

In Earth's Own Back Yard

A STORM IS GATHERING

Stormshadow lurched violently. Her hull made a hideous groaning, screeching sound that mixed with the scream of tortured metal as the clamp finally tore free. The helmsman caught the frigate just before she slammed into the cradle wall. The external monitors showed that *Stormshadow*'s fire had weakened the support beam but the clamp was still attached to the hull. Her violent struggles had torn it free of its mounts but they'd be taking it with them into action.

"Aft docking clamp . . . released," said Browning, which was not, strictly speaking, accurate but conveyed what Crowe needed to know. "Cradle gate is still closed."

"Very well. Commander Browning, clear us a path. Bracket the gate with torpedoes," Crowe said. "Helm, as soon as the torpedoes hit you will go full astern. Ram the gates if they're still there."

Crowe heard the acknowledgement as Browning fired and the frigate began to accelerate violently.

The torpedoes went to full acceleration as they left the launchers, slamming into the lightly armored gate after a flight of less than a second. Lacking the velocity to punch a hole, they detonated on the surface. Most of the blast went into the gate, twisting it off its mounts at one side. Fragments of torpedo casing whirled across the docking bay along with one of the weapons' drive section, its exhaust still flaring.

As the torpedo engine corkscrewed into the far wall of the bay and fragments rattled from *Stormshadow*'s hull, she lurched across the bay and smashed stern-first into the launch gate. Crewmembers clung to their consoles and Crowe reeled across the bridge before he could grab his seat for support.

The Solomani Rim Explodes!

The Traveller Universe comes to vivid life as veteran game designer and Traveller expert Martin J. Dougherty takes us deep into the Solomani Rim, humanity's ancestral home.

And even far into the distant future, we come together to fight.

TRAVELLER®

Novels

From Far Future Enterprises

Fate of the Kinunir

Robert E. Vardeman

Shadow of the Storm

Martin J. Dougherty

Priority: Hyperion

Erik Scott de Bie

TRAVELLER®

Novels

SHADOW
of the
STORM

Martin J. Dougherty



Shadow of the Storm

©2014 Far Future Enterprises, LLC
All Rights Reserved

First Print Edition
March 2014

ISBN: 978-1-55878-034-7

Cover Design by Alex Athans
Image courtesy of NASA

Published in association with
Athans & Associates Creative Consulting

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, events, organizations, or brands is purely coincidental and unintended.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Pavel System

132-1099

(2 February, 5618)

“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 mic. “We are ordered to screen *Atami* during her recovery operations. She’s picking up hundreds of our support crews and planetside 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. Finchley 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 Crowe figured 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.

Missiles streamed from the Laputan ship, beginning their run at the two Confederation Navy destroyers. As strike vessels they had nothing to reply with at this range; they'd have to rely on evasion and point defenses to survive long enough to reach their own weapons range.

"Make signal. *Hauk* and *Djerv*, my compliments, et cetera. Corvettes are to accelerate ahead of us and provide missile screening." It seemed to Crowe that Commander Finchley spoke as if he were thinking out loud rather than giving the ship's computer an order. "Corvettes are to engage until seriously threatened, then jump to the rendezvous point and meet *Atami*."

Maestrale did not immediately respond, causing Commander Finchley to glance at his gray-suited political officer. A few seconds passed, then Lieutenant Jorgenssen nodded sharply. He lifted his hand off a control on his desk, removing his veto from the command.

"Acknowledged," replied *Maestrale* at last. Then it—the ship was "she", but her computer was always an "it"—added, "Escorts One and Two extend their captains' compliments. They acknowledge receipt of orders and wish us luck."

They might need it, Crowe realized. He frowned at his repeater. The two Confederation Fleet ships were of the same generation as the Laputan *Varanzich* class cruiser, but she was far bigger, armed with a mix of missiles and laser batteries backing up a particle accelerator that ran the length of her hull. Her laser batteries alone could shatter a destroyer; a hit from the particle lance would pretty much vaporize either of them—or both, if they were lined up right.

The corvettes began firing, their laser armament thinning the missile salvo a little. The attack was concentrated on the larger vessels; corvettes were an irrelevance in an engagement of this size. They could be knocked down or chased off at leisure once the bigger ships were dealt with.

