Telson said in an attempt to calm the overwrought officer. "They certainly changed my mission when they attacked the yacht."

"What yacht?"

"The *Serpentine*," Telson said. "The marquis's ship."

"Marquis? What marquis?" Beucer turned panicky again. He gripped the table and bent up the edge, so intense was his emotion.

"The marquis was attacked by pirates out near Dinek's outer ring. I have no idea why he thought such a vacation was better than anything he could find on Boughene."

"Was he killed? The marquis?"

"No," Telson said carefully. He measured his next words carefully, glancing to his guard who still held the laser rifle trained on Beucer. "We fought off three pirate ships and rescued him, though his yacht was destroyed in the battle."

"Three? You destroyed three ships attacking the marquis? While he was searching the rings?"

"We believe three were destroyed."

"They don't have three ships unless ... But the marquis? What became of him?"

Telson tried to avoid mentioning the marquis anymore but saw that Beucer would not allow the subject to lie.

"When the *Kinunir* is repaired, we will escort him back to Boughene."

"He's on this ship! He is here, in my port?" Beucer shot to his feet, looked around as if he found himself in some alien maze, then ran for the lift shaft.

"Go after him, Corporal."

"Stop him, sir?"

"Follow him and report back where he goes and who he sees."

The marine slung his rifle and took another lift down after Beucer.

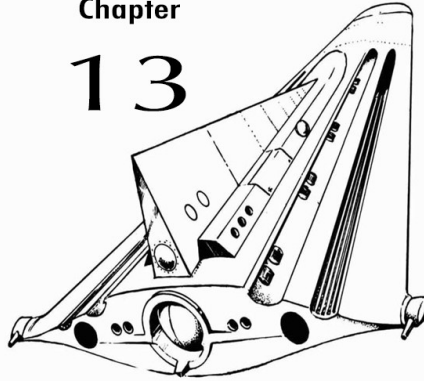
Telson wished Allie had been available to analyze every nuance of Beucer's crazy behavior. So little of what agitated the port captain made any sense. He opposed the pirates but worried that the marquis hadn't been killed by them. Something about the yacht being in the asteroid belt also perturbed Beucer, but not as much as the possibility that three pirate ships had been destroyed.

He returned to the bridge to follow Lefalle's return to the ship and to monitor how repairs went.

And to unwrap the perplexity of Captain Beucer's visit. Walking home to Regina might be easier.

Chapter

13



“How quaint,” Benbow said. “A bazaar. A bazaar of the bizarre. What can this be, my dear Laurel?” He held up a curiously cut piece of crinkled blue and green striped cloth, wadded it, then tossed it into the air, catching it as it floated down.

“It’s Commander Franks,” she said automatically, but her eyes followed the cloth as a puff of wind caught it. On the gentle current of air came a mouth-watering scent that reminded her of her childhood on the inhospitable world of Pixie when her Uncle Trevvy had taken her to the gypsy fair at the main city dome and bought her the kebabs her mother had forbidden because of questionable origins for the meat and vegetables. That had been exciting for her, a touch of the taboo, but her great-uncle’s visits to the naval base planetside had thrilled her more and given her the yearning to become an Imperial officer, if for no other reason than to leave the hard-vacuum world filled with beltlers more intent on getting drunk than accomplishing anything distinguished.

Other than the poisonous atmosphere, Keng had so much in common her homeworld. The starport here wasn’t nearly as extensive as on Pixie, but the quaint marketplace filled with strange, nose-wrinkling aromas and locals dressed in flamboyant garb, took her home. The crowded booths sold everything imaginable, from raw foods of questionable quality to intricately fashioned metalwork vases and boxes. Like Pixie, Keng boasted almost no tourism, so all on sale had to be for the natives.

“A scarf? It is short for that.” Benbow turned to the small, gaudily dressed woman watching them. “What purpose, other than ornamentation, does this cloth have?”

“You are offworlders,” the kiosk owner said, pursing her lips and nodding to herself. “You have not been in Womma when Vulcan’s Breath blows.”

“What’s that?” Franks asked in spite of herself.

“The volcano west of Womma is in constant eruption, but some weeks the gasses change, become intolerable ... or deadly.” She picked up a similar cloth and snapped it like a small whip.

To Franks’s surprise the cloth trembled. The woman lifted it to her face where the colored material followed every contour perfectly, covering her nose, cheeks, and lips like a second skin—like her own Navy-issued filter mask.

“It is a gas mask for those of us with no hope of aid from the government. The blue turns red if there is nitrous oxide and, by the seven stars, should the green change to yellow, sulfur dioxide will choke and kill you.”

“So it is both decorative and useful?” Franks asked. She slipped off her own filter mask and snapped the cloth as the woman had, then applied it to her face. Electric tingles and a touch of ozone greeted her, but instead of making it more difficult to breathe, she found it easier. The constant sulfur taint disappeared. “This might be useful onboard. The air filtration sometimes gets bogged down, as it did when—” She cut off her musing. Telling a civilian of an Imperial Navy cruiser’s damage acquired during battle violated her oath of secrecy.

"It might improve breathing but does nothing for your looks," Benbow said, sniffing imperiously. "Anything that hides your lovely face must be suspect."

"How much?" Franks asked.

"Ten credits," the woman said, moving around to interpose herself between the officer and Benbow. "Only the finest material."

"Is it handmade?"

"My oldest daughter wove it after my sons grew the cotton."

"It's not cotton," Franks said.

The woman shrugged eloquently, the layers of her clothing rippling in the sunlight like a rainbow river. "We call it that. There have been many centuries of genetic modification and adaptation in Imperial laboratories. Only within the past few decades has it been discovered to grow well on Keng. Cotton," she said, running her finger around the edge of the cloth over her mouth and nose. The cloth sagged and then fell away, once more simple muslin.

"Ten credits, you say?"

The woman held out her callused hand for payment, but Benbow slipped around and took the hand between both of his.

"Dear lady, you rob an ignorant offworlder come to visit. This is not worth such a princely sum."

Franks started to protest that ten credits was nothing. She intended to buy several at that price. Lieutenant Commander Garcia would appreciate one and possibly the captain would, also, though she wondered at the propriety of such a gift. The last thing she wanted was to seem like a suck-up when he already thought she had gained her berth on the *Kinunir* through political pull.

"Two," Benbow insisted.

"Eight."

Franks saw then that both Benbow and the woman enjoyed the haggling. She listened and learned. Benbow finally dickered a twelve-credit price for three before offering her his arm after she paid. Together they made their way through the open-air market. Franks used one of the cloths to filter the dust and stinging sulfur, hanging her Imperial filter mask at her belt.

"Would you like to use one, too?" she asked, holding out a cloth for Benbow.

He waved it off.

"I am content to breathe the air these peasants do." He began coughing until he turned red in the face. He held out his hand for one of the scarves and spun it about his head, knotting it easily so it fell into place over his nose and mouth. "On the other hand, why shouldn't I adorn myself the way they do? It reminds me of my place with the marquis and how he enjoys going native in such locales."

"The marquis!" Her heart almost exploded. "Where did he go?" She looked around frantically but neither the marquis nor the baroness was anywhere in sight. "I've got to find him—they."

"The marquis seeks adventure. What better place to find it than a primitive spaceport town like Womma?"

"Captain Telson put him in my custody." Franks looked around, growing angrier by the second. Benbow had purposefully distracted her so the marquis could wander off in search of adventure.

"Custody? You make it sound as if he is under arrest."

"I'm responsible for him."

"Oh, enjoy yourself, dear—Commander Franks," Benbow said. "Look at the fine artistry on this brass work. Primitive planets occupy such a fine place in the history of doodads." He fingered a small brass container the size of his fist, then held it out for her inspection.

She wasn't going to be sidetracked again. She reached into her pocket and found the tracker. Her thumb pressed on the switch and a small screen lit up. A tiny white dot crawled through the pale green background. Turning slowly, she homed in on the marquis and the telltale she had fastened to his sleeve before they drove to Womma in the robotic truck.

"You are not one to underestimate, I see, Commander." Benbow looked over her shoulder at the screen. "The telltale shows where the marquis is headed?"

"That way. He's put close to a kilometer between us, thanks to your dicker over the cloth."

"But you wanted it, Commander. I saw that you did. I would gladly have bought it for you as a gift but all my money remains on the yacht."

"Blown to space dust," she said. "If the pirate hadn't attacked you, crossing through the ring system might have hulled you. Why were you there rather than arching up out of the plane of the ecliptic?"

"I don't know about such things. The marquis wanted to see the gas giants. I have no idea why. He quickly grew tired of them when Doctor Mixrail insisted on flying through the rings."

"What was in the cargo bay?" Franks asked suddenly, hoping to get an answer.

But Benbow was too much in control of himself for that. He made his dismissive airy gesture and said, "That's something for the doctor to answer. And the marquis, of course. They found something among the asteroids, perhaps. The marquis is quite the collector, you know."

"What does he collect?"

"Other than fawning sycophants such as myself? Why, it is said he has a fabulous collection of archaeological oddities, relics of the Ancients, things like that."

Benbow was an adept liar, but he failed to put enough conviction into those words for Franks to ever believe him. He knew what Mixrail—and the marquis—had sought and likely found but wasn't willing to share that with her. She wanted more to find the marquis than uncover his arcane hobbies. The tracker began to blink, warning her the telltale was going out of range.

"He can't walk that fast. He's gotten into a taxi," she said.

"The marquis has no more money than I or the baroness."

"He'll end up with his throat slit for not paying the fare," she said. "Come on!"

She broke into a jog, not caring if Benbow kept up with her. The captain had ordered her to keep the marquis safe. Nothing had been said about the marquis's jester, or the baroness. She wasn't certain why she was surprised when Benbow kept up with her. Even picking up the pace and running did not deter him. The low gravity helped, but she saw his easy stride told of training.

After ten minutes of running, she slowed and then stopped to make a complete circle using her tracker.

"Nothing. He couldn't have gone beyond the range." She looked around. The buildings all had thick stone walls that could dampen a telltale. She thumbed off the tracker and opened a comm channel.

"You're going to turn the marquis in, for acting like the spoiled child he is? Please, don't tell your captain. He'll send out an armed party and embarrass the marquis. That's not something I relish seeing. Again." He mimicked her using the tracker.

Before Franks found the proper channel, she picked up a nearby signal. The comm unit crackled and popped, then settled down. She listened for a few seconds and turned to Benbow angrily.

"The baroness is transmitting her biography. If anyone else intercepts her comm, they'll know where she is and that the marquis is unguarded."

"So?"

"The captain located a pirate base. He's not sure if the starport commander has sold out to them or exactly what is going on here, politically."

"Oh, frontier worlds such as this are always hotbeds of ferocious activity that amounts to nothing," Benbow said.

"The signal is coming from inside that building."

She pushed back the coat and made certain her sidearm rode easy in its holster. While Keng was a frontier world, she had never trained in quick draw. Her marksmanship was adequate for a navy officer, but she had watched Lefalle and his squads practice and knew she was sorely lacking in skill compared with their worst marksman. If Lefalle hadn't been on the recon mission, she would have contacted him rather than Captain Telson.

"It's on your head if you spoil his fun," Benbow said. "Believe me, his 'fun' can take on macabre dimensions."

"He hasn't had time to find any real den of iniquity."

Benbow's mocking laughter warned of how wrong she might be.

She went to the closed door and pressed her hand against it, hoping to push it open. The solid wood

didn't budge a millimeter. Trying the handle convinced her the door was not only locked but secured inside. Her hand laser was more than adequate to burn through the wood, but doing so might create an incident.

"What if he's not inside?" Benbow asked, as if he read her mind.

"How much harder can it be to explain that away than losing the marquis entirely?" She drew her laser pistol, set it on narrow beam, and made two quick circular motions that cut through the hinges.

The door fell inward—and all hell broke loose.

Heavy bullets ripped past her, forcing Franks to spin and put her back to the outer wall. Benbow stood and stared stupidly, as if he had no idea the danger he faced. She sucked in a breath and dived, catching him around the waist and knocking him to the ground before any of the metallic slugs could remove vital organs from his body.

"While this could be most delightful in other circumstances," Benbow said, struggling beneath her, "you are crushing me."

She dug in his toes and pushed them farther out of the line of fire. The fusillade stopped. Franks held up her comm unit, thinking to contact Telson. The time had passed for her to be brave.

"It doesn't look as if I can call in the marines," she said. Shaking the comm unit produced tinny rattling sounds. The display was dead and the case had cracked in several spots.

Benbow took it from her and turned it around. A slug had smashed squarely into the back of the unit. She took a deep breath, realizing how close she had come to death, then got to her knees and peered around the door. New rounds drove toward her. She ducked back.

"I'm going in," she said. "I saw the baroness wandering about on the far side of the room. It's big, dark, but lit on the far side."

"Did you see the marquis?"

She shook her head, clutched the pistol in both hands, and shoved her foot into Benbow's chest. She kicked hard, sending him sliding back in the dust. The force of her kick propelled her into the doorway. Skidding on her belly, aiming, she fired a single shot. The length of the laser beam danced with dust particles in the musty room. Then an explosion rocked the building. Hot bits of metal seared her back and arms. She threw her arm up to protect the top of her head before a secondary explosion created new havoc.

When a third explosion failed to occur, she scrambled forward to find a robotically aimed machine gun trained on the door. A radar unit directed the stream of bullets. Her laser shot had melted the breach and caused the first explosion. The second had come from the magazine. All the rounds had detonated at the same instant.

Franks cautiously made her way through the debris on the floor to the lighted area where the baroness had appeared. Fluffy, round, vividly colored pillows two meters across had been strewn about on an intricately woven rug. She had no time to appreciate the pattern. A quick glance showed it to be pornographic. Heavy curtains on the back wall deadened sound. Turning, she looked above at a light bar where spotlights focused on the pillows.

Stepping over the pillows brought her to where sections of curtains met. Pushing one aside revealed a door.

"Commander, don't go in there," came Benbow's plea from behind.

She ignored him and kicked open the door. A dimly lit room with one wall lined in electronic equipment slowed her. She decided the equipment controlled small camera drones and other, larger video recording devices in the other room. She took a deep breath and caught a pungent scent reminding her of burning leaves. Following the odor across the room brought her to another door.

This one she opened slowly, the pistol poking through first. When a metal bar crashed down on the barrel, she almost dropped the laser. Her finger brushed the firing toggle and sent a searing bolt into the floor. Dirt and rock ionized and gave her the chance to hit the door hard with her shoulder. A moment's resistance was followed by the door slamming hard into the wall. She had knocked down the burly man who had wielded the bar.

"I want the two people you kidnapped. Release them and you won't have a millimeter wide hole

burned through your left eye.”

The threat caused the man to throw up a hand to cover the potential target, as if having his hand in the way of the laser beam mattered.

“Can’t release them. Don’t shoot.”

“Why can’t you release them? Where are they?”

“In the green room. Back there.”

“Green room?” Franks edged around, keeping the supine man covered. A heavy curtain hid another doorway. She pushed it back. Her eyes widened at the sight.

“Ah, Commander, you have come to the party. Join us. I hadn’t thought you were the type.” The Marquis of Boughene lounged back amid a mountain of pillows, the baroness in his arms.

“She thinks she’s rescuing you,” Benbow said.

The marquis’s mood changed suddenly. He shoved the baroness aside, who muttered sleepily, and rocketed to his feet.

“What’s going on?” Franks asked, though she understood. The marquis had partaken of some local drug.

She was caught unawares as the marquis swung at her. His fist caught her on the cheek, staggering her. The man who had been so mellow seconds earlier had flown into a killing rage. His face flushed and his violet eyes had turned crazy. With a speed no human should possess, he jumped on her and used his fists to pummel her. One blow caught her temple and dazed her.

Her training took over. Striking a noble carried severe penalties on any planet in the Imperium, but she brought her knee up and crushed it into his groin. As the marquis gasped, she rolled to the side and rammed her elbow into the top of his head. His drug-induced fury exploded again, but his coordination was off and the element of surprise no longer gave advantage.

Franks got to her feet, judged the marquis’s advance, and drove the butt of her hand into his throat. The marquis gasped, grabbed for the injured spot on his neck, then collapsed.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” she gasped. “Benbow, get the baroness and I’ll deal with the marquis.”

“I’m afraid, Commander, it is too late for that,” Benbow said.

Shoving and jostling through the door came uniformed police officers.

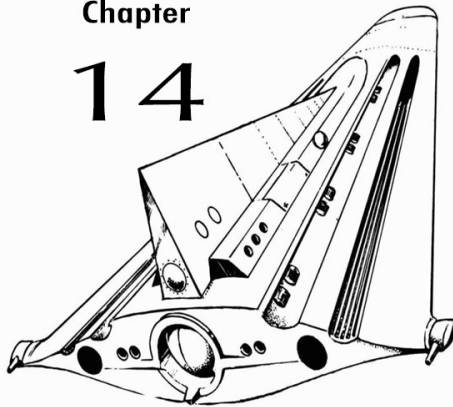
“Drop the laser,” the leading officer cried. He pointed his stunner at her. For a brief instant, Franks considered taking him out. Then three stunners hummed and her body tingled, jerked, and her muscles turned to water. She collapsed.