The salvo began to spread out as *Aquila* heeled away sharply. About half the incoming missiles went after her. Both corvettes stayed in position ahead of *Maestrale*. Crowe nodded, watching the short range battle

plot. He saw what *Aquila's* captain had done, and why. He also realized what the consequences would be. With the corvettes' covering fire and her own defenses, *Maestrals* would survive to reach torpedo range. *Aquila*, facing the same salvo unprotected, would not.

That was Crowe's gift, or maybe curse: an ability to mentally dismantle and analyze a situation like a simulator output. Firepower modified by maneuver matched against armor and countermeasures, damage control effectiveness weighed against structural effects. The mathematics of the situation were pitiless. Crowe could see what *Aquila's* captain intended, and he understood why it had to be done. It was pretty much a death sentence for most of her crew, but then *Maestrals's* chances were little better.

"Guns, switch everything to point defense," Finchley ordered. "Helm, I want a torpedo pass. Gunner-T . . . prepare for saturation torpedo salvo at minimum distance."

The acknowledgements came in as Crowe licked dry lips. The maneuver was suicidal; anyone could see that. Their guns, plus those of the corvettes, would stop some of the missiles but they'd have to run the gauntlet of the cruiser's laser armament. Once *Aquila* went, the cruiser could concentrate her full firepower on *Maestrals*. Likely they'd never even reach minimum distance and even if they did, there would not be enough left of *Maestrals* to fill a shipping container.

Strangely, that thought anchored Crowe rather than frightening him. With poor prospects for survival no matter what he did, there was little temptation to flee his post. He'd fight it out with the crew of CSS *Maestrals* and maybe earn their respect. Better that than to know he was despised in his last moments. Yes. Better to . . .

Crowe laughed out loud when he saw it, and heard the captain say, "I'm impressed, Mister Crowe . . ." Puzzled glances from other crewmembers suggested that the penny had not yet dropped.

"The hostile's spinal weapon is inoperable," Crowe said loudly. "She's the *Josef Valaki*. Intel database shows she was never properly repaired after being transferred from the fleet to the Laputan Home Forces, and that much of her portside armament may still be out of action."

"Know thine enemy," Commander Finchley said sagely. "Helm, attempt to pass close down her port side if you can."

The acknowledgment was lost in a series of violent jerks as the first missiles slammed into *Maestrale*. One scored a direct hit, tearing away a torpedo mount. The others were proximity detonations, hurling fragments of superdense casing against the destroyer's flimsy armor.

"We're holed in several places, Captain," Crowe reported. "Forward torpedo room is hit but operable. We've lost a barbette and some fuel. We can still maneuver and jump."

Finchley acknowledged with a curt gesture, but his attention was on the battle plot. *Aquila* was slewing, still under power but not properly answering her helm. Debris trailed astern as she vented water, air, and precious hydrogen fuel. Slowly, unsteadily, she righted herself and began forging at the target once more.

"Signal from *Hauk*," *Maestrale*'s voice said. "Her captain extends his compliments and respectfully requests permission to cover *Aquila*."

"Denied!" snapped Finchley and Jorgenssen together, political and military commanders for once in wholehearted agreement as a second wave of missiles poured in, then a third. Yet still *Aquila* lurched erratically forward, her remaining guns firing on the distant cruiser rather than protecting her mangled hull. *Maestrale* was hit too, but as the range dropped she retained her main capability. As a strike vessel her function was to run in fast and launch a salvo of torpedoes—short-range heavy missiles that could seriously harm even a light cruiser.

A fourth salvo closed in, this time focused entirely on *Aquila*. Crowe realized that his own vessel was probably too close for effective missile salvos, but that just meant that the cruiser would engage with her guns. *Maestrale* slewed and heeled, twisting desperately through the fusillade of laser fire, and astern from her *Aquila* suddenly vanished.

Crowe's heart stopped for an instant, even though his conscious mind knew what had happened. "*Aquila* has initiated an emergency jump," *Maestrale* reported.

"After pulling in that entire salvo," Finchley added approvingly. "Left it a bit late, but her captain deserves a commendation for drawing fire off us for so long." *Aquila* had delayed her escape until it was too late to retask the missile salvo that was suddenly deprived of a target.

"Agreed," Jorgenssen said from his station. The recommendation would be automatically transmitted with the rest of *Maestrale*'s combat log; any ship still in the system would record it. The data-share made it possible to reconstruct the events of a battle right up until the last sur-

living ship left the system. In the present situation, it would be a litany of defeat but at least they'd know why it happened.

"Why" was pretty obvious in this case. The handful of ships deployed by the fleet had failed to deter Laputan aggression. Whilst loudly declaring their continued and wholehearted support for the Solomani Confederation, the greatly-enlarged Laputan Home Forces had struck at Pavel, dragging the fleet into the middle of what was ostensibly a factional dispute.

Laputa was in conflict with the equally powerful world of Thetis over control of local trade, each seeking to dislodge their political rivals' hold on the surrounding star systems. Pavel was vital to Thetis's interests and heavily defended, but the Laputans had been buying up older naval vessels for years and now had a decisive advantage. They were also of the view that the fleet elements stationed at Pavel had effectively picked a side and were fair game.

Laputan strategy was simple. Holding the Pavel system put a large segment of Thetis's forces in a position where they had to fight no matter what the odds, and the Laputans had simply built up a big enough fleet to smash the defenses . . . and not coincidentally to eliminate a significant proportion of their rival's military strength.

Crowe was an engineer, not a strategist, but it was obvious to him that the losses Thetis was taking were irreplaceable. By attacking a target their opponents absolutely had to defend no matter what the cost, Laputa might well have won the war at a stroke.

For the fleet elements caught in the middle, the only possible course of action was to evacuate, to fall back to Elsinore, and wait for the political wrangling to produce a clear set of orders—if that ever happened. Despite the fact that the war was ripping the Kukulkan sub-sector apart, and Laputan Home Forces were now firing on the Confederation Fleet, this was still officially a local dispute between two powerful factions *within* the Solomani Confederation rather than *against* it.

Both Laputa and Thetis possessed enough political leverage to prevent their trade war from bringing down the wrath of the Confederation as a whole. So the fleet simply had to get out with the minimum losses and try to keep a lid on the situation. And so CSS *Maestrale* was charging headlong at a ship almost ten times her size, trying to buy time for vital personnel to evacuate Pavel aboard their overloaded transports.

Maestrle shuddered under laser hits, causing Crowe to look up questioningly at his captain. “Not yet, Mister Crowe, but stand ready,” Finchley said.

Crowe watched sections of the damage indicator board turning amber, then red. There were black areas too, parts of the ship where even the damage sensors were not returning anything. The two corvettes fired a defiant—if pointless—laser salvo at the cruiser and engaged their jump drives. One second they were alongside *Maestrle*, the next they were just . . . gone. Crowe swallowed hard, feeling strangely alone.

“Thirty seconds to projected closest approach!” the helm officer reported.

“Gunner-T, stand ready!” Finchley’s tone was harder than before, but he still spoke quietly, calmly.

“Twenty-five seconds . . .”

Maestrle lurched, losing internal gravity for an instant. Crowe slapped his faceplate down reflexively, but there was no loss of pressure on the bridge. The damage board had gone almost entirely red or black.

“Captain! We’re holed on all decks, main drive is erratic, we’ve lost all beam weaponry!” Crowe reeled off the damage reports as his shocked brain registered them. “Gunnery room is destroyed; engineering is holed and open to space. Jump drive is functional but we have power plant damage. Jump is not possible at this time. Point defense is down. Electronic warfare is . . . status unknown. Internal life support is functioning on reserve power but failing . . .”

“Fifteen seconds to closest pass!”

Finchley acknowledged the helm officer’s report with a nod. “Gunner-T. You may fire when ready.” There was no reply. “Gunner-T! Any gunnery personnel! Launch all torpedoes! All weapons to local control! Fire as you bear!”

Crowe found a part of the status board that still worked. “Captain! We’re launching! Someone is . . . someone’s firing torpedoes. I don’t know which barbette it is; all I can see from the board is that the magazine hoists are operating.”