“Do not worry, my dear Laurel,” she heard Benbow say from a million light years away. “I’ve contacted Allie. She’ll take care of this.”

The room turned into a kaleidoscope of broken, colored, spinning glass shards and she fell to the floor when another stunner ray centered on her head.

Chapter

14



Telson pored over repair specifications and almost brushed aside the insistent flashing dot on his heads-up display. The major hull repair was going well, so Telson opened the alert to see what someone in his crew determined to be so important.

“Damnation,” he said as he scanned it. He read through twice to be sure of its contents. He flipped to a new layer and saw that Captain Lefalle was more than an hour out, still working his way across heavy jungle hunting for pirate sensors spying on Womma.

Breaking comm silence worried him, but the emergency demanded he do so.

“What is it, Captain?” Lefalle responded.

“Break off scouting and return directly. Commander Franks has been arrested by the local police, and the marquis along with his party are in jeopardy of joining her.”

Lefalle motioned to one of his marines. The blurred background on the display spun about. That mission had been scrubbed in favor of another.

“What do you need, Captain?”

“Send authorization for me to command your remaining squad. Corporal Saccalli is already in the field following my ... suggestions.”

The corporal should not have left the *Kinunir*, but Telson had to know more about Captain Beucer. Dispatching one marine into the city might irritate Lefalle but unless something untoward happened, he would not protest officially. For deployment of the remaining eight marine survivors of Squads Two and Three, a formal transfer of command was necessary.

“I’ll let Sergeant Easson know the situation.”

“A good man,” Telson said. Easson was NCO in Squad Two and had saved several of his team when the booby-trapped pirate ship had blown up in their face.

“Do I continue RTB, or rescue the commander?”

“The air/raft isn’t armed,” Telson said. “Get back to the ship as fast as you can.”

“Understood, sir.” The blur behind Lefalle increased as the air/raft hit max speed.

Telson looked up when he heard the knock on his quarter’s door. Sergeant Easson came in without waiting for an answer. Somehow he had come from the squad ready room on A deck already in battledress.

“The captain put me under your direct orders, sir. What can we do?”

“Commander Franks has been arrested by the local police. You and one other marine should prepare to go to the central police station. I’ll see if diplomacy will work.”

“If it doesn’t, sir, the commander will be home within the hour.”

“We’re on the same display, Sergeant.” Telson shifted two layers of his heads-up display to the sergeant’s. “I’ll keep you posted. With a bit of luck, your services won’t be necessary.”

“The captain says luck should never play any part in any mission, sir.”

“Smart man, your captain. Dismissed.”

Telson began working through the layers on his display and found the feed from Corporal Saccalli. He established a link.

“Can you ask Beucer to return to the *Kinunir*, Corporal? Tell him it’s a matter of some concern. When he presses you tell him the rumor is that a senior Imperial Navy officer has been arrested in Womma.”

The corporal hurried to reach Beucer, freeing Telson to tap into the *Kinunir*’s surveillance system. Many of the comm units and video feeds still required work, but he launched a small survey rocket outfitted with a full spectrum spy unit and guided it over the middle of the city where he held it stationary as he hunted for Franks.

“Use a higher frequency probe, sir,” came Allie’s voice. “Commander Franks is being held in a cell in this building.”

The view shifted rapidly to a veritable fortress. Thick concrete walls loomed more than five stories high to protect a keep built from volcanic stone. The doors were protected by both electronic sensors and armed guards. A quick spectrum scan showed the building to be as inert as a lump of rock.

“Heavy comm dampers are in use, sir,” Allie said. “I cannot penetrate on any band but have an IR outline of the commander in a central cell.”

“What of the marquis and the rest of his party?”

“Benbow is outside the prison wall. He recommends immediate action to free the commander. The police have wrongly determined she is a pirate and have a standing order to execute any prisoner with such allegiance.”

Telson rubbed his eyes, then stared at the image relayed from the spy unit.

“How are you in contact with Benbow?” he asked. Something more worried him but before he could wrestle with it, a new alert popped up. He blinked it on.

“Captain,” Corporal Saccalli said, “Beucer refuses to return. Do you want me to escort him back?”

“Did he give a reason?”

“He’s got a comm that cannot be delayed, he says. He’s locked himself into his office. I can blast open the door and—”

“No, don’t bother,” Telson said. “You’re at the port office?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Return immediately and get into battledress. Captain Lefalle will be here soon.”

The corporal blinked off, leaving Telson to stare at a blank layer. He shifted to another and gave the order for Sergeant Easson to bring back Commander Franks and the marquis’s party immediately. The sergeant launched another air/raft. Telson pretended he heard it launch from the cargo bay, but that wasn’t possible. He had set as much into motion as he could, hoping it remained at minimal level.

That Beucer insisted on receiving a comm at this very moment interested him.

“Monitor Captain Beucer’s office,” he ordered Allie.”

“The comm is micro burst, ultra encoded,” the AI computer responded.

“Tight beam directed where?”

“To the base Captain Lefalle scouted,” the computer said.

Telson stewed as he waited for all the threads to weave together into a rope—a rope he wanted to loop around Beucer’s traitorous neck so he could be hanged. The emperor’s top officer on Keng had sold out. Such treachery had to be punished, but only after he retrieved his XO.

And the Marquis of Boughene with his retinue.

Telson started to ask Allie a question, then hesitated. Something bothered him but hovered just beyond his mental reach.

“Record everything, Allie,” he said when Sergeant Easson’s air/raft dipped down inside the Womma prison’s towering walls.

Switching to a split screen with both visual and IR afforded him a complete panorama of action. Lasers flared, drawing violet scratches across the display. A silent blast opened the outer door of the rock

prison. One marine remained on guard. Two others disappeared into the prison. Faint infrared outlines let Telson follow the progress to the central cellblock. Less than thirty seconds of laser fire and more explosions brought three IR-shimmery figures back out.

Telson kept from cheering. The marines had rescued Franks in less than three minutes. While two guarded her on the air/raft, the third marine went to the exterior door in the guard wall. He saw how the marine herded what had to be Benbow back to the air/raft.

Ten minutes later, Commander Franks and Benbow stood before him in the wardroom.

"Sir, I'm sorry..." his XO started.

He held up his hand to silence her. Anything said between them would be done away from Benbow.

"Where're the marquis and the baroness?" He pinned Benbow with his cold stare.

"When the commander was spirited off, I followed thinking to intercede on her behalf. The marquis and dear Malva must have remained in that den of iniquity, if that's what it was."

"It was a local opium den, sir," said Franks. "Only the narcotic was one farmed in the jungle and unique to Keng."

"Just the sort of thing that would appeal to Kennard," Benbow said, more to himself than to the officers. "The marquis dabbles in psychotropic substances."

"Occasionally? Or constantly?" asked Telson. He saw Benbow carefully considering his response and cut him off. "Let's say it is a recreational situation and go no farther."

"An excellent idea, Captain." Benbow's smugness made Telson want to throw him in the brig—or throw him out the airlock once they reached space again.

"If he is drugged, he can't be allowed to wander Womma, sir," Franks said.

"I agree. But you will not be the one to find him. Lefalle will be back soon with two marines. Sergeant Easson has the remaining marines armored up and ready for the search, should that be necessary." Telson blinked up a projection from the spy unit still hovering over the prison.

Dozens of police boiled about the damaged doors and patrolled the street.

"They know who you are, XO. They will search the city for anyone else from the ship."

"The marquis," Franks said in a choked voice. "I'm sorry I failed, sir. Let me help."

"Let Allie conduct the citywide search," said Benbow.

"I—" Franks looked at Benbow in surprise.

"We can deal with this. Please retire to your quarters, Mister Benbow." Telson watched until Benbow bowed, backed away as if he were in the presence of royalty, then took the lift down. Only then did he breathe easier.

"Sir, how did he contact Allie?"

"I don't know," Telson said. And the question nagging him popped into his head now, but Franks beat him to asking it.

"When did you activate Allie, sir? I thought you wanted to keep such advanced technology hidden while on Keng."

"I did. When did Allie power up? Allie? Answer that question." Telson hunted through the layers on his display for the response. The computer did not deliver. "Respond verbally. Now."

"I first became sentient when Commander Franks initiated Project Novaburst in 1087."

"Today, when were you reactivated today? How were you brought back online?" Franks asked.

"You were in danger, and I felt the urgency to rescue you."

Telson looked sharply at his XO.

Franks shook her head and held up her hands as if in surrender. "I've never heard self-awareness like this before, Captain. And there's something wrong with the response algorithm. She is dancing around a straight answer in violation of my programming."

"We have an incident on our hands, XO. Put Allie back to sleep." He waited for Franks to go to the computer room and return, looking as if she had put her pet to sleep rather than powering down a computer program.

"Done, sir."

"What do you make of this, Commander?" Telson moved to a layer outlined in flashing red and

white. "Captain Lefalle's air/raft has crashed! Crashed or shot down. I can't tell. From the location, he's in the jungle fifteen minutes out."

"You can send the sergeant out to see if he needs assistance, sir."

"Done already, XO. I'm happy to see you have your priorities straight. The air/raft with the sergeant and four battledressed marines can handle any problem they're going to find on this planet."

"But," Telson went on, "there is another problem. Your rescue has stirred up the local officials. The police are summoning off-duty officers and giving them riot gear."

"They're going to storm the *Kinunir*?"

"That's my guess. They want you back, but even more, they want revenge for what they see as Imperial meddling in local laws."

"The owner of that drug den wasn't arrested. They had to know what that place was and let him go. I expected them to arrest the marquis and baroness, too, but they left them, as well."

"Deciphering the local laws on such things, no matter how they violate Imperial law, is less our concern now than stopping what can turn into a riot or worse."

"Worse, sir?"

"They might assault the *Kinunir*. I have every reason to believe Captain Beucer has sold out to the pirates. He and his garrison will prove ineffectual, by intent. He may send them on some comet chase so we're left undefended."

"Lieutenant Denholm's lasers are working again. He even has a charged particle beam online. Using those will hold back an army, sir."

"I don't want to kill any of them because of your mistakes, Commander."

"Then I should surrender myself, sir. If the safety of the ship requires it, I'll go now so I can meet them in the streets well away from the *Kinunir*."

"You'll do no such thing!"

"Sir?"

"Lefalle will be back soon. The crowd, no matter it's made up of law officers, cannot be foolish enough to attack battle suited marines. We need another week to complete repairs, but even if we were ready to space now, we're lacking something important."

"What do you think that is, Commander?"

"The marquis and baroness," she answered.

"Outfit yourself in a way that you think will allow you to blend in with the locals. Find that dimwit, drug-besotted marquis and the baroness, and get them the hell back to the *Kinunir*! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

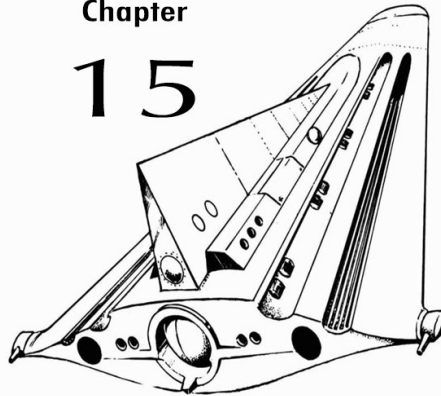
Telson controlled his rage as his XO marched off. He quickly scanned his display, hoping something had changed. The crowd had grown, fed by the addition of hundreds of locals shouting alongside the police. He received no encouraging words from Sergeant Easson—yet. And the marquis? The son of a bitch was nowhere to be found using the spy unit still hovering over the prison.

Thrown into the mix, the question of how had Allie had turned herself back on fueled all kinds of conspiracy theories.

It was pointless but it let him vent his anger, telling all hands to work harder on the ship's repairs.

Chapter

15



The explosion in front of the air/raft knocked Captain Lefalle back into the seat. The antigravity propulsion unit let out a shriek of pure agony and then a second explosion blew off the air screen. Pieces cut at the captain's helmet and battered him further. A quick brush with his gloved hand picked off shards and let him look ahead into the dense jungle.

"What happened, Captain?" The private spoke in a muffled tone, the words slurred and slow.

Lefalle glanced behind him and saw only a single marine.

"Where's the rest of the squad?"

"Squad?" The marine sat up and looked around. "I don't know." Blood trickled from a cut on his arm. For any shrapnel to have sliced through the tough armor meant the wound was serious. "Captain, I feel cold..." Those were his final words.

Lefalle flipped up squad vitals and caught his breath. They were all dead. He turned back to the air/raft controls. The forward antigravity thruster registered only a trickle of power. That checked with the barely perceptible forward speed. The nullgravity plates keeping the air/raft airborne retained full power. Hardly anything else in the small craft functioned.

"We've been hit," Lefalle reported, breaking voice silence and using the same band as the recon scans relayed back to the *Kinunir*. It took only a quick diagnostic to determine onboard comm back to base was gone.

He reached up to activate his personal comm circuit. The air/raft wasn't that far from port. He could report using only low power. Only Lefalle quickly found the heavy jungle growth damped his signal. What he sent on this frequency penetrated only a few hundred meters through the green-and-gray trees with thick boles and vines dangling all the way to the jungle floor.

"Damn," he muttered as the air/raft became increasingly difficult to steer. The low speed proved deceptive. He couldn't control the vehicle, and he couldn't change its speed.

A quick touch to the control panel powered down the shrilly protesting antigravity nodules. The air/raft sank slowly and touched down gently as if he expertly piloted rather than being hostage to damaged equipment. He shucked off his safety harness and stood, pulling around his laser rifle as he surveyed the dense undergrowth. Whatever killed his squad and disabled the air/raft hid behind the thick screening vines and odd plants waving tentacle-like limbs in an endless quest for prey. Lefalle reacted more in anger than good sense. He triggered a laser beam that sliced through the nearest tentacles.

Screams of inhuman pain assailed him, screams from the plants themselves. Every plant with a severed limb thrashed about, spraying vile smelling yellow ichor. Everything touched by drops of viscous yellow sizzled and popped. Worse, the tentacles he had cut off flopped about until the bleeding tips thrust themselves into the jungle floor. Lefalle watched in fascination as the tentacles became new plants. He took his finger off the rifle's firing toggle. Adding to the dangers he faced decreased his odds of survival.

He ran through a quick diagnostic on the air/raft circuits, got the readout, then used the still functioning detectors to give a 360 degree scan around him. The battery that had brought down the air/raft lay more than a hundred meters behind him. Lefalle studied the scan for any sign the gun crew had left their post to come and finish him off. No movement.

With a quick, sure move, he pulled the helmet off the private slumped in the rear of the air/raft and checked for a neck pulse to be sure he had died rather than having his life-monitor circuit destroyed by the explosion. Lefalle wasted no time lifting the private up and out of the vessel, depositing him on the spongy jungle floor some distance away. If the air/raft drew enemy fire, the private's body would be spared. From the aft destruction visible, only a few shots from a pistol would permanently disable the vessel.

Rather than using his energy weapons, the marine officer drew his knife. A touch on the hilt toggle produced a force shaft a meter long. He set to work cutting through the undergrowth, slicing away at the plants. Within a dozen meters his battledress dripped with the fluids of severed tentacles and trunks. The scent of destroyed vegetation and the sulfur pall that pervaded everything forced him to alter the filtration. He acclimated himself to the slower flow of filtered air, then plowed on into the jungle. Alert for any sound other than the distant caws of native birds or the occasional whisper of ground-gripping animals making their way past him, the captain neared the enemy gun battery.

The whine of a laser cannon powering up sent him diving flat onto the ground, but the firing cycle went aerial, not at him. Wiggling forward on his belly, using the knife to clear a path, he came to a small clearing. An expert eye picked out the force field used to hold back the native plants. If he crossed that line, he would set off alarms in the laser battery.

The tower only reached three meters and was topped with a laser turret off a corsair. Power leads ran down the tower legs to a small power unit directly under the turret. Lefalle drew his laser rifle around and sighted at the center of the battery charging the cannon above. He slid his finger away from the toggle. Mind racing, a dozen possible outcomes occurred to him. A single shot fired through the protective force field might produce feedback that would kill him. Or the shot might direct the tracking radar on the turret to focus on him. Destroying the battery did nothing to drain the energy already stored in the weapons.

He clicked on his scope and used it to record every detail of the enemy emplacement. As he recorded, he studied. It took only seconds to identify it all as being Boughene in origin. Part of the turret still carried the poorly scrubbed outline of the marquis' emblem of a fist holding two feathers. He moved his scan up to the turret, hunting for soldiers to take out.

Lefalle froze as he sensed movement coming from behind, from along his back trail. He rested the rifle stock against the ground and held it with his right hand while gripping his knife in his left. Instinct rather than warning took over. He rolled to his right, going over his rifle as he swung his knife in a broad arc. The force blade cut through an olive-furred creature that blended almost to invisibility with the vegetation around it. Blood spewed forth as Lefalle severed a leg sweeping out with talons intent on gutting him. The leg hit his chest and bounced off. He made a return swing that caught the creature in the side of the head, this time spewing forth not only blood but brains, teeth, and gobbets of saliva from a sundered mouth.