Finchley nodded again, lunging for his seat and strapping in as the internal gravity fluctuated wildly. “Mister Crowe,” he said almost conversationally, “I think now might be the time. I want you to make your way aft with any and all personnel you can muster. We’re going to need jump capability and life support. In that order. I think we’re about to

make that cruiser very angry, and if I were her captain I'd launch a missile salvo at us, and push on against the transports. Given the relative velocities we're passing at, I'd estimate perhaps thirty minutes to impact. I don't think we should be here when that happens."

"Aye sir! Jump drive and life support. All available personnel to my command!" Crowe barked, releasing his seat straps. The internal gravity field had died completely, allowing him to feel a sickening corkscrewing sensation. They were tumbling, then. That'd make things significantly more difficult.

"Mister Crowe," Finchley said. "I'm informed that all other engineering officers and most of the ratings are down. You more or less *are* our engineering and technical divisions. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir!" Crowe said with no emotion at all. The enormity of his task crushed any reaction he had to it. Instead he responded automatically, moving with numb caution to the bridge airlock and out into the dim, emergency-lit main corridor. Smoke obscured his vision even with helmet lights, but there was no fire. Decompression had seen to that. He made his way aft, pausing momentarily to glance out through a hull breach at the crazily tumbling stars.

And at the enemy light cruiser just kilometers away, her flanks lit by the flashes of impacting torpedoes. As Crowe started moving again, he saw another stubby tube accelerating away from *Maestrale's* hull. Someone in a torpedo barrette was still fighting.

The torpedo flared against the cruiser's hull, scattering fragments of armor and punching deep into her vitals. Flames billowed out as liquid hydrogen fuel exploded in her tanks, and suddenly the numbness was gone. Crowe let go of the handhold he'd carefully been working his way along and hurled himself down the dark corridor. Debris scattered as he crashed through it, risking a suit puncture.

Untethered, fighting the ship's corkscrewing inertia by instinct alone and heedless of the risk that he might fall through a hull breach, Sublieutenant Simon Crowe smashed his way through the dying ship. Where he passed, dazed crewmembers began to follow until at last he reached the shattered remains of the drive room at the head of a damage control gang.

And there, amid all the chaos and destruction their enemies had wrought, they saved their ship.

Recommendation For Award of Order of Sol: 268-1099 Sublieutenant Simon Crowe

Heavily engaged with a cruiser class vessel during the Battle of Pavel, the strike destroyer CSS *Maestrale* (Commander Alexander Ulysses Finchley CN commanding) was ordered to cover the retreat of naval transports. During the ensuing action *Maestrale* was crippled, with most of her engineering and technical branch personnel killed in action.

With a heavy missile salvo incoming and no means remaining to defend the vessel, Sublieutenant Crowe was ordered to form an emergency repair party and restore jump capability. Showing complete disregard for his own safety he proceeded untethered and with great haste through open compartments and extreme-hazard areas filled with debris, gathering crewmembers as he passed.

Through prompt and efficient action, and inspired leadership of the personnel he gathered, Sublieutenant Crowe was able to restore jump capability to CSS *Maestrale*. He then ordered all nonessential personnel out of the drive compartment and single-handedly initiated the jump procedure despite a very significant debris hazard and the risk of a drive explosion.

Sublieutenant Crowe's actions are in the highest traditions of the Confederation Navy, and I therefore recommend that he be considered for the above-named decoration.

Commander Alexander Ulysses Finchley, CN

Approved: Lieutenant Davide Jorgenssen, Solomani Security attached to CSS *Maestrale*

Recommendation For Award of Order of Sol: 268-1099

Commander Alexander Ulysses Finchley

Heavily engaged with a cruiser class vessel during the Battle of Pavel, the strike destroyer CSS *Maestrale* (Commander Alexander Ulysses Finchley CN commanding) was ordered to cover the retreat of naval transports. In company with two corvettes and her sister ship *Aquila*, *Maestrale* attempted a torpedo attack on the light cruiser *Josef Valaki*.

During the attack, *Aquila* was heavily damaged and forced to withdraw by emergency jump. The corvettes were also forced out of action. Commander Finchley, now commanding the only significant vessel between the enemy cruiser and the transport force, pressed home a torpedo attack despite overwhelming odds.

Using his knowledge of enemy capabilities, Commander Finchley was able to position his ship so as to reduce the amount of damage she received. Nevertheless, CSS *Maestrale* was reduced to a wrecked condition as she approached the enemy vessel.