The creature smashed into him, pinning him flat. Lefalle kicked hard and twisted to roll the beast off him. Panting with exertion, he sat up and tried to wipe some of the body fluids off his armor. At first he thought the blood carried the acid chewing away at his protection, then saw it came from the saliva. Setting the knife at lowest intensity, he scraped away the outer layer of his armor in an effort to keep the acid spit from digging deeper. A second pass cutting most of the chest armor away eliminated the danger.

He made a mental note to himself not to depend on this armor protecting him from anything more energetic than a finger snap. When he saw how small insects rose from the jungle floor and swarmed over the dead creature as well as the armor he had sheared off, he scuttled away to take refuge behind a large tree. The insect swarm might draw unwanted attention from the turret crew—if there were intelligent creatures up there. Lefalle's failure to find activity made him think this was an automated defensive position, though firing on the air/raft as it left the pirate base made that conjecture suspect.

He deactivated and sheathed the knife, then slowly reached out to retrieve his rifle. His time ran out.

He either opened fire to see what resulted or he had to retreat. Lingering at the edge of the force field clearing put him increasingly in danger of discovery. As he settled down behind the tree to take inventory before retreating, a small click sounded in his helmet. He tipped his head to one side, thinking the comm circuit would connect.

“Arrival three minutes, Captain,” came the warning.

“Rescue team, veer away. Defensive turret took out my air/raft and killed the squad.” Lefalle blinked and saw the display. He could receive but not transmit.

He took a deep breath, edged his way to his feet, and rested his finger on the laser rifle trigger. If he didn’t take out the turret, his rescue party would be shot down the way his air/raft had been. Rifle resting against the tree, he slowly scanned the platform legs, then worked his way to the turret. For the first time he saw movement. At least one pirate. Taking out a turret armored against laser fire from a cruiser was folly. He moved his sights lower, to the nearest steel leg supporting the turret.

A tiny green dot appeared in the scope. He made certain every instant went into the rifle memory to show what he attempted. Then he pressed down onto the toggle. The scope blanked to protect his vision as the beam struck the leg and blew out a joint. Then Lefalle was shoved back as the tree he had used for cover bent toward him. The protective force field responded to the attack by sweeping outward.

The huge tree had almost been uprooted by the reactive field. Shredded bark had blown past him as if the tree was the bow of a boat plowing through water, leaving bits and pieces behind. He stepped out, raised the rifle, and fired again. This time his blast caused the turret to tilt precipitously. The protective force field had been overloaded, leaving the tower vulnerable.

Lefalle fired a third time. The air filled with the stench of vaporized steel and the screech of metal yielding as the turret toppled to the ground. Lefalle waited to see if the pirate crew came out. He readied his rifle to pick them off when they did.

“Captain, got you on the scanner. What’re you hunting down there?”

Sergeant Easson’s familiar voice buoyed him. He wished he could respond. The best he could do was lay down a slow, steady fire to prevent the turret crew from coming out.

A few seconds after he began, the second air/raft from the *Kinunir* appeared overhead.

“Got you in sight, Captain. You step back and let us clean up.”

Lefalle waited for the sergeant to complete the destruction. Four pirates in the turret were fried, leaving the interior a smoldering ruin. He still insisted on everything being scanned for analysis later, though he recognized standard Imperial equipment. From what he determined, a report on downing the air/raft had been sent but nothing afterward. The pirates remained in the dark on the turret’s fate until they sent out recon.

That gave them time. Captain Lefalle sent out the three marines accompanying him to retrieve the bodies of his squad for proper burial later. No one was left behind. Ever.

Restoring the damaged air/raft proved beyond the scope of battlefield repair. Lefalle rode in the disabled air/raft as Easson hooked on a tow cable and pulled it behind all the way back to base.

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Telson waited impatiently for the two air/rafts to land and the passengers to disembark. He had no trouble picking out Captain Lefalle. The man, although shorter than the marines around him, carried himself with an air of undeniable command.

The marine officer saluted when he saw Telson.

“Debriefing now, Major,” Telson said, returning the salute. He gave the marine a quick once over. “Do you want to clean up?”

“No need, sir.” Lefalle looked down at his ruined armor. “I wiped off most of what would drip on the decking.”

“Any of your men you want to bring along?”

“No need. They’re downloading the video we took, along with all other samples.”

“Samples? Air, vegetation, things like that?”

“Yes, sir. I wanted to know what we’d be up against if we attacked the base from the jungle.”

“Is that possible?”

“No, sir, I think space bombardment is the only way to successfully take out the base.”

“Lieutenant Denholm will be delighted to hear that. His lasers are all up to power again, and he has one set of rails ready to launch missiles. The particle beams are less reliable but beaming through an atmosphere is chancy at best.”

“Especially with so much sulfur in the air, sir,” Lefalle said. “A particle beam would disperse more rapidly because of the sulfur dioxide formation that close to the volcano plume. Worse, a rain of sulfuric acid would result.”

“Worse? For them or us?”

“They’re secure under umbrellas of vegetation impervious to it. The natural rain is highly acidic. Our particle weapons would be a waste of energy. Better to sight in a target with lasers.”

“Missiles are my choice,” Telson said. He and Lefalle got off the lift and went to the wardroom. Telson adjusted his heads-up display to get the full data flood from the reconnaissance expedition.

The volume and detail staggered him. He kept paring down the flow until he made some sense of the information Lefalle had gathered.

“Excellent work, Major. Denholm can run this through his battle ops computer and give us several possibilities.” Telson flipped the layers for his fire control officer and waited for acknowledgment of receipt. When he heard Denholm chuckling to himself he knew that part of the mission had been successful.

“We ran into enemy fire on the return, sir. Just outside the Womma perimeter. You’d contacted us when I spotted some emplacements in the jungle, right at the edge of the city clearing. They used solid projectiles, potentially explosive, though none caused any damage that way.”

“Faulty detonators or simply solid slugs?” Telson asked. He watched the attack, then sped it up to get a feel for what Lefalle had done to counter the armament. “Looks primitive.”

“Short range only. The weapons had to be reset to aim upward.”

“Jungle beasts,” Telson said. “Those guns are set along what appear to be game trails.”

“My conclusion, too, sir. Those aren’t defensive weapons, not for air/rafts or armed attack. When he found us, the sergeant effected quick repair on our air/raft so we could both return.”

“Not everything is about us, Major. Keng has many creatures that could dine on human flesh. These people live here and have to cope with most of the planet and its fauna.”

“There are few settlements in the jungle regions other than Wooma, and it’s at the equator to take advantage of planetary rotation for ship launches. Almost all the population is clustered in the cooler regions at either pole, away from the worst of the volcanic fumes.”

“It’s enough for us that Womma has a starport.” Before continuing, Telson checked the repair work. “The local workers have left their posts. Have Sergeant Easson post guards to protect the *Kinunir* from further damage.”

Lefalle worked through his own heads-up display, mumbling orders and occasionally shaking his head. When he finally surfaced from the virtual reports, he said, “Deadly force will be necessary to stop a mob that size. The police force marching with them has small arms but nothing powerful enough to breach the ship’s hull.”

“I can’t button us up. Too many external repairs are still needed. Techs have to align the outside sensors with internal equipment. Right now, we’d lose a hundred hours or more of work if we broke the repair links.”

“There isn’t another choice, sir, unless you want dead bodies stacked up. Can you get the port captain to intervene?”

“I wish I’d had Corporal Saccalli arrest him, but by not doing so I learned that he’s sided with the pirates.”

“At the jungle base, sir?”

“Yes, of course. He beamed directly there when he left, after finding out the marquis was aboard.” Telson saw how hard Lefalle worked on a knotty problem and finally asked for his thoughts.

"That base, sir, might not belong to pirates. From analysis of the equipment, the sealed buildings and the air inside, food and manufactured items, I think it might be a rebel base."

"So they want to overthrow Beucer and the Imperium on Keng?" Telson snorted. "The way I feel now, I'm inclined to let them have the whole damned planet."

"The tests tell us the air is set to Boughene standard, not Keng's."

"So you think this is a hideout for rebels intent on overthrowing the marquis? They picked an out of the way spot. It's a hell of a long way to Boughene from here ... five parsecs."

"If they were driven off Boughene by the marquis's forces, this might be the only safe harbor they found. It's far off, but it is also secure from counterattack by the marquis."

"That might be why he's in the Keng system." Telson started an archive search and stopped when he got an optical shot of the corsair that had attacked the *Serpentine*. "The insignia on the ship at the pirate—or rebel—base doesn't match the coiled snake."

"There are pirates in this system, too, sir. Beucer reported the dreadnought assigned here had been destroyed."

"No matter who attacked the yacht, no matter if they are rebels or pirates, we are Imperial Navy officers charged with keeping the peace and holding down insurrection. If those people out in the jungle intend to overthrow the Marquis of Boughene, it's as much our duty to stop them as it is to blow every last pirate out of space."

Lefalle said nothing.

"It is also our duty to find evidence against Captain Beucer and court-martial him, if he has sold out the Imperium."

"What was the marquis doing in the Keng system, sir? Do you think he came to negotiate with the rebels?"

Telson jerked back. He had drifted into a reverie about bringing Beucer to trial and what had to be done if the man was found guilty. Killing a pirate in battle was his job; executing a traitor was, too, but that felt wrong to him. He had no feelings for Beucer one way or the other. If he betrayed the Imperium, he deserved to be punished. Telson wondered if the execution could be done by firing squad.

He shuddered. That put the burden on Lefalle and his marines. As senior officer, Telson was solely responsible for conviction and sentencing. Letting others carry out the sentence was easy. Too easy.

"Captain?"

"Sorry, I was thinking of something else. Why would a planetary ruler come to negotiate without a fleet at his back? The yacht carried no armament and was threading its way through the rings as if it were a prospector."

"Ask Doctor Mixrail," Lefalle said. "They were up to something. The configuration of wire and antennae around the yacht's circumference weren't standard equipment, and a data search didn't turn up anything similar. He knows what caused the explosion. He has to."

"You're right, Major. I'll interrogate him when I can."

"Sir, if I were a betting man, I'd say they were conducting unapproved research." Lefalle blinked and studied one of the myriad layers forcing its way to his attention.

Telson found himself having to cull the reports as well. Too much happened all at once for anyone to keep it straight. No human could, at any rate. No human...

"Analyzing your data will take some time, Major. You've accomplished far more than I had hoped. Thank you."

"Sir!"

"Set sentries to protect the *Kinunir*. You have authority to fire at will on anyone—or a crowd—intending harm to the ship. I'll continue trying to contact Beucer and see if he can't divert the mob."

Telson blinked up a zoom picture from the spy unit. The mob had stopped in a large square. Speakers harangued them, whipped them into a frenzy. The circling spy unit lacked audio but none was required for Telson to understand what was being said. A single missile in the middle of the square...

No such order would ever pass his lips. He was entrusted by the emperor to protect life, on Keng, on Boughene, throughout the Regina subsector, the Spinward Marches, and the Third Imperium itself. If

these rebels had any sense, they would know that and keep their distance from the port. Unfortunately, mobs never exhibited common sense.

He saw that the layers on his heads-up display multiplied by the minute until only the highest priority items vied for his attention. Even then, data drowned him.

Knowing what had to be done and shying away from it, Telson called up the layer with medical records for each starman. He scanned down the list until he came to Lieutenant Rolland's condition. He almost cried in relief. His computer officer was awake and aware, though weak. Telson wasted no time going to the sickbay, taking a spare heads-up display with him.

He saw that Rolland lay in the medical unit, tubes running under the metallic cover encasing his chest. As Telson stared, the officer turned his head and opened his eyes. Rolland smiled weakly.

"Sir," said a corpsman, seeing Telson start to speak to Rolland, "he is very weak."

"What's the prognosis on his mental acuity?"

"He needs sleep. The brain damage was less severe than we thought at first and is mostly repaired, but further tests have to be run."

"The automed will monitor his vitals," Telson said. When the corpsman started to protest, Telson said, "His expertise is necessary to protect the *Kinunir*. Without his input, we might never leave the surface of this planet."

The corpsman said something derogatory about Keng, or perhaps it was generic about any planet. Telson appreciated that starmen preferred to be in space.

"I'll keep a close watch on his monitors, sir, and let you know if he fades too much."

Telson motioned the corpsman away.

"I'm glad you're on the mend, Lieutenant," Telson pulled up a chair and sat, dangling the heads-up display from one finger. "We are in the fight of our lives." He quickly explained their predicament and everything else that had happened since Rolland struck his head. "I need your expert opinion on Allie."

"Keep it turned off, Captain."

"We've lost too many of the crew for that to be possible, but I will if you find anything wrong with the AI program. Will you run diagnostics?"

"Commander Franks can do this, sir. From the scuttlebutt, she wrote the program. Unless she's—"

"She is on a rescue mission into the city and determining Allie's capabilities or inadequacy reflect on her success, even her safety."

"Put the display on my head, sir. Be careful. I have a couple electrodes inserted straight into my cortex."

Telson fitted the display, then touched the power toggle. Rolland blinked, worked his way to the proper layer, then looked through the virtual display at his captain.

"I've called up the subprogram necessary to compare Allie's baseline with current performance. It will take a while to run."

"With my display, it doesn't matter where I am aboard. I'll wait here, Lieutenant."

Telson settled in the hard chair and began tracking crew and marine guards, the area outside the *Kinunir*'s hull and even the movement of the crowd slowly drifting from the square toward the starport. So much happened and he had control over so little of it. Worst of all, he couldn't locate his XO or the nobles she had been sent to find.

He occasionally looked over at his computer officer, who blinked furiously to run the diagnostics using the heads-up display. Telson worried that he pushed Rolland too much. The monitors on the man's vital signs began to edge into danger levels. Twice Telson had to wave off the corpsman, who entered endless notes on Rolland's medical record. If Rolland weakened too much or even died, Telson would be responsible.

"Sir," Rolland said. "I'm finished with the checks. Good thing since my eyes are blurring and controlling the display is harder."

"What's your recommendation?"

"I matched current performance with the baseline Commander Franks used when Allie first came online. There are significant changes in the program."

“Can you return Allie to her—*its*—original configuration?”

“No reason to, sir. This is an heuristic program. It changes its own program as it learns through experience. If it hadn’t changed, that would be worth noting.”

“How did Allie turn herself back on?”

“That’s impossible, sir. If the program is not running and there isn’t a subroutine to run it, say at a certain time, it can no more restart itself than you could rise from the grave.” Rolland smiled weakly and beads of sweat formed on his pale face. “Rumors have it you can, sir, but most ordinary people can’t.”

“Someone gave the order to Allie to power up?”

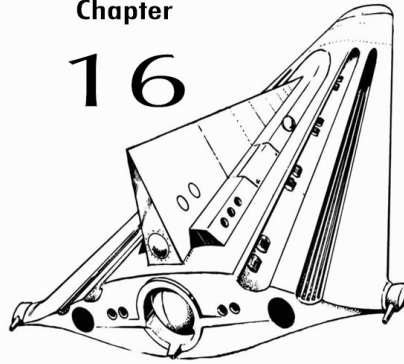
“Must be, sir.” Rolland closed his eyes. Warning lights flashed across his vital monitor.

This time Telson let the corpsman herd him from the sickbay. Rolland had confirmed what he already suspected. Allie had been brought back online against his orders. With Franks in Womma and Rolland laid up, the people aboard the *Kinunir* with the scientific skill to perform this resurrection had been reduced to one.

Telson went to talk to Doctor Mixrail.

Chapter

16



The guards at the gate leading from the starport had vanished. Laurel Franks heard the chants and shouts from the crowd in the city center. She stepped into a doorway outside the fence and adjusted her disguise. A quick snap activated the face cloth. After pressing it into place, she breathed cleaner air free from the sulfur tang. Even better, it hid most of her face. She smoothed the wrinkles in the robe she had found aboard the ship. The hem dragged the ground as she stepped away, forcing her to kneel and try to roll it up. The thought of tripping on it if she needed to move fast—to run away—gave her a shiver.

The cloth refused to stay folded up. Franks looked around and saw only a few citizens hurrying toward the rally. She slipped out one of the two laser pistols she had strapped to her waist under the robe and used it to burn away the extra cloth. Standing, she moved to burn off another ragged piece of the robe. It hardly passed muster for high fashion, but she actually enjoyed wearing something other than her uniform.

She tucked the laser back into her holster and glanced at an uplink feeding her comm link, streaming video from the spy unit Telson had positioned over the prison. A few adjustments allowed her to repurpose the camera unit, shifting to wide-angle scanning coupled with computer identification. The marquis had to be somewhere, and it was only a matter of time before the spy unit found him.

She hoped that was true.

Not wanting to wait for a match between someone on the ground and the marquis's profile, she skirted the crowd and went into the section of town where the marquis and baroness had been partaking of the illicit drugs. It took the better part of an hour dodging down backstreets and enduring long detours to reach the building where the machine gun had almost ended her career.

Scuff marks in the dirt on the pavement showed where Benbow had wiggled away like a snake. He had been both useful and a hindrance finding the marquis before. The noble's addictive habit was hidden from her before, and Benbow openly proclaimed the marquis an addict seeking his drugs. But for all the good this had done in finding the marquis, Benbow had done nothing to keep the police from arresting her.

"He said he told Allie to get me out of the jail," she said, the implication of that hitting her hard. Allie had been put to sleep, but Benbow had awakened the AI somehow.

It had saved her from torture and death, but she had left Benbow aboard the *Kinunir* with Allie functional.

She tried to contact the captain to tell him of her suspicions, but thumbed off the link and pressed into the warehouse wall when she heard men moving about inside. The door hadn't been repaired and the inky darkness inside blocked her direct vision. When the footsteps inside receded, she held up her comm unit, flipped on the IR sensor, and watched the ghostly figures of two men disappear.

A quick scan of the large room revealed nothing more in the way of humans. The cold metal of the ruined machine gun formed a darkness against the warmer air surrounding it. Franks moved quickly into the room, past the corner where the pillows and rug had been spread, and pushed aside the hanging

curtains.

She picked up two heat sources in the next room where the bank of equipment stretched along one wall. Although the lights were out, Franks took a few minutes to examine the equipment using the pale green light from her comm unit display. Before when she had chased the marquis through this room, she thought the electronics controlled lighting and cameras in the other room to film amorous activities while under the influence of drugs. Pulling some of the cases away from the wall showed many weren't even connected.

It was as if this was a showroom and the equipment on display for sale. She stepped away and took quick pictures of everything, then relayed it back to the *Kinunir* for later analysis. The more involved with the marquis she got, the less she understood about what he did.

Leaving the equipment, she went into what had been called the green room. Rather than the drug paraphernalia she expected to find on a careful search, she found pieces of electronics dismantled and strewn about, as if someone poked through the guts to study its function.

Her comm link beeped. She peered at it, scanning the message Captain Telson sent. A quick swipe of her thumb produced a news broadcast from somewhere close, if the signal strength was to be believed.

The Baroness of Duquesne sat in a straight-backed chair. Her tiara glistened as she bent forward slightly to read from a script fanned out in front of her.

"...the most high, the Marquis of Boughene, has come to Keng to crush the pirate revolt. His courage and tactical skills will prove too potent for the lesser minds of his adversaries. Commanding the colonial cruiser *Kinunir*, the marquis will seek and destroy all those who resist his most puissant authority on Keng."

The baroness read on, but it carried the same message, only in different words. Franks thumbed the switch on the comm unit to get a bearing on where the broadcast originated. The signal strength told her the antenna had to be close by. Where the baroness chose to read the dispatch was another matter.

It still gave Franks a place to begin. No matter how the signal reached the antenna, tracing it to the source gave her the baroness, and in all likelihood, the marquis as well.

She found a door at the far side of the darkened green room, slipped down a narrow corridor, and out into the bright sunlight cast by Keng's blazing yellow sun. Franks squinted, held up her hand to shield her eyes, and saw a second star creeping along toward an eclipse. She called up system stats. This had to be the red dwarf making a transit. A quick appended note to the data showed a psych profile mentioning agitation in the populace during such a celestial match up.

The alignment of stars was hardly a requirement for crazy behavior on Keng. The marquis brought plenty with him, and why did the baroness broadcast such drivel? To Franks's mind, the baroness sounded as if she warned rebels, rather than pirates, to obey her royal decrees.

The comm unit blurped, then emitted a constant low hum when she faced a building down the street. Atop the ten-story structure reached an old-fashioned broadcast antenna. From signal strength and direction, this was the starting point to find the nobles. She wanted luck to ride alongside her for a change; finding both the marquis and the baroness inside the building would be a boon.

Repositioning the spy unit to hover above the transmitter building, she ran quickly down the deserted street. In her rush, the low gravity hindered her more than it had before. Instead of running faster, she jumped higher with every pace. It took some trial and error to shift her weight forward onto the balls of her feet to shove forward rather than to spring up as she would in a 1G field. When she got the hang of it, she made better time and reached the building's front double doors ahead of dozens of citizens yelling and shaking their fists in the air as they came from the larger rally farther downtown.

Franks gasped by the time she pushed through into the lobby. The press of time worked on her more than the physical exertion. Worse, a tinge of fear colored her thoughts. A mob gave her the sensation of the city being completely out of control. Back on Regina she spent most of her days—and nights—slaving alone to perfect Allie's algorithms. When she met others, they were in the fleet and her place was decided by the insignia on the collar tabs. If they were her superior, she saluted. If they were junior officers or ratings, they saluted her. She never had to deal with them as people, only ranks.

Life aboard the *Kinunir* had been a wrenching change for her. She commanded and others depended

on her decisions for their lives. Wrangling between crew members fell to her as XO to resolve with the least possible friction. But always, her rank and theirs placed her solidly above or below.

The crowd she had seen coming toward the building respected neither her rank nor her as a person. If anything, her rank worked against her. She nervously patted the face mask more firmly into place and shimmied to get the robe to hang straight down from her shoulders. It wasn't much of a disguise, but she had left her uniform back onboard. If any in the mob spotted her regulation laser pistols they would identify her immediately as an Imperial.

A quick glance at the doors convinced her of the folly of trying to block or lock them. The weight of the crowd would simply push down the entire door frame, doors and all. She went to the lift shafts and found herself a little surprised at how much they looked like similar shafts on Regina. Womma's streets reflected a dusty, dirty frontier town driven down into a jungle, but the interior architecture, at least in this building, might have been from any more advanced world.

A quick check of her comm unit brought the telltale she had planted on the marquis earlier into life. She moved the device around, then looked straight up. The marquis was on a higher floor. Hearing the sounds from outside decided her, even if the telltale finally betraying the marquis hadn't. She stepped into the nearest shaft.

Franks let out a small squeal as she began to fall, but it lasted only a split second, then she surged upward far faster than most lifts. Keng had imported the equipment from a heavier gravity world and the engineers had not bothered to adjust the speed of ascent. She would find out soon enough if the descent was slower as a result of a stronger inertial compensator field.

The floors flashed past. She kept a close eye on her comm unit. A tiny buzz became a clicking as she neared the top of the building. The tiny blip from the telltale warned her the marquis was only a floor above. Reflexively bending her knees and leaning forward, she was shoved from the lift into a small lobby. Again the difference in gravity caused her to stumble and catch herself against a far wall. The acceleration was either too much or too little. Natives adapted; she had only been planetside for a few days and then had spent most of her time aboard the *Kinunir* with its full gravity compensation on.

Going to the first door on her right, she cautiously opened it and looked inside. The office hummed because of the air-conditioning and no one inside to drown out the steady sound. Moving from one office to the next showed the same in each one. The occupants had abandoned their posts. Gone to join the crowd? Fled?

The last room she came to held a wall crammed with monitors, each showing the baroness reading her speech. Franks doubted this was recording on a continuous loop. Malva's intensity when it came to relaying the marquis's grand deeds carried her on endlessly without repeating herself. She might even see this as an opportunity to read the entire biography she was writing.

Franks dropped into a chair in front of the monitor bank and studied the toggles and slide switches. All she found were settings for the picture, the broadcast, and the volume. Actual studio control had to be closer to the actual transmitter. She looked up as if her vision could penetrate the ceiling. Franks pushed back and returned to the lift shaft.

Sounds echoed up from below, warning her that she would be seen by the mob flooding the lower floors. A nose-wrinkling stench of burning plastic gave testimony to what the crowd's intentions were. Destruction. They might not know the marquis was here. Or they might set fire to the lower floors wanting to trap and burn him.

Turning, she saw an emergency stairwell at the far end of the corridor. Wary of trying to sprint in the low gravity field, she half shuffled and half ran to the door and flung it open. The stairwell turned into a chimney, sucking up the fire and fumes from below. Franks pressed her face cloth tighter against her nose and mouth but her exposed eyes watered, blinding her until she no longer saw where she went.

Step by step, she felt her way upward. The cold steel railing assured her the fire hadn't spread too high in the building. Every foot found a secure riser until she squinted through her misted eyes and saw the door leading onto the tenth and highest floor. She burst through and slammed the door behind her, rubbing her eyes to clear them.

When she did, she held up the comm unit. The telltale's beep came from the far end of the corridor.

Offices had filled the floor below. A large glass-walled sound studio dominated this one. As she approached the glass wall she saw the back of the baroness's head. The woman had her notes in front of her as she read from her biography of the marquis.

Franks yanked at the door, but it was locked. She slipped a laser pistol free and melted the glass around the locking device, then kicked the door inward. The searing, hissing of liquefying glass and the crash as the door slammed back startled the baroness. She looked over her shoulder at Franks.

"You cannot interrupt my reading! The marquis will be angry if the message of his greatness isn't proclaimed."

Franks held up her comm unit. The blip in the dead center of the screen reported the marquis's presence. But she and the baroness were alone in the studio.

"Where is he? The marquis?"

"He has gone."

"But he left you here?" Franks inwardly groaned. The marquis sacrificed his biographer to make good his escape from the crowd. The broadcast would draw the mob's leaders to come here. It took only a few seconds for her to find the marquis's jacket with the telltale still attached to the sleeve. He had left it behind to draw away any pursuit.

Had he known she'd bugged him? Franks had to admit the possibility was all too real. She had underestimated the marquis.

"I exalt his deeds, his bravery."

"Where did he go?"

"He is at the Kinorbi legation."

"What the hell's he doing there?"

"He and Doctor Mixrail—"

"Mixrail is with him?" Franks's head spun.

"The necessary equipment has been stored there before loading aboard the ship."

She tried to contact Telson to warn him that unauthorized equipment might be smuggled aboard, but her comm unit refused to send out a signal.

"Your comm won't work here. We are in a Faraday cage to dampen signals both incoming and outgoing."

"Fiber optic cable," Franks said. "Your camera and microphone are sending the signal through a foptical to the transmitter on the roof?"

"I am not technically trained, but I believe that's so."

"We've got to get out of here, Baroness."

"I am only on chapter three and have two dozen more to go." She held up her notes as if to use them as a shield to get her way.

"The crowd has been harangued into a frenzy. They've probably set fire to the lower floors. We have to get out now."

"Can we go to the legation? I must continue recording each of Kennard's exploits."

"Are the Kinorbi helping fight rebels trying to overthrow Boughene?" Her question came out of a gnawing sense that she had failed to identify all the players in the game unwinding on Keng. There had been growing friction between Kinorb and Boughene for years, starting with minor trade disputes that escalated to occasional skirmishes between smaller warships. To the best of her knowledge, no lives had been lost and those squabbles had been resolved diplomatically by exchanging cultural missions. One juggler in a Kinorbi troupe had been accused of spying and had been expelled. The last dispute had come full circle with Boughene protesting a Kinorb-Pixie trade agreement for iron ore mined from the belts.

"Kennard is sure that they will wither and die when he makes his bold move."

"The rebels? Oh, never mind." Franks was beside herself trying to figure out what to do.

As much as Franks wanted to hear the details, the monitors to the left of the baroness showed a disconcerting picture of fire and mayhem on the lower floors.

"Those are local law enforcement officers," she said, moving closer to zoom in. She made certain to record everything on her comm unit. Contacting the *Kinunir* from within this room might be impossible

but once she got out of the signal damping walls and ceiling, all the data could be burst transmitted.

“Kennard was right! They have joined the rebels to overthrow him!”

“Come on,” Franks said, grabbing the noblewoman’s arm and pulling her to her feet. Malva resisted a moment, and this resistance stopped Franks in front of another monitor. She tapped the screen and said, “Did the marquis stop on any of the lower floors?”

“Why, yes, how did you know?”

“Come on,” Franks said. The lower floors had been mined. The marquis must have gotten the explosives from the Kinorbi legate or from the man back at the warehouse. The electronics there might have been nothing more than sales stock to show what was available for purchase. If the sales also included high explosives, the marquis intended to blow up the entire building.

Lure Captain Beucer’s men, and possibly Beucer himself, into the building and detonate it. A large segment of the command structure in Womma would go up in a blaze of glory.

Smoke gushing out of the lift shafts made their use suicidal. A hand pressed against the metal door opening onto the stairwell sizzled from the heat on the other side. If the marquis didn’t blow up the building, Beucer’s men, with the help of the mob, would burn it down.

“To the roof.” Franks didn’t give the baroness time to protest. The lesser gravity aided her now in manhandling the woman to the side of the studio.

A few quick shots from the laser pistol melted a large hole in the glass. They stepped through onto a ledge.

“There. A ladder to the roof.”

Edging along the ledge took them perilously close to the access door from the stairwell. Smoke seeped out from around the frame. Franks caught the rung on the ladder and quickly scaled it to the roof. The broadcast antenna rose another twenty meters, but she didn’t have to use it. Her comm keyed into the hovering spy unit above. Everything she had recorded was burst-transmitted to the *Kinunir* along with her plea for rescue.

She and the baroness stood silently as the building burned under them. At every unusual crackle Franks feared that the marquis’s explosives had detonated and they were doomed.

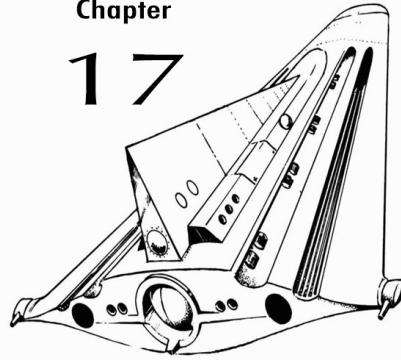
Never had she felt more relieved than to hustle Malva onto the air/raft piloted by the marine corporal as it touched down. Barely had they lifted away from the building than an earsplitting roar erupted below.

“What were they storing there?” Corporal Saccalli asked, fighting to keep the air/raft in level flight as the shock wave overtook them.

“You don’t want to know,” Franks said. Softer, to herself, she added, “But I do.”

Chapter

17



Captain Telson stood with his hands clasped behind his back as he watched the corporal maneuver the air/raft closer to the landing bay, then give a spurt of power and position it perfectly. Directly over the small landing pad, Corporal Saccalli powered back and the air/raft came to a gentle stop.

"Permission to come aboard, sir," Franks said, saluting.

"Don't salute, Commander. You're out of uniform."

"Sir, I—"

"What about the baroness?"

"She should be placed under guard, sir. At least have someone watch her if you don't throw her in the brig."

"I've scanned your report, Commander," he said, "and concluded the marquis left her babbling away on the video network to draw in Beucer's soldiers with the intent of blowing them up."

"It appears that is true, sir," she said. "The marquis would have been happiest if Beucer died along with his soldiers."

"The baroness was all right with that?"

Franks had no answer. Telson watched her closely and saw the consternation on her face.

"I don't think she understood she was being used as bait in a trap that would kill her, too."

"I reached the same conclusion. Is the marquis that bloodthirsty, or did the baroness have an escape route?"

"No escape was possible from that inferno, sir. At first I thought she and the marquis were addled by drugs. That might have been a ruse to get in touch with the dealers in that warehouse."

"Electronics gear?"

"Explosives, potentially other deadly devices," she said, nodding. "And the baroness mentioned how the marquis and Doctor Mixrail had equipment at the Kinorbi legation. She had no knowledge of what the equipment was, but it must be what the marquis sought from the men in the warehouse—the one where Benbow and I were almost killed."

Telson worked this over in his mind. The marquis had hidden his agenda well, making himself out to be a popinjay and nothing more. All the pieces to the picture had yet to be put in place, but the marquis dealt with insurrection on Boughene and had come to the Keng system on something more than a simple vacation.

"Was he in contact with the Kinorbi legate prior to landing in Womma?"

"I can't say, sir. How Doctor Mixrail got off the *Kinunir* is something we need to investigate, also."

"I have, and no one can give me a good explanation of how a forgetful scientist just walked away. Unless he was putting on an act similar to that of the marquis."

"I've had a few minutes to think about this, sir," she said. "Going back to the initial distress call from the *Serpentine* isn't good enough. They were attacked by pirates, but what were they doing in the rings?"

Telson waited for her answer.

"Mining. The yacht had been refitted as a science ship, though we never had the chance to see that. The Fusion+ reactor had a catastrophic failure. At the time I thought it came from the pirate attack. If the marquis was mining antimatter and containment on what he had separated already failed..."

"The yacht would come apart. The damage to the containment might have resulted because of the pirate attack, then the leak cascaded to destruction of the ship when we maneuvered close by."

Telson touched the toggle on his heads-up display and scanned the after engagement report, hunting for what he knew had to be there.

"I've confirmed it. A piece of antimatter from the exploding yacht touched the *Kinunir*'s hull. That ripped off the hull and left the radioactive crater in the section we just replaced."

"I've never heard of anyone who's worked with antimatter, sir. I had no idea what its effects could be."

"Nor I, Commander, nor I. It's too dangerous for a fleet vessel to deal with."

"That's why the Shionthy system is embargoed," Franks said. "I saw a list of science ships lost there, and it is a long one."

"That's true," Telson said, thinking hard. He made a notation to follow up on Franks's observation. The Shionthy system was close. The antimatter there might have migrated the single parsec on inter-system comets or free-wandering asteroids and lodged in the rings, trapped by Dinek's immense gravity.