Firing torpedoes under local control, CSS *Maestrale* inflicted heavy damage on the enemy cruiser, forcing her to break off action and thereby protecting the transport force from certain annihilation.

The high level of training and efficiency insisted upon by Commander Finchley, and his calm and inspiring leadership throughout the action, enabled the crew of CSS *Maestrale* to not only drive off a greatly superior warship but to restore functionality to their vessel and withdraw to rejoin the fleet.

Commander Finchley's actions are in the highest traditions of the Confederation Navy, and I therefore recommend that he be considered for the above-named decoration.

Rear Admiral Victoria Berdinelli, CSN BT OS SS with Swords and Clasp

Approved: Commodore Bryce Pelton, Solomani Security attached to First Fleet Headquarters

CONFEDERATION NEWS AGENCY
Yamato Naval Base, Vantage System 001-1102

Confederation Navy and Solomani Security officials today jointly announced an inquiry into the events of last year's Battle of Santorini. A pivotal action in the Bootes Trade War, the battle has remained controversial despite being a clear victory for the regular navy over the Laputan Home Forces.

It has been suggested that a complete breakdown in the chain of command was responsible for the confused closing moments of the action. The decision to allow elements of the Laputan fleet to withdraw while others surrendered has been roundly criticized in some quarters as having greatly prolonged the war.

The Confederation Navy has indicated support for the commanding officer in the action, Rear Admiral Berdinelli, by announcing her forthcoming promotion to Vice Admiral. However, many other officers involved in the so-called "Santorini Incident" are suspended from duty and several have resigned their commissions.

The inquiry is expected to deliver a verdict within three months, at which time the battle may be re-evaluated in the light of its conclusions. Central to the inquiry will be the actions of Lieutenant Davide Jorgensen of Solomani Security and Lieutenant Simon Crowe, a previous recipient of the Order of Sol.

Lieutenant Crowe has declined to resign his commission and is on secondment to the Home Forces whilst suspended from the regular navy

pending court-martial. Solomani Security will not comment on the whereabouts of Lieutenant Jorgenssen.

Yamato Naval Base Vantage System 292-1107

Lieutenant Simon Crowe paused before the double doors of the conference room. He smoothed his black dress uniform jacket, made sure his campaign and command medals, plus the star of the Order of Sol, were straight. His hands moved down, finishing the dress uniform version of the tap-drill. Sword in place, belt straight . . . his black trousers with the gray stripe of an engineering officer were crease-free.

So. Step through the doors, salute and hand over his sword. He'd rehearsed the drill so many times while he waited—endlessly, endlessly waited—for the summons to court-martial. It had been so long that his regular navy uniform felt strange. The Home Guard lieutenant's tunic he'd been wearing for the past few years lay just a little differently. On another day he might not even notice, but today the difference was important. Today might be the very last time he wore regular navy uniform.

The doors opened and the marine guards stepped aside. Crowe dragged himself up straight and marched forward to stand before the admiral's desk. He saluted smartly, hiding his surprise. A court-martial required three senior officers, but only two sat before him. No matter; what was about to happen, was about to happen. Crowe rattled off his name, rank, number and current assignment for the benefit of the recorder. The admiral sitting in front of him knew exactly who he was and why he was here.

That was another odd thing. There was nobody else in the room. Normally there would be marines, a handful of mid-ranking staff officers ostensibly acting as observers and recorders but mainly there to add gravity to the proceedings. There was only Vice Admiral Berdinelli and a Solomani Security representative who wore a suit rather than naval uniform. That was odd, too.

Berdinelli eyed Crowe's uniform and stance for a while, presumably sizing him up. She knew about the Order of Sol he'd won; she'd presented it. She knew about his subsequent career and the circumstances that had led him to this room. It had all happened under her command, after all.

Berdinelli finally spoke. "At ease, Lieutenant, I have orders for you."

"Sir?" Crowe asked, using the non-gender-specific honorific as was normal in the fleet.

"You are not on trial, Lieutenant Crowe. In fact I can inform you that you are not going to be tried. Commissioner Pullinger?"