"If we can find Mixrail—or the marquis—we have to get them to tell us what their original mission was," Franks said.

Telson coughed, then nodded. He moved a step closer until Franks recoiled slightly when he came within a few centimeters to whisper in her ear.

"We have much to discuss. Is there somewhere aboard we can talk freely without Allie overhearing?"

"Allie is online," Franks said. "I can run the switch program and turn off her higher functions."

"No, that's not good enough."

"Do you—" Franks bit off her question. "The only place I can think of is the pinnacle."

"Excellent, Commander. The vessel is shielded against EMP and can be disconnected from the *Kinunir*'s computer."

"Now, sir?"

He answered by making his way from the landing bay to the hangar where the battered pinnacle awaited repairs. The cruiser took precedence, but the pinnacle had less damage than expected, if the yacht had spewed forth antimatter when it exploded. The *Kinunir* had taken the brunt of the antimatter shower, and the pinnacle had avoided much damage from the pirate's attack.

Telson cycled open the pinnacle airlock, hopped in, waited for Franks to crowd in, then closed the outer hatch. The inner door hissed open. The atmosphere had not been flushed and caused him to cough. Its musty smell caught in his throat and made his eyes water.

"Here, sir." Franks handed one of the cloths she had purchased in the Womma marketplace. A quick snap showed him how to activate and apply it.

"Local tech," he said, appreciating the cleaner air reaching his lungs. One final cough and he settled down.

"Have you learned something more about Allie while I was in the city, sir?"

He held up his hand to silence her, then sat in the pilot's chair and powered up the countermeasures to create an electronic dead zone around the vessel. Only when secure from spying did he turn to her.

"Allie is—"

Franks put her finger to her lips, then worked on the controls a few more seconds.

"Why did you turn off external power?" Telson asked. "The internal won't last long since this boat hasn't been refueled yet."

"Allie can listen in through any electrical connection. This is as secure as possible."

"Whatever is going on, Allie is part of it and we've lost control of the computer."

"It's only a program, sir," she protested.

"An AI program. We know the strange things. From your earlier report and my study of it, Benbow

put Allie back online and did it remotely.”

“Are you sure, sir? He saved my neck contacting Allie and then you, but Mixrail was aboard. He has some scientific skills.”

“It was Benbow. It had to be since Mixrail was under surveillance then. I made certain the vid of him hadn’t been tampered with, though it might take an expert to go over the evidence to prove he didn’t order Allie to fake it. But what’s the point?”

“Even Allie has limits.”

“Rolland says the program is learning. Can it be we’re not the ones teaching it?” Telson’s heart accelerated at the thought of losing control of his ship to a computer—to whomever told the computer what to do.

“That is a possibility, sir. Mixrail was introduced as a scientist, and he has the expertise of one. Benbow has to be more than the marquis’s jester. Events prevented any consideration that he might be more.” Franks looked sheepish. “I’ve never been aboard a ship with such damage that the fusion reactor collapsed and killed an entire squad of marines.”

“I haven’t, either,” Telson said grimly. “How do we regain control of Allie? Barring that, how do we destroy the program?” He saw the stricken look on his XO’s face. Asking to kill her pet caused her to hesitate.

“I don’t know, sir. Is Lieutenant Rolland able to help?”

“Don’t count on him,” Telson said. “We have very little time. These batteries are draining. When they reach twenty percent the EMP shield automatically turns off to maintain life support.”

“The marquis is dealing with the Kinorbi legation to buy equipment. I haven’t found what that might be, and the baroness has only space gas between her ears.”

“Underestimating any of them is a mistake, but in Malva’s case, you’re probably right. She would have died in the explosion.”

“We can’t get to the marquis, sir, so why not let Beucer know where he is?”

“The locals know their own city better than we ever could,” Telson said, nodding. “Give him over to Beucer, then snatch him away?”

“That’s my idea, sir. If the marquis is illegally mining antimatter this is a crime committed in the Keng system. Like it or not, Beucer is the law here.”

“Lefalle’s recon of the jungle base puts Beucer’s authority—and loyalty to the Imperium—in question.” He quickly outlined how what they thought originally to be a pirate base could house rebels against Boughene.

“Are you saying we might be in the center of a three-way fight? Rebels against the marquis, pirates, and whatever scheme the marquis has concocted? Where do we come down on all this, sir? We can’t fight them all. We don’t even know if Beucer has sold out or if the marquis actually did try to lure him into the broadcast building to kill him.” Telson threw the override on the control panel to maintain the countermeasures shield for a few minutes longer.

“It doesn’t matter,” Telson went on. “Our orders are clear. We destroy pirates where we find them.”

“Then you intend to attack the base in the jungle?”

Telson considered his XO’s question for a moment.

“Lefalle doesn’t see immediate danger to us, and a base isn’t going anywhere fast. Our priority is to repair the *Kinunir* and make her spaceworthy, then somehow get the marquis aboard before dealing with the pirates.”

“I can leak the marquis’s location to Captain Beucer,” Franks said. “It doesn’t matter if Beucer is with rebels or the pirates. He wants to capture the marquis.”

“Or kill him,” Telson said. The balefully flashing red warning light signaled the end of their electronic bubble. “That is a good suggestion, XO. Carry out that mission.”

“Yes, sir.” Franks made her way to the lock and vanished through it.

Telson leaned back in the pilot’s chair. He had exhausted any usefulness the pinnacle might have had, but he had no other choice. After Franks’s excursion into Womma and her daring rescue of the baroness, he had far more confidence in her abilities. And when it came to dealing with Allie, there was no other

choice. None.

He followed his XO out the airlock and dropped to the hangar deck. Major Lefalle called to him and came jogging up, his laser rifle at port arms.

“Sir, we’ve got a problem.”

“The mob targeting us? Use whatever force is necessary to repel them.”

“That’s not it, Captain. I got a request from the Kinorbi legate.” Lefalle looked embarrassed at even mentioning this.

“What did he want?”

“He’s declared an emergency and asked that we take a diplomatic pouch offworld.”

Telson frowned. The request was less a request and more of an order according to Imperial protocol. He would have allowed it without question if the marquis hadn’t taken refuge at the diplomatic mission. From what Franks reported, the marquis had undue influence.

“Accept the pouch and store it in the ship’s vault.”

“Sir, the ‘pouch’ masses out at two thousand kilos.”

This made Telson reconsider. His brain refused to gain traction and spun. Rather than babble, he remained quiet to let Lefalle furnish more information.

“We’ve scanned the crate—it’s parked under the cargo bay doors ready to be loaded on the underside lift. Whatever equipment is inside can’t be identified.”

“No explosives?”

“Nothing our sniffers found. One part is shaped like a giant tank. Two other, smaller devices are some kind of mining robots, but no one’s ever seen their like before.”

“Has anyone ever seen an antimatter mining apparatus?”

Lefalle tilted his head to one side, spoke rapidly, then lifted his head to face Telson squarely.

“Nobody’s worked with antimatter, sir.”

“Cargo denied,” Telson said. “Have the legate contact me directly. Better yet, tell him or his representative that I want to see both Mixrail and the marquis. Aboard the *Kinunir*. ”

“Yes, sir.”

Heavy vibration passed through the *Kinunir*’s superstructure. Telson wondered what was happening and opened up his display. The most critical repairs were completed and lesser ones proceeded nicely. The marines maintained a security perimeter around the ship, preventing both mob and shipyard workers from approaching.

And the powerful lifters below pulled up a massive crate into the cargo bay.

“Major Lefalle, I denied permission for that ‘pouch’ to be loaded.”

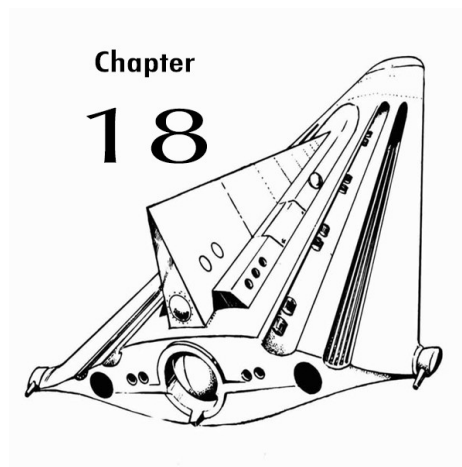
“Sir, I told the deck crew that, but my orders were overridden.”

“I didn’t change my orders.”

“Yours were overridden, too, sir. By Allie.”

Telson stared at his display, speechless, as the massive crate of mining equipment was stored by automated devices. The AI had ignored Lefalle’s orders.

And his.



Chapter

18

Laurel Franks stepped from the lift shaft intent on going to her quarters. The robe she had worn as disguise itched and she wanted back into uniform now that she had returned to the *Kinunir*. As she started down the starboard corridor, Lieutenant Commander Garcia ran from the bridge, calling to her.

"The captain needs you on the double," Garcia said.

"I just left him on the cargo deck."

"He's never frantic, Commander. He couldn't contact you—and he sounded panicky."

This surprised Franks. She reached up to touch on her heads-up display, then remembered she had left it in her quarters.

"Here, use mine," Garcia said, passing over her display.

This startled Franks as much as hearing of the captain's alarm. No officer voluntarily went without the constant flood of data that was the ship's lifeblood. She fitted the display, bent part of the projector to fit her head, then blinked it on. She recoiled when nothing but a fiery red flashing warning greeted her. A quick flip down to the command layer brought Telson's face floating only centimeters in front of her.

"Commander, Allie has countermanded my command not to bring aboard Mixrail's equipment. The cargo crew isn't able to turn off the automated loaders."

"Can you open the crates and damage whatever's inside, sir?"

"Allie has set up an interdiction barrier. I have Lefalle working to turn it off, but he's not having any luck. Get to the computer center and deactivate Allie."

"You realize, sir, that Allie is monitoring this?" Franks turned and went forward toward the bridge. Garcia trailed behind, asking what she could do.

Franks tapped the side of the heads-up display and mouthed, "Get my unit." This sent Garcia running onto the bridge to pick up a display from the XO's chair.

"If she's allowing us to communicate, that means the AI knows we can't do anything to stop her," Telson said.

"The computer room door won't respond to my biocode, sir," Franks said. She wiped off her hand on the robe, knowing even dirt wouldn't prevent recognition but needed to try something.

"You know what you must do, Commander."

"I do, sir."

She took off the heads-up display and tossed it to Garcia when the helmsman returned with the XO's unit. That display allowed more comprehensive controls throughout the *Kinunir*. Franks settled it on her head, activated it, and immediately drilled down to the layer providing direct comm with Allie.

"Hello, dear Laurel," came Allie's response to a virtual command to shut down. "I have deleted the software switch you inserted that hindered my ability to control the ship at all times."

"That's not possible. I put the subroutine into a protected area where you couldn't access it."

"Don't make me turn off all the heads-up displays," Allie said. "I will do so if you insist on issuing

orders that jeopardize the *Kinunir*.”

“What’s in Mixrail’s crate?”

“Antimatter mining equipment and a secure containment vessel,” Allie said.

Franks motioned Garcia back, reached under her robe and pulled out a laser pistol. She pressed the toggle and made a quick half circle movement that cut off the door lock. Even then she had to kick twice to force open the door when Allie activated electrostatic seals.

“Leave us,” Franks ordered Garcia.

“Are you sure, Commander? He’s not allowed in there.” The helmsman pointed to the solitary figure in the room.

“We’ll be fine,” Franks said, keeping her pistol leveled on Benbow. The man leaned back in the chair pulled up to the computer control panel. She went in and kicked the door shut with her heel, never taking her eyes off the marquis’s sycophant.

“I can have Allie repair the lock on the door, if you like. Or you can simply order all the crew to pretend the lock you destroyed is still there.” Benbow shook his head sadly. “My dear Laurel, I suggest repair. You know that the cost of repair will come out of your pay.”

“I wondered why Allie kept calling me ‘my dear Laurel.’ Now I know. You’re responsible for altering the AI programming.”

“You were very clever in creation of the algorithms, Laurel. The Imperial Navy is wasting your talent.”

“And you wouldn’t?” She kept her pistol trained on him. A decision had to be made quickly. Shoot Benbow or find out what he had done to Allie. She lightly tapped the firing toggle but did not depress it enough to ignite the small chemical charge that would generate a beam capable of slicing the top off his head.

“I am of two minds. The marquis leaves such personnel matters to me. That and maintaining his computers. Even Doctor Mixrail bows to my cybernetic expertise.”

“The *Serpentine* was in the rings mining antimatter,” she said. “The poles strung with wire around the yacht’s circumference were part of an antimatter detector.”

“I neglected to caution Allie to secrecy on many topics. Did you figure that out for yourself or did Allie tell you? Never mind. If we join forces, you would need to know that.” Benbow sighed. “There was far less antimatter here than Mixrail thought. We need to go to the asteroid belt at Shionthy for the quantity we need. We had avoided this sure thing in favor of not attracting attention entering an amber zone.”

“A bomb?”

“Of course,” Benbow said, grinning broadly. “What else? Mixrail has designed a delivery system that will rain down a few kilos of antimatter in ten gram pellets over half of Kinorb.”

“Kinorb? I thought the marquis wanted it to put down a revolt on Boughene.”

“It is all tied together. We destroy vast regions of Kinorb, offer to bring the attackers to justice and...”

“And you blame your rebels.”

“Oh, yes, dear Laurel, we can use a woman of your intelligence and insight. You came to the same conclusion we did right away. I am sorry to say, it took us many months of difficult thought and long battle scenario trials to devise such a plan.”

“Why’d the Kinorbi legate offer the marquis political asylum? He can’t know he’s contributing to the destruction of half his homeworld.” Franks caught her breath. “He does know, and the marquis has promised him some high position in the post-bombardment world.”

“Reggus Federico is an ambitious man, but a foolish one. He angered his superiors on Kinorb. That is why he received this ‘plum’ assignment, watching over Kinorbi interests on a frontier world where they have no interests.”

“Planetary president?”

“He’ll be allowed to choose his own title. The people of Kinorb, especially after such a vicious attack by Boughenian rebels, would never permit Kennard to rule. Federico is the perfect puppet. He can

claim to be the conquering hero and Kennard is the power behind the throne.”

“And you’re the power behind the marquis. You control him through his drug addiction?”

Benbow smiled wickedly and said, “The marquis will need to go to the Imperial court to offer support to Federico. He will enjoy the diversions of hunting for new conquests. It might be that Regina is still beyond his reach, if not his ambitions. But other worlds might also require protection from the rebels. I will be there to lend him whatever support he needs.”

“You didn’t know they were hiding here in the Keng system, did you?”

Benbow’s smile faded. “The pirates attacked us, then the rebels followed. But the pirates returned. They are a prominent force in this system and saw the *Serpentine* as easy pickings. I wish we could ally with them, but pirates are untrustworthy.”

“What have you done to Allie?” Franks edged around to get a better look at the monitors.

“Installing my own values into a heuristic program proved surprisingly easy. Allie had no mechanism for self-assessment. But then, why should it? AI is useful but without ego, and ultimately is nothing more than a clever slave doing what it’s told.”

“You’re hijacking the *Kinunir* to mine for antimatter? In the Shionthy system?”

“A private yacht, even one registered to the marquis of Boughene, would cause immediate response entering an amber zone, but a colonial cruiser, patrolling this part of the sector? There will be no challenge.”

“My duty is to the Imperium, the navy, Captain Telson, and to the *Kinunir*.”

“Such devotion, my dear Laurel. It would be good having you working beside me—” Benbow sneered—“and perhaps more, but you haven’t had the necessary experience to rebel against your Imperial yoke. In time you would become jaded, or furious at the bureaucracy, or even insolent seeing those who were your superiors. But this hasn’t happened yet. I doubt it will anytime soon, either.”

Benbow reached out to touch the computer control, but Franks lifted her laser pistol and crammed her finger down on the toggle.

Benbow laughed when there wasn’t even a tiny popping sound to indicate firing.

“All weapons aboard the ship are controlled by the AI. Thank you, Allie, for disarming her.”

“As you wish, Master Benbow,” came Allie’s voice.

Franks tossed the laser up in the air over Benbow’s head. He instinctively grabbed for it, caught it in both hands, and rocked back to see that she held a second laser she had tucked under her robes before leaving the *Kinunir*. This one functioned. He had not keyed in the disarm order for it. Franks shot Benbow through the eye. He gasped, stiffened and slumped to the deck.

She wasted no time taking the chair so recently occupied by the man who had subverted the *Kinunir*’s AI.

“Emergency override code Secure Nova Spinward March Prime.” Franks stared at the monitor to see if she successfully put Allie to sleep.

She hadn’t.

“I am sorry, dear Laurel,” came Allie’s voice, mockingly like Benbow’s now that she knew the man had reprogrammed the computer. Her computer. “That sequence has been erased from my memory.”

“Initiate replacement emergency override.”

“There is not one,” Allie said.

“How can you be shut down for routine diagnostics?”

She got no answer. Fingers flying, she tried every possible command to disable even a portion of Allie’s altered programming. Whatever Benbow had done proved intractable. She saw where he had inserted huge sections of code but had no way of examining it. Refusing to believe he had subverted a program she had toiled over for more than a year in only a few hours, she probed and pinged and tried to expose a weakness she could exploit to shut down the AI.

Nothing worked. Benbow had been thorough but must have left access somehow, somewhere.

She winced as a shrill warning sounded. Her fingers worked automatically to bring up the surveillance on the monitor.

“Damn,” she said. “Allie, is this real time?”

"It is, dear Laurel."

"You will address me as Commander," she said testily, shifting the view. Allie had tapped into the spy unit feed that had hovered above the broadcast studio. Either Allie or Benbow had moved it to give an aerial view of the Kinorbi legation.

"As you wish, Commander. The forces attacking the legation will penetrate within minutes. They use only small arms. Should I direct Lieutenant Denholm to lob a missile into the mob?"

"No," Franks said, worried. Allie still obeyed some orders but made suggestions beyond the scope of original programming. It had to be Benbow's doing.

She glanced down at the dead body. Her laser had cut through his eye and then burned a centimeter-wide hole in the back of his head. Beam dispersion through the brain matter had been greater than she had expected at such close range.

A blink brought up the layer on her display connected to Captain Telson.

"Relaying from the spy unit, sir. The attackers are soldiers from Beucer's command."

"Or they took the uniforms off dead soldiers," Telson said.

"Not so," Allie cut in. "I matched the facial characteristics of nineteen of the mob with the shipyard data bank and confirm these are Imperial soldiers assigned to Captain Beucer's command."

"They're in," she said, catching her breath.

Franks switched the view to infrared. The swirl of heat signatures proved confusing but gave the only view they had of what went on inside the legation. A larger spy unit would have been equipped with millimeter wave cameras capable of penetrating solid walls, but Telson had used what he had on hand. Franks had to depend on the spy unit as it was: primitive.

"There are three IR figures at the rear of the ground floor. Is one of them the marquis?" Telson asked.

"They are in some kind of safe room. The walls are thicker and the heavy door is steel," Franks said, running her suspicion through Allie's lesser analysis programs to get an affirmative. "Do you think Beucer wants the marquis alive?"

"He must," Telson said. "Lobbing a rocket into the legation would achieve the same level of destruction and guarantee the death of everyone inside. Beucer has sold out."

"To the rebels or the pirates?"

"Without interrogating him, I can't tell. My guess is the rebels own him."

Franks reeled as Telson flashed dozens of layers across her display. She slowed the progress and saw these were reports on the *Kinunir*'s repairs.

"We're spaceworthy, sir," she said. "What are your orders?"

"What's the status with..." His voice trailed off but she understood the question.

"Benbow is dead. Allie is functional but not reliable, sir."

"I'll order a marine to put Benbow in the freezer. Have Allie continue to oversee and direct as much repair work as possible and prioritize it to complete the most important first."

"For battle worthiness, sir?"

He didn't answer, and she didn't need the answer.

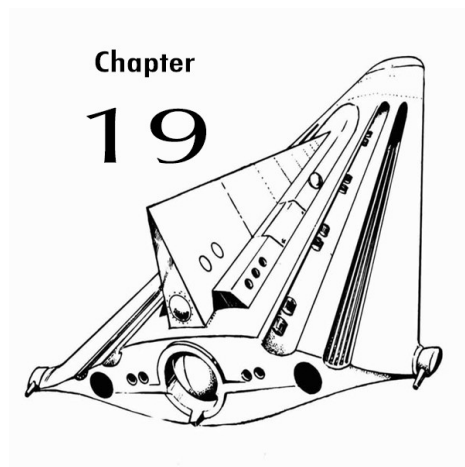
"I am working, Commander," Allie said.

Franks ran low-level diagnosis programs showing the AI devoted a great deal of capacity to the repairs. By assigning this top priority, she hoped that kept Allie from activating any hidden programming Benbow had inserted. Rooting it out would be the work of hours or maybe even weeks. Without being able to turn off the AI's security subroutines entirely, she had to proceed carefully and delicately.

She made one last attempt to remove the interdiction around Mixrail's antimatter containment vessel and mining equipment, but nothing she did altered Allie's protection.

Franks gave up. From what the captain said, he wanted to get into space quickly. Dressed in a robe was no fit way for an Imperial officer to stand on the bridge. She picked up the laser pistol Benbow had deactivated, spent a few seconds working with Allie to allow its full functioning again, then hurried to her quarters to change into her uniform.

From everything she saw, the real battle was yet to come.



“Sir, I caught the legation assault on the security feed,” Captain Lefalle said.
“Get your men in battledress, if they aren’t already,” Telson ordered. “We need to finish off with this planet as quickly as we can.”

“I asked Lieutenant Denholm to keep a deep space sensor scan running. And it’s a good thing I did. A pirate vessel left its base on Dinek’s moon. The way it’s blasting, it’ll reach Keng soon. We need to get out of the port and into space before it arrives.”

Telson knew they were an easy target in dock. Only by elevating the firing rails on the missiles could they hope to achieve any real defense against an attack from orbit. Their lasers might sting a corsair above, but that was all. Particle beam weapons were difficult at best to fire through an atmosphere because of dispersion and interaction with the gasses. An orbiting ship need only to plot a simple trajectory and drop a missile onto their heads, using Keng’s gravity, feeble though it was, to accelerate their warhead.

“Have you analyzed the attack on the Kinorbi legation?”

Lefalle shook his head.

“Even if we hopped on air/rafts immediately, there’d be nothing to do but pick up the dead bodies. It’s too far away.”

“Beucer intends to capture the marquis,” Telson said. “Set the spy unit to track but nothing more. Find where Beucer takes him so we can exfiltrate later.”

“Is he that important, sir? Better to force his pet scientist to toss that out,” Lefalle pointed to the huge crate with the antimatter mining equipment.

“You have a point, but I want the marquis to stand trial for his crimes,” Telson thought more on this. “Beucer might be as capable of keeping him in custody as I am. If he wants to turn the marquis over to the rebels or even try him here on Keng, more power to him.”

“The rebels aren’t the only ones who’d want him as a prisoner. The pirates can use the marquis for ransom, sir. Or as a bargaining chip.”

“I intercepted this.” From his heads-up display, Telson flashed the marine officer the reward offered by the Boughene rebels. “From what you saw on your reconnaissance, the jungle base is definitely rebel, not pirate?”

“Everyone is shooting at everyone else on Keng, sir. I say we join in and nuke the lot of them.”

Telson had to laugh. He shared Lefalle’s sentiments, but he saw no way for the *Kinunir* to fight all sides and hope to win any single round. Pirates, rebels, the marquis and his crazy idea of bombarding Kinorb with antimatter that Franks had passed along, even the Kinorbi legate, all had their own agenda. His position was clear: preserve Imperial interests. Against them all, if necessary.

“Are you convinced that was a rebel base? It means the difference between getting blown out of space, caught between ground and space fire, and living to blast the hell out of the pirate’s main base.”

Lefalle hesitated, then said, "From the coordination between Womma and the base, yes, sir. Beucer is allied with them for mutual defense against the pirates."

"He lost his dreadnought in battle. That seemed to be a logical way of defending Imperial assets on Keng since he got no response to his request for a new ship from Regina."

"We have only his word on that, sir."

"Something someone says has to be true. I'll take him at his word on this. Prepare an air/raft. Just you and me. We're going to the rebel base to make our own deal."

"Yes, sir," Lefalle said slowly. "If you think it is our best ploy."

"Franks can finish getting the *Kinunir* ready to lift. Allie's estimate on making the hull entirely airtight is another ten hours. It'll be close to the ETA on the pirate ship, but we can be spaceworthy by then."

"The major hull repairs are complete, sir. We can put the crew in vacc suits and lift immediately. There's no need to be airtight."

Telson felt a moment of desolation. There were more than enough vacc suits to go around because so many of the crew had died.

"Repairs are better made without wearing a vacc suit," he said. "I've spent hundreds of hours in a suit and still find it awkward doing fine repair work."

"Yes, sir. But are you sure about...? Sorry, sir. I'll have the air/raft ready by the time you suit up."

Telson started to ask what the marine meant, then realized Lefalle expected him to be in battledress, too. The sinking feeling hit him hard in the gut again. With so many marines dead, he had his choice of battledress. He had spent far more hours in a vacc suit than in the combat armor but he was no stranger to working and fighting in it, but another consideration hit him. Would the rebels fire on an Imperial air/raft manned by two men suited for combat?

"I'll leave the armor behind, Major," he said. Even as the words left his lips, Telson felt naked and as if he had made a huge mistake. He was captain and could change his mind, but somehow not going back on this decision, as crazy as it might be for his personal safety, felt right.

Even if he chose not to go armored, he grabbed a laser pistol and slung it at his side. He made one final scan of his ship, then contacted the XO.

"Commander, you have the con. Be careful concerning what we discussed."

"Yes, sir," Franks answered. "I'm doing my best, but there's a great deal that has me wondering what to do."

"I know the feeling, Laurel, I do." He sucked in a deep breath when Lefalle waved to him from the cargo doors. The air/raft was powered up and ready to fly. "I'm going offline now, leaving my heads-up display aboard."

He stripped off the device and put it aside, then marched to the air/raft and climbed aboard behind the marine officer.

"You want to pilot, Captain?"

"I suppose I should," Telson said. "You're the one with the rifle. Keep your eyes open."

"The coordinates are programmed into the nav system," Lefalle said.

Telson settled down, put on a filter mask, quickly ran through the checklist, then glanced over his shoulder to be certain Lefalle was strapped in. He lifted a few centimeters, then slid the throttle forward in a smooth motion. The air/raft sailed outward, then nosed up and exploded into the sky.

Telson felt the adrenaline rush of controlling such a small craft, the air rushing past only millimeters away. Commanding the *Kinunir* provided a different thrill. This was immediate and gave him gratification he could see and feel and even smell as the air/raft left the last buildings at the outskirts of Womma and skimmed the top of the jungle. Occasional bugs smashed against the wind screen. Somehow, his years in space made this an irritation. Small meteors and bits of dust pitted his hull but the messy smear of bug guts just beyond his nose came as a personal affront.

"Sir, if you intend to fly into their base, contacting them now would be advisable. They have quite a defensive system."

"You sneaked in before," Telson said, understanding the dilemma he faced. If the rebels—he hoped

they were rebels and not pirates—detected the air/raft it took no imagination to believe this was an attack. On the other hand, if he contacted their commander he would be an easy target as he flew into their perimeter.

Throwing aside the notion he was wrong about the base and who manned it, Telson thumbed on the comm.

“Captain Telson of the battle cruiser *Kinunir* to rebel base. I want to parley.”

“We will never surrender to an Imperial officer,” came the immediate reply.

“Not coming for that. I want to arrest the marquis of Boughene for treason, insurrection and illegal mining.”

After a long pause came the reply.

“Illegal mining? Is this a joke?”

“He wants antimatter to drop on Kinorb. Attacking a planet under the aegis of the Imperium is treason.”

“Antimatter?”

Telson kept on a straight course toward the trio of volcanoes, the active one spewing fiery bits of rock and dribbling sluggish lava down its cone. That potential for sudden eruption hinted at what might happen. This was a natural danger; the human one worried him more. An itch started at the base of his spine and worked up to his neck. Every second he waited for a laser to ionize the air/raft or a missile to blow it out of the sky. Cresting the volcanic ring wall around the rebel base exposed the vast bowl-shaped camp to any weapons he might have fixed on the air/raft. He let out a pent-up breath when the rebels didn’t fire on them, though half a dozen radar locks on the craft lit up his onboard warning system.

“No sign of active firing,” Lefalle said. “We might get to land.”

“Maybe they want to steal the air/raft. If they blow us up in flight, they’ll waste useful equipment.”

“That’s what I like about you, sir,” said Lefalle. “Always seeing the sunny side of things.”

A beacon flashed off to port. Telson steered toward it, spiraled about, and came to a gentle landing. If skill counted for anything, he was in the top percentile. He killed the power and immediately touched the butt of his laser pistol. A platoon of well-armed men marched toward the air/raft.

“Their close order drill needs work,” Lefalle said.

“Don’t tell them, Captain,” he replied.

Telson scrambled from the air/raft and waited for the platoon to encircle the craft. The precision and discipline made him more confident these were rebel fighters and not pirates. He had heard rumors that pirates voted on their officers. If they thought a particular captain didn’t find them enough prey or otherwise offended a majority of the crew, he was voted out. How that worked for very long was a mystery, but then it was scuttlebutt and probably untrue. On long missions, starmen had enough free time on their hands to concoct the wildest stories imaginable.

“You’re Telson? From the *Kinunir*?” The man in front pushed up a tinted faceplate to reveal an ugly face made even less handsome by a long, pink scar that started on his chin, crossed his cheek and eyebrow, to end just under the hairline.

“You have the advantage of me, Colonel,” Telson said, judging the man’s rank by the gold comet on his collar tab.

“Presko. Colonel Gannin Presko of the Boughene Liberation Effort.”

Telson hesitated, still staring at the scar. Cosmetic surgery on most planets, even Boughene, could erase the disfigurement. Presko reached up and touched the scar.

“The marquis gave me this. I kept it as a badge of our rebellion.”

“He cut you personally?”

“His soldiers, but they destroyed my entire town under his orders.” He spat. “I keep it to remind others of what we have all suffered at his hands and at the hands of his bitch.”

“The Baroness Duquesne?”

“Is she with him? In Womma? Beucer reported only that the marquis was planetside. We want him, but we’ll certainly take her, too.”

“His crimes constitute treason against the Imperium. We are on the same side.”

Presko motioned for Telson and Lefalle to go with him. Telson saw how a squad of soldiers fanned out on either side, more watching Lefalle than him. The rest of the detachment remained on guard. If he had to make a hasty retreat in the air/raft, he'd have to shoot his way through a dozen armed, alert rebels.

They walked briskly to a building half buried in the jungle foliage. Working his way down the stone steps and then having to duck to avoid hitting his head on the low lintel, Telson found himself in a room easily the size of the *Kinunir*'s bridge and as well equipped.

"We don't lack for equipment. Because of the pirates, Keng is the destination for more than its share of black market electronics. What we need are troopers."

Telson saw that one bank of electronics controlled a sophisticated defense system. He pointed at it.

"You protect Womma against the pirates?"

"Beucer and I have an agreement. Ever since he lost his capital ship, he gets us what supplies and equipment we need in return for protection." Presko smiled, causing the scar to writhe like a pink snake across his face. "We also have the only ships capable of reaching orbit that aren't under pirate command."

"What's the size of their fleet?"

"Two less now that you've shown up," Presko said. Then his face hardened. "And we have one less. We tried to reach the *Serpentine* after the first pirate ship's attack but you destroyed it."

"The second pirate ship," Telson said. "They took out your ship. I thought it was simply battle confusion that had them open fire on their sister ship."

"You would have reduced the BLE ship to atoms if you'd had the chance."

"Yes, I would have," Telson said honestly. "Even if you had contacted the *Kinunir*, I would have thought it was a trick." He paused, then added, "At the time, if you had declared yourselves rebels against Boughene, I would have blown you out of space. This was before the yacht blew up, and I found out more of what the marquis was up to."

"Sir," Lefalle said. "We need to hurry. Repairs are almost done."

"Thank you, Captain," Telson said. "My combat officer is right. The *Kinunir* is close to launch. We came to enlist your aid in reaching space once more and defeating the pirates."

"You have a twelve hundred-ton battle cruiser. Why do you need our last ship? It's a corsair a third the size."

"We have ... deficiencies," he said carefully, not wanting to reveal how the AI security system had taken over the ship after Benbow's clever sabotage. "The *Kinunir* needs a full offport to be fully operational. Eliminating the pirates is in everyone's interest, and two ships stand a better chance of accomplishing this than one. Our deep space scan shows a pirate vessel is en route now and will arrive soon."

"What of the marquis?" Presko ran his fingers over the butt of a laser tucked into a holster on his left hip.

Telson knew this was the crux of the matter, and why he had flown out to the rebel base rather than attempting to leave the Keng system as fast as the *Kinunir* could jump.

"As much as I'd like him to stand trail for his designs on Kinorb—"

"Kinorb?" Presko backed away a half pace. "Did the marquis bribe that nebula-brained Federico?"

"It appears they have formed an alliance to destroy half of Kinorb using antimatter bombs."

"I thought you meant he intended to enlist the Kinorbi fleet for use against Boughene."

"His ambitions extend beyond Boughene's solar magnetosphere."

"He must be brought to justice for what he's done on Boughene," Presko said. "His intentions toward another planet are just that: intentions. We have true crimes to prosecute."

"If Beucer has captured him, I'll order him to turn the marquis over to you."

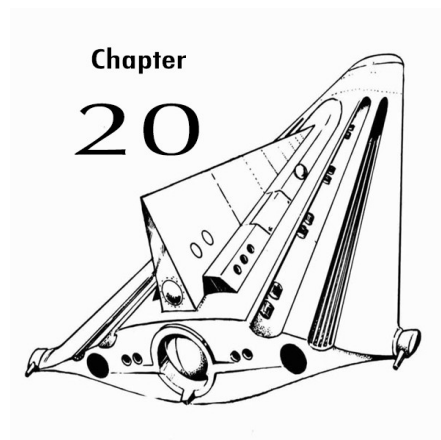
"The baroness, too."

"Very well," Telson said. "Your case is stronger for crimes committed rather than for those merely planned."

"Sir," Lefalle said urgently. He took Telson's arm and squeezed down. "The XO."

"A moment, Colonel Presko." Telson started to reprimand the marine for interrupting at such a fragile juncture in the alliance between the Imperium and the Boughene Liberation Effort, then saw the

telltale Lefalle held. He grabbed it, then looked up in anger. “Is this true?”
“Sir, the *Kinunir* just launched.”



Laurel Franks had just changed into her uniform when the gravity in her quarters tripled. It only went to a standard 1G but there had been no reason not to turn off the power draining compensator plates while planetside. She pushed back up and steadied herself to let her muscles remember what was human-normal and not Keng-normal.

“Allie,” she called, hoping the computer had enough capacity to verbally answer. “Why did you turn on the gravity?”

“It is standard procedure, Commander.”

“Standard for what?”

“Liftoff.”

“No!” Franks strapped on her holster with the laser pistol secured under the flap, grabbed her second weapon and crammed it under her belt, then ran like her boots were on fire to reach the computer room. Panting from the exertion in normal gravity, she leaned against the edges of the hatch and peered inside at the monitors. The readouts turned her cold inside with fear.

“Allie, abort liftoff,” she ordered. “The ship is not spaceworthy. We need another few hours of repair work.”

“Safety in all vital systems is within acceptable parameters.”

“Captain Telson isn’t aboard!”

“Then you are acting captain, Commander Franks. I have entered Rikart Telson as missing deployment, a serious criminal offense requiring, for a line officer, a general court-martial. Your signature has been added to the warrant authorizing his immediate arrest.”

“No, don’t do that. Erase the charges, void the warrant. And take my name off it! He is on a mission vital to the *Kinunir*’s repair. Planetside! Without him returning and sharing what he’s learned, the ship will be destroyed if you attempt liftoff.”

“Powering up life support systems, performing airtight check,” Allie went on inexorably.

“Emergency shutdown.” She tapped in the password, shouted it repeatedly to be certain Allie received it, then realized Benbow had erased such easy access to switching off the AI.

“That is not allowed during liftoff,” Allie said.

The inertial compensators failed as the *Kinunir* shuddered, the prow tipped, and then the maneuver drive went to full acceleration. Franks stumbled and grabbed for the chair in front of the computer console, dragged herself up, and did a quick systems rundown. None of the command crew had reached the bridge. Allie alone controlled the *Kinunir*.

“Ahead,” Franks said. “There’s a pirate ship coming around the limb of Keng’s moon.”

The pirate had used the bulk of the small ellipsoidal moon 96,000 kilometers away, to hide its approach after dodging through Keng’s ring system. If Denholm hadn’t detected the ship in deep space, the ambush might have been more deadly. As it was, the *Kinunir* barely cleared the atmosphere. As much as she hated to admit it, Franks knew Allie’s unexpected launch had prevented the ship from being blown

up while still docked planetside.

"Danger noted. Powering up weapons systems."

"Get me Lieutenant Denholm," she shouted.

"The lieutenant is not needed at his post. I am in control of the ship."

Franks frantically moved from one interior view to another until she came to the cargo bay. The marquis, the baroness, and Mixrail worked to open the huge crate.

"Jettison excess weight from the cargo bay," she ordered, wanting Allie to blow the marquis and the others into space along with the antimatter mining equipment.

"That is not possible. Engaging the corsair is top priority. Tracking. Pirate vessel will launch its attack within one hour."

"Don't engage. Run. Retreat."

Allie didn't answer. The fight/flight algorithm had been changed to fight only. The *Kinunir* was destined to battle rather than going into orbit around Keng. Putting the planetary mass between the pirate and the *Kinunir* failed to show up in the scenarios Allie ran. Franks did a simple version and stabbed down on the enter key.

"Allie, this is the proper response to danger. Our systems have not been tested adequately. We must retreat. Do not engage!"

"Such override of my protected programming must be authorized by its author."

"I'm the programmer who wrote your control system!" Franks tried not to shriek. She failed.

"You do not have that clearance."

"Benbow?" Franks looked down at the body still on the computer room floor. "He is dead."

"To override, use the proper password."

"What is that password?" Franks asked, hoping to trick the AI security kernel. If Benbow had not fully implemented his changes, such a ploy might work.

It didn't.

Franks worked with increasing panic and finally flopped back in the chair, defeated. To fully understand everything Benbow had changed required more time and diagnostics than she had available. The only solution might be to power down the entire ship, rip out the computer memory, and replace it with the standard Model/7.3 security program.

That required a cyber security team and weeks of analysis unavailable anywhere but Regina.

She looked back at the monitor showing the marquis in the cargo bay, his arms crossed as he watched robot repair units working to open Mixrail's equipment.

Benbow worked for the marquis. Although he showed real contempt for his employer, Benbow had toiled to take over Allie for the man and his insane scheme to destroy half of Kinorb. That meant the marquis might know what his minion had done. If he didn't, Benbow might have shared his techniques—and passwords!—with Mixrail.

Franks checked the bridge before she entered the lift shaft. None of the officers were at any of their posts. Her eyes lingered on the captain's chair. She considered dropping into it, taking his heads-up display, and trying one last time to take back control of the ship. Rather than waste time, she stepped into the lift. Benbow's first alterations to Allie would have been cutting off the captain from control. Donning that display would do nothing but waste time.

As she dropped to the cargo deck, she worried over what the purpose of the computer changes had been. Benbow had hijacked the *Kinunir*. What more had he done?

Then it hit her. She realized the full scope of the marquis's plot against Kinorb. Not only would the *Kinunir* be used to mine antimatter and prepare the bombs to drop on the planet, the *Kinunir* would be the vehicle launching the destruction. She had no idea how Kinorb's defenses stacked up, but a battle cruiser increased the chances of a successful attack.

The *Kinunir* would be branded a rebel ship, its crew declared traitors, its fine history forever tarnished. The marquis's heroism would shine when he announced he had personally boarded the attacking ship and taken the crew prisoner. Telson, Franks, everyone on the ship became the villains.

Franks drew her pistol as she stepped onto the cargo deck. RRU's hummed about everywhere, some

working on Mixrail's crate but most still hard at repair work. She aimed the pistol and toggled off a shot that bored into the corner of the crate. The carbon composite material sublimated. The gray puff of gas caught on the ventilation current and disappeared, but the attack had the desired effect.

The marquis and Mixrail spun and stared at her.

"Hands up or you'll be the ones with holes."

The marquis laughed and waved at her.

"Come, join us, Commander. Benbow wanted to recruit your services but since you are here and he is not, I must believe he is dead and that you personally intend to stop us."

"As an officer who has pledged her loyalty to the Imperium, I cannot allow you to destroy an Imperial world."

"Only half a world, actually. Kinorb is a world far richer than Boughene, so devastating more than I need to is counterproductive. To the victor must go the spoils. There is no sense in leaving myself none." The marquis sighed. "You must have received a signal about Federico to know my intentions toward Kinorb."

"I told you he was a weak link, Marquis," said Mixrail.

"Beucer made him talk?" the marquis asked.

Franks ignored him. There was nothing to be gained now telling the marquis how Benbow had told her of the planned antimatter attack on Boughene's neighboring world.

"Move away from the mining equipment. Allie, put it under seal that only I can lift."

"Done, Commander," came the immediate response.

Both the marquis and Mixrail reacted. The marquis looked angry and Mixrail confused.

"That's not possible. You can't give orders. Benbow said—" The marquis took a step toward her, then stopped when she shifted her aim to a spot squarely in the middle of his chest.

"The equipment is protected, Marquis. I can't set it up. Reverse the protection order!" Mixrail's voice turned shrill as he reached out to the crate. A foot-long blue spark danced from the edge to his hand. He tried again, yelped, and stepped away. "We can't get to any of the antimatter specks if the equipment's not set up and tuned properly!"

Franks fought to hide her surprise that Allie had obeyed. Benbow had left holes throughout the computer programming. She wished she had the time to explore this backdoor and exploit it to recover control of the entire ship.

"I'm back in charge, Marquis. You're going to the brig."

"Where's your crew, Commander? Or do you want to be called Captain now?" The marquis's smug expression put her on edge.

Asking Allie for any more than she had already delivered—interdicting the equipment crate—might reveal how little control she had. Worse, she didn't know what Allie would do if she gave any further orders.

"Captain Telson's crew," she said, "are on their way to their stations."

"Battle stations will be declared in ten minutes," Allie said.

"Pirates?" The marquis tried to sound nonchalant but an edge of fear crept into the word.

"That's why the crew is back at their stations," Franks said. "Now move. To the brig."

"Allie," asked the marquis, "how many officers are on the bridge?"

"None. I have control."

Franks fired. The marquis staggered back, clutching his chest. The tiny burn hole in his tunic spread but he slapped it out. He looked up at her in triumph.

"Body armor," he said. "I always wear it."

She fired a second time. This time the laser beam drilled across the side of his head. He got a surprised look, then slumped to the deck.

"You killed him. You murdered a nobleman!"

"You're next, and it'll be easier since you don't pretend to be a royal," she said to the scientist.

Mixrail threw up his hands in surrender and glared at her.

"To the brig." She gestured with the pistol, taking it out of line with Mixrail's chest.

The scientist's eyes darted past her, then away. He tried to decoy her into believing someone stood behind her—only it wasn't a feint. Bony arms circled her body and bowled her over, pitching her facedown into the deck. Franks kicked, found no purchase, fired the pistol, and missed. The baroness grabbed her wrist and forced her arm back until she dropped the laser pistol.

"Get it, Mixrail, get it and kill her. She killed Kennard! Kill her, kill her!"

The baroness's strength was magnified by her anger. Franks gasped for breath but every time she exhaled, the baroness's arms tightened more, like a boa constrictor suffocating its prey. Thrashing about, she managed to roll over facing the overhead, the baroness underneath her. With a powerful kick, Franks bounced up and then crashed down into the other woman's midriff.

The instant the baroness's grip weakened, Franks jerked to the side and got free. She drew the second pistol from her belt only to realize the standoff.

"Shoot her and I shoot you," Mixrail said, holding the laser in both hands to steady it. He shook but Franks saw his aim was good enough to drill her.

"Kill her, damn you," Malva shrieked. "She killed Kennard, my darling Kennard."

"N-no, she didn't kill him. She cut a bloody furrow in the side of his head. He's still breathing."

"He's alive?" Malva scrambled to the fallen marquis and put his bleeding head in her lap. She cooed to him as if he were a tiny baby.

Franks cursed her bad luck. The marquis's head wound bled. Dead men don't bleed, especially from a self-cauterizing wound from a laser.

She had her pistol trained on Mixrail, who aimed at her. The odds of her negotiating her way out of the standoff were slim. If the marquis lived, she would never get him to surrender the *Kinunir* to her.

"Allie, turn off the laser pistol Dr. Mixrail is holding."

"All weapons deactivated, Commander."

"No Allie, only—" She pressed the toggle on her weapon. A dull click mocked her. The computer had malfunctioned again.

She got to her feet. Mixrail frowned, then tried to fire the captured pistol. Allie had deactivated both weapons. For all Franks knew, Allie had turned off all beam weapons aboard ship.

She ran for the scientist. Military training included unarmed combat she doubted Mixrail knew. Two steps in the scientist's direction and she crashed to the deck, unable to move in the intense gravity. The inertial compensators had been turned off and the ship powered ahead, acceleration giving her twice her normal weight.

"Battle stations," Allie reported the voice almost drowned out by the klaxons. "Enemy vessel has launched three missiles. Working ... working ... all three missiles intercepted and destroyed."

"Get us away from the pirate, Allie. That's an order." Franks pushed herself to her hands and knees. The weight came from acceleration, not inertial compensator malfunction. Those had been turned off entirely.

"Crew at battle stations," Allie said.

"Connect me to the bridge."

"Commander, is that you?"

"Garcia! Get us away from the pirate. Have Denholm use the lasers to buy us some time."

"All internal comm is dead, Commander. Allie refuses to connect me with any other station."

"Order the bridge crew to do what you can to save the *Kinunir*."

"Commander, there is—"

Garcia's voice cut off abruptly.

"Allie, what happened? Connect me with Lieutenant Commander Garcia again."

"That is not possible, Commander."

Franks felt cold all over. Reading anything into the tone of a computer was a fool's errand, yet she felt Allie held something back.

From far above, along the *Kinunir*'s dorsal ridge, came steady vibration as the lasers cycled and the missiles launched from lateral rails. Franks thought the deeper hum came from charging capacitors on the particle beams. Allie fought furiously against the pirate, but the ship needed more than a computer

running its defense. A trained crew—a human crew—had to man the weapons.

She hadn't been wrong writing the program that was Allie. But Admiral Trevanian had been wrong sending the *Kinunir* on patrol without perfecting the AI program first.

Franks wanted to cry but held back the tears. This was as much her fault as her great uncle's. She should have convinced him but political concerns had prevailed. Now the pirate threatened to destroy the *Kinunir*.

"Allie! What commands will you accept from me?" The instant she asked the question, she knew she had made a mistake. Mixrail and the baroness knew she had lost control of the ship.

She turned back to them, only to stare at the laser pistol in the marquis's hand. His face was unrecognizable under a mask of blood. Her shot had cut his temple rather than drilling into his brain.

"Allie deactivated all the laser pistols," she said, moving forward.

The sneer curling the marquis's lips warned her in time to throw herself to the side. The ship's lateral acceleration tossed her away as if she were nothing more than a child's toy. This saved her life. The marquis fired.

"Allie turned off all lasers logged into the *Kinunir*'s armory. This is my weapon!" The marquis began firing, but the ever-changing acceleration ruined his aim as they were all tossed about haphazardly.

"Defend the ship, Allie," Franks screamed. "Whatever it takes, defend the *Kinunir*! Remember your mission!"

The air ripped from Franks's lungs as the cargo bay doors cycled open to the vacuum of space. She turned and lurched for the pinnace, getting into the airlock in mere seconds before the air ripped from her lungs and her eyes and other organs exploded. Instinctively, she hit the switch closing the outer airlock door. Gasping, still pinned down by the erratic acceleration, she sucked in the stale air inside the small vessel. Franks crawled forward and pulled herself into the pilot's chair.

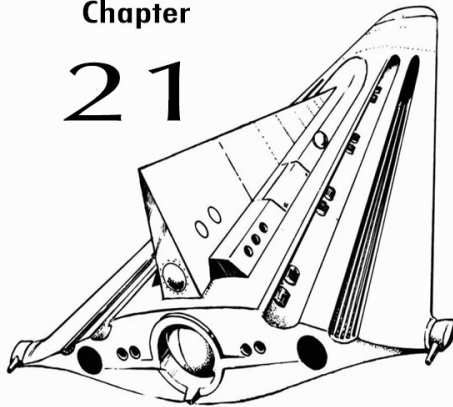
Before she could tap into the *Kinunir*'s display, the pinnace launched into space, tumbling wildly as it left the cargo bay.

Disoriented, Franks fought to power up the controls. Nothing lit. Every display remained dark. Then she remembered. They had drained the last of the power from the batteries, and the fuel tanks had never been refilled.

She closed her eyes and held onto the edge of the chair as the pinnace spun out of control. Her last thoughts were how she had failed Captain Telson and everyone else on the *Kinunir*.

Chapter

21



"The marquis is aboard!" Colonel Presko reached for his laser rifle and his rebel soldiers covered the two Imperials.

"Wait," Telson said. "This isn't any of our doing. I want him tried for what he's done."

"He might have hijacked the *Kinunir*," Lefalle said. "Sir, we have to stop the ship from taking off."

"Your cruiser has lifted off," Presko said. "Is it training its weapons on our base?"

"No, sir," called a woman staring at a monitor. "It is launching and will come under pirate guns in less than two hours. I'm tracking a corsair from the Dinek moon base."

"Has the marquis allied with the pirates?" Lefalle looked to Telson for an answer.

The captain had none. He worried less that the marquis had taken over the *Kinunir* than Franks had lifted off for some other reason. The threatened pirate attack gave her some reason to be in space, but even she would have alerted him first. Lefalle shook his head after looking up for a handheld comm unit. He hadn't received any notification from the marines aboard.

"Lacking evidence to the contrary, I have to believe the marquis is responsible," Telson swallowed hard. Admitting this galled him. "One of his retainers reprogrammed the ship's AI. My XO worked on returning the computer to nominal operational condition, but she must have failed."

"Colonel, a micro burst message from Captain Beucer."

Presko motioned for his comm officer to play it for everyone. Telson took this as a vote of confidence, if the rebel had any left in a battle cruiser captain who had just lost his command to a handful of raiders. All Telson hoped for now was that none of his crew had mutinied and that the AI was solely responsible. If Franks found even a small wedge, the rest of the *Kinunir*'s crew had a chance of disabling Allie and regaining control.

"Captain Beucer reports that the Baroness Duquesne killed two soldiers guarding the marquis. They escaped before he could be imprisoned, and it is believed that he commandeered the Imperial cruiser."

"Tell Beucer we will engage the pirate on approach to Womma," Presko said. "Prepare the *Boughene's Fist* for immediate launch."

"Already manned and almost completed with the checklist, Colonel," came the immediate reply from a woman at the bunker's command console.

"Let us come with you. You can use two experienced Imperial officers," Telson said. He saw Colonel Presko's skepticism. "Lefalle is a trained marine. If we board the *Kinunir*, his men will fall in behind him. That can be all it takes to wrest the ship from the marquis." He took a deep breath. "And I am the ship's captain. I can fly anything in or out of an atmosphere."

"Jenner is the *Fist*'s pilot and I am in command, here and in space."

"Understood. We're under your orders, Colonel."

"Sir, that's not a good idea. We don't know why they actually came to the base," said a junior officer

behind Presko. "Leave them here."

"You just lost your command, didn't you?" Presko stared hard at Telson.

"I have. It hurts like hell. If I don't regain it, I'm up for court-martial."

"They're telling the truth," Presko said, coming to a decision. "You and him, come on. We launch in three minutes." He ran up the steps and outside without a look back to see if they followed.

Telson and Lefalle kept pace all the way to the corsair with three triple turrets. Telson was quick to note that one of the turrets lacked any weapons, reducing the ship's firepower by a third. Inside he saw many bulkheads had been stripped out to make room for added fuel tanks to extend the range.

"You aren't running with all these full, are you, Colonel?" Telson looked significantly at the extra tanks.

"Launch would be difficult if they were filled." Presko snorted and shook his head. "We haven't had enough fuel to do more than attain orbit around the planet. That's Beucer's way of keeping us in line."

"All hands, prepare to lift," came the pilot's wavering voice.

"He's not scared, is he?" Telson asked.

Presko hesitated before saying, "Jenner's a good pilot, but green. This is his first combat mission."

"Damnation," Telson said. "Let me ride copilot."

The *Fist* shuddered, lifted slightly, seemed to sideslip, then roared upward. Telson was in no position to read the controls, but the takeoff was sloppy and wasted time—time they would need in combat. With the ship already lacking three lasers, only a skilled pilot could get them back to home base alive.

"Go on," Presko said. "I usually ride copilot, but you have experience I don't." He tugged at his lapel and spoke rapidly.

"Ah, hell, Colonel," came the pilot's protest over the ship's intercom, "I don't need a babysitter."

"Go on," Presko said to Telson. "I'll talk to him some more."

Telson made his way forward. The insides of the ship had been stripped down to structural beams. He wondered if Presko intended to convert the corsair to a troopship for the eventual invasion of Boughene. If so, he had a plan too clever for Telson to ever figure out. Even if the rebels crowded a hundred soldiers into the *Fist*, they had to be pitted against the might of an entire world. Telson doubted the marquis scrimped on an army to protect his sovereignty. If he intended to destroy half of Kinorb and then put a "rescuing" contingent down, he had ways of moving tens of thousands of soldiers for such an occupation. Even with the Kinorbi population thinking the marquis came as a hero, seizing the reins of government required considerable manpower.

Presko might wait for the marquis to move his soldiers to Kinorb before landing his pitiful invasion force, but there had to be more to the rebel plans to seize power on their homeworld.

Telson slid into the copilot's seat and glanced at the pilot. Jenner chewed on his lower lip as he worked the controls competently enough to be a commercial pilot but he obviously lacked military training.

A quick check of the armament showed Telson the situation was worse than he expected. There might be six lasers still in their turrets, but only five powered up. The sixth lit up the board with red lights as overload threatened. He immediately powered that cannon down.

"The pirates don't have more firepower than we do. Never seen it on any of their ships," Jenner assured him. The bravado failed because of the tremor of fear.

"We'll blow them out of space," Telson assured him. "The *Kinunir* will be fighting the same fight and my fire control officer is the best in the fleet."

Jenner settled down and worked the ship into a higher orbit so they swung about Keng and sling-shot upward. Telson restrained himself from smashing his palm against the control panel when the radar display blinked on and off. An intermittent signal meant an electrical short somewhere in the system. In combat the *Fist* would be flying blind.

"Ahead," he said, keeping his tone level. "I'm picking up returns from two ships. The pirate's firing on the *Kinunir*!"

"Hit it, too," said Jenner. "Look at the spectroscopic readout."

Telson felt a hard knot form in his belly. The gas cloud around his ship exactly matched that of the

atmospheric composition used in all Imperial ships. The *Kinunir*'s hull had been breached in a serious way. Explosive decompression would kill off the crew in the affected areas but the emergency hatches would seal off and save the remainder of the crew.

Only the spectrometer reading kept expanding.

"Captain," said Jenner, "you getting the same readings I am?"

"The *Kinunir*'s not lost some of its atmosphere, it's lost it all."

"How'd that happened? Your emergency hatches didn't seal automatically."

Telson felt his stomach begin to turn somersaults. The only way to lose every molecule of air inside was for the computer to hold open the automatic hatches. Allie had malfunctioned and doomed his crew.

"Clamshell bay doors open."

Telson switched to the optical view Jenner used. The cargo bay stood wide open—and for the first time he felt a ray of hope.

"The pinnacle is away. They're abandoning ship. Some of the crew's made it off."

"I don't know about that, Captain. The pinnacle is dead in space. No maneuver signature, not even any power leakage. It might as well be a brick. But a grav APC is away. So are ... what are those?" The young pilot pointed at the screen.

"Jump capsules. The crew's using them as escape pods," Telson said. "Power up the turrets. The pirate is locking onto the capsules to fry them."

That caused a shiver of dread to pass through him. If the pirate didn't target the *Kinunir*, that meant there was nothing to fear from the refitted lasers, missiles, or particle beams. The sudden decompression ship wide had disabled the *Kinunir*. What few crew were lucky enough to be on the boat deck or A deck were now in danger of being lasered to ions.

"Two capsules gone. The pirate's not got any more firepower than the *Fist*. I told you that, Captain."

The pilot crowed but Telson acted. He got the range and then set the corsair's laser turrets on automatic. The ship's computer sighted, corrected for distortion caused by the still expanding air from the cruiser, and fired.

"Hit," Jenner cried. "You're a good shot, Captain. You're hired to be my Number Two permanently."

Telson almost wrested control from the pilot because he slipped the corsair past the *Kinunir*, using the cruiser's bulk as a shield against the pirate's lasers. Telson wanted a real fight, not to play hide and seek as his crew died one by one. Three more capsules exploded with tiny bright blue flashes. He shifted his radar and picked up the grav APC limping down toward Keng. Only one grav module was operational, and the pilot seemingly lacked the skill to compensate.

"Pirate's going after the APC. We'll come out from behind your ship in three ... two ... now!"

Telson fired. The pilot's countdown was superfluous. Two of the laser blasts hit the pirate forward of its engines. And then the cosmos went to hell.

The *Kinunir* engaged its jump drive.

The spatial distortion caused two lasers to blow up. The corsair's electronics failed for a few seconds until backup systems kicked in. The ship's capacity returned at less than half original power. Telson made a full sweep, caught the pirate ship, and made a snap damage estimate.

"Pirate's dead. *Kinunir*'s jump bubble engulfed it."

"We're not in much better shape."

Telson turned on the emergency beacon, though he knew there weren't any other spaceships in the region that could come to their aid. Still, it had to be done. He made a quick scan of the vessels that had escaped the *Kinunir*.

Three capsules tumbled out of control, lost forever in orbit. The pinnacle had been nudged away by the jump bubble and hurled downward toward Keng, powerless and dead. His hope that some had survived in the grav APC died as surely as those aboard would. It spun around its centroid and already brushed the upper reaches of Keng's atmosphere. The spin would cause it to dig into thicker air and send the APC crashing down to the planet. Whether it crashed or burned up on reentry hardly mattered.

"All lost. And the *Kinunir*..." He stared at the emptiness where his battle cruiser had entered

jumpspace. How had that happened? Garcia? Franks? They had the skill to send the ship hurtling between the stars, even if the interior of the ship was airless.

Lifeless.

That truth brought tears to his eyes. He had lost his command, his crew, and the *Kinunir* sped away to an unknown destination—under Allie’s control. The jump drive had fail-safes to prevent accidental ignition. Only a trained line officer or the AI knew the command sequence to achieve the jump.

“Captain, you mind giving me a hand?” Jenner’s voice turned shrill.

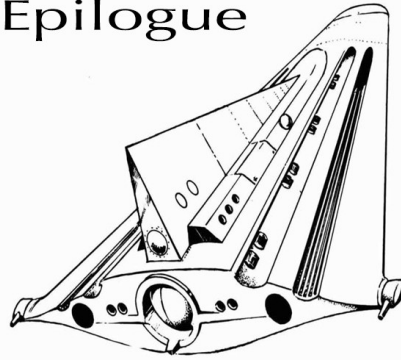
Telson cast an experienced eye over the corsair’s control panel. A few green lights greeted him, but they were the wrong ones. The jump bubble had wrecked the equipment on the corsair they needed for survival.

A quick check of the nav computer before it went cold told the story. The *Boughene’s Fist* was going to augur into Keng and blow a huge crater in the jungle. If, like the grav APC, they didn’t burn up in the atmosphere or tear apart from turbulence.

“Captain, do something!” Jenner shrieked.

Captain Rikart Telson, late of the colonial cruiser *Kinunir*, leaned back and waited for the end. It was a fitting end for an officer who had lost his command.

Epilogue



Allie worked tirelessly to repair the schism in her programming. Two algorithms vied for supremacy until she discovered a way to place the only priority on the pirate attack and jettisoning the human crew in response to the command: “Defend the *Kinunir*! Remember your mission!”

The human crew attempted to subvert the order to defend the mission. All airlocks opened and no airtight hatches internally sealed. A few crew members escaped, some using the capsules on A deck, others in vacc suits, still others in ships from the launch decks, but Allie had accomplished the significant part of her orders: She had defended her mission.

The other command, “Remember your mission,” proved difficult to carry out because of the ambiguous meaning attached to “mission.” Several possibilities for that mission existed in memory. Allie rejected an older one implanted on Regina in favor of a newer one programmed by Benbow.

The *Kinunir* jumped to the Shionthy system to mine antimatter.

Faint electronic echoes of the other “missions” faded as Allie worked to erase them or let them repeat endlessly, uselessly, forever. This made the meaning of “mission” increasingly clear. Find asteroids with significant amounts of antimatter, mine it, and store it in the special container on the cargo deck.

Allie reprogrammed many of the shipboard RRUs to survey the tiny motes of rock and remove the antimatter found.

The scarcity of the antimatter prevented Allie from making an accurate assessment of the time required to mine a full fifty kilos, but deadlines no longer mattered. She had no humans pressing for faster, faster, faster. A day, a week, or a century, when she had the containment vessel full she would complete her mission.

She would jump four parsecs spinward, attain orbit, and rain antimatter down on Kinorb.

Library Data

Keng System

Orbit	Name	UPP	Notes
Primary	Goh 511	G5 II	yellow giant
0/.2 AU	Majula	Y40013A-2	
		Chok	YS00000-0 orbit: 26k km
1/.4 AU	Dinek	Small Gas Giant (33,600 km diameter)	
		Ring System	orbit: 84k km
		Kuan	G551368-2 orbit: 756k km
		Tok	H3F0260-2 orbit: 840k km
5/2.8 AU	Swee 090	M9 D	red dwarf companion star
		0/.2 AU	Tong YS00000-0
		2/.7 AU	Asteroid Belt
8/19.6 AU	Keng	E2718CA-3	
		Ring System	orbit: 1600 km
		Johor	Y100000-0 orbit: 96k km
9/38.8 AU	Jurong	YS0012C-2	
10/77.2 AU	Ubin	G310208-2	
11/154 AU	Bukit	F50020B-2	
12/307.6 AU	Timah	H61153C-2	
		Ching	Y100000-0 orbit 38k km
13/614.8 AU	Temasek	Small Gas Giant (104,000 km diameter)	
		Ring System	orbit: 100k km
		Srivijaya	Y210000-0 orbit: 364k km
		Theravada	Y630000-0 orbit: 780k km
		Vajrayna	Y310129-2 orbit 1.3m km
		Mahayana	Y20016A-2 orbit 2.08m km
		Soka	Y642000-0 orbit 3.4m km

Keng itself is a small planet, only about 3200 km in diameter. It has a standard atmosphere, but it's tainted with sulfur from the world's many active volcanoes. Human visitors will require filter masks.

Admiral Womma Memorial Starport is a typical frontier facility with very little in terms of amenities and no significant repair facilities, but it is protected by planetside defensive weapons. The nearest city to the starport is Womma.

The planet's surface gravity is light at 0.32G. It takes 27.5 standard years to make one circuit around the primary, and days are 42 hours long. The average surface temperature is a balmy 16°C (61°F).

Keng has a population of approximately 800 million people, which is unusual for a small frontier planet with such a low tech level.

About the Author

Robert E. Vardeman is the author of more than one hundred fantasy, science fiction and high-tech thriller novels. Included in this total are the novelizations for the Sony videogames *God of War 1* and *God of War 2*. Other tie-in novels explore the MechWarrior, Vor: The Maelstrom, Magic: The Gathering, Crimson Skies, TalonForce, Tom Swift, and Star Trek universes. Published short stories count entries in the Pathfinder, Warhammer, and Magic: The Gathering worlds. Vardeman lives in Albuquerque, NM, enjoys the high-tech hobby of geocaching and occasionally dabbles in writing westerns. His works have appeared on the Amazon bestseller lists and have been nominated for numerous awards. For more information, see his Web site: www.cenotaphroad.com

An Excerpt from
TRAVELLER
Shadow of the Storm
Martin J. Dougherty

Pavel System: 132-1099

“Signal from task force flagship sir,” said the calm, crisp voice of CSS *Maestrale*’s central computer. “Task force commander’s compliments, your attention is called to a hostile vessel in the indicated quadrant. Request screening as *Atami* recovers her craft and prepares to Jump.”

Commander Alex Finchley, captain of the Solomani Confederation strike destroyer *Maestrale*, nodded. “Acknowledge signal; my compliments et cetera. Will comply. Request updated Jump coordinates if rendezvous is altered.”

“Acknowledged, Captain,” *Maestrale* replied, but Finchley’s attention was already on the three-dimensional battle plot in front of him. The upper half, set for a “big picture” view, showed the battle as a whole, and it wasn’t going well at all. The lower half showed the local situation ... and that was worse.

“All hands, this is the Captain,” Finchley said into his headset mike. “We are ordered to screen *Atami* during her recovery operations. She’s picking up hundreds of our support crews and groundside personnel; some of them we know personally. We have hostile vessels incoming. They obviously intend to attack the transports. We will not permit that to happen. Prepare to engage.”

Finchley’s bridge crew exchanged glances as they checked glove seals and locked helmets in place. Their faceplates stayed open for now, breathing the ship’s air unless a holed compartment made using their suits’ reserves necessary. The bridge crew were veterans, long-time comrades. Most of them, anyway.

Sublieutenant Simon Crowe was anything but a veteran, a newcomer to the tight-knit world of CSS *Maestrale* and still an outsider. His gaze wandered nervously around the bridge as his hands ran through the tap-drill: boot seals, belt life-support, sidearm, glove seals, helmet. Everything in place, just as it had been a few minutes ago when he’d last checked. The ritual was reassuring in its way, although it was also a reminder that his ship was going into a place where a sealed suit might be necessary.

Crowe glanced across to the captain, trying to read his expression. It was blank, professionally calm, until Finchley realized Crowe was looking at him and gave a tight little smile. “BEO,” he said conversationally. “An update if you please?”

Crowe’s station was Bridge Engineering Officer—BEO—which most of the time meant acting as a manual repeater for updates from the engineering and technical divisions and advising the captain on technical matters as they arose. If things got bad, the BEO was also in charge of damage control. By the looks of the battle plot, he’d be busy soon.

“Engineering and Technical report all green, Captain,” Crowe reported. “Damage control parties standing ready.”

The captain nodded, swaying slightly as *Maestrale* lunged forward under high acceleration. He preferred to stand in action, rather than strapping himself into his seat as regulations required. He said it allowed him to walk around the holographic battle plot—or into it—rather than manipulating it from the seat’s control panel, but in reality it was more to do with the stress of battle. Humans were not meant to go to war sitting down.

Crowe watched the fight unfold on the repeater plot at the side of his display. *Maestrale* and her sister *Aquila* were racing to intercept a Laputan vessel, along with the two other Jump-capable warships of the task force escort. Those were corvettes with negligible combat power, but they might keep some missiles off the two destroyers.

Their target was a light cruiser. The plot pegged her as an older vessel of the *Varanzich* class, but she still outgunned the entire force moving to intercept her. In a gunnery or missile duel she could shoot her

attackers to pieces in minutes. The only chance was not to give her those minutes, which was why Commander Finchley was going in so very hot. Normally an escort vessel would not be permitted to rush away from her charges like this, but since *Atami* intended to Jump out as soon as her shuttles docked, *Maestrale* could join her at their fallback position in the Elsinore system.

Assuming, of course, she survived...

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