The suited man smiled in a professional way that still conveyed just a little warmth. "This may come as something of a surprise after waiting several years, but the decision has been made to shelve the incident. The initial inquiry was unable to reach any verdict, and none of the subsequent investigations have done any better. It has been decided that it is not in the interests of the Confederation to draw out the matter any longer. All suspended personnel are to be reinstated and the matter will be considered closed."

Crowe suspected that meant that the inquiry into the Battle of Santorini had once again collapsed into an orgy of political infighting. No SolSec representative was going to say that in so many words, of course.

"No verdict has been returned, Lieutenant, so there is no case against you," Pullinger said with no hint of expression that might suggest whether he approved or not. "The official version of events, which you will repeat when queried, is that the actions of all involved were at least excusable and in most cases correct given the information available to them. The best interests of the Confederation are not served by a lengthy and expensive inquiry which may not produce any useful outcome."

"Yes sir, I understand," Crowe said dutifully, though in truth he was struggling to come to terms with this unexpected situation.

“You will be returning to duty, Lieutenant,” Pullinger said heavily. “You ordered your ship to fire on a squadron mate and there is not even going to be a court of inquiry over the incident. You would, I think, be advised to tread very carefully in the future if this matter is to remain closed.”

Crowe nodded at the threat. That, at least, was expected. “Yes sir,” he said again.

“Lieutenant Crowe,” Berdinelli said. “You are to be reinstated at your old rank of lieutenant, receiving no seniority for the six years you have spent with the Home Forces. You will not be required to resign your Home Guard commission; you will be listed as being on secondment while you were suspended from regular fleet duty. You will thus retain seniority earned while in Home Guard service, should you ever return to any branch of the Home Forces.”

“Yes sir,” Crowe repeated. It seemed like the safest thing to say.

“Now, I know that you have command experience,” Berdinelli went on. “Eleven months as commanding officer of the corvette CSS *Rosado*. Are you up to taking on an independent command?”

“Of course, sir,” Crowe replied. He’d be expected to say that no matter what the job was.

“Very well. You’ll be taking temporary command of a new vessel while she works up. There is an outside possibility that you will get to keep her, but I warn you that it’s unlikely. You will be responsible for shaking down the new vessel and reporting on her flaws so that follow-on members of her class can be modified on the ways. You will be asked to undertake some patrol work in the surrounding systems, but this is a technical exercise more than anything else. Your engineering background makes you an excellent choice.

“This isn’t a glamorous job, Crowe, but it puts you back in the right uniform. Chances are good that you will not even leave your base system for the duration of your tenure as commanding officer, but that does not mean it won’t be tough,” Berdinelli went on.

“I appreciate the opportunity, sir,” Crowe said like he was expected to.

“You’ll be taking command of CSS *Stormshadow*. She’s a patrol frigate of a new design, and your input will help eliminate the inevitable teething troubles of a new class. For the duration of this assignment you will hold the acting rank of lieutenant commander. Your orders will be

delivered to your quarters later today, and you'll begin transit to Carter Naval Base to take command within a few days. Your Home Guard superiors have already been informed. Questions?"

"Not at this time, sir."

"Then good luck, Lieutenant Commander," Berdinelli rose from her seat to shake Crowe's hand. "Dismissed."

CONFEDERATION NEWS AGENCY
Carter Naval Base, Barsoom System: 360-1107

In a brief ceremony held today, the first ship of the Confederation Navy's newest class was commissioned and formally unveiled to the public. CSS *Stormshadow* is a 2000-ton patrol frigate armed with a mix of beam weapons and missiles. Also carrying a contingent of marines, her class is to be an integral part of the Iron Gate doctrine revealed three years ago, and will undertake "patrol and intervention" operations rather than joining the fleet forces.

CSS *Stormshadow* will undertake yard trials before being handed over to her duty crew for operational assessment. During this time she will conduct a variety of exercises and tests, and will be available for patrol operations in nearby systems.

Representatives from several planetary governments in the region have welcomed the addition to local patrol forces and the increased naval presence it represents, citing numerous pirate and smuggling incidents in recent years. Rumors that the class is due to be redesignated as a fleet asset and assigned to fleet escort roles are vigorously denied by naval authorities, as is the suggestion that Solomani Security will receive the majority of these vessels.

Carter Naval Base Barsoom System 014-1108

The little speech had sounded pretty good when he'd written it. Yet somehow, despite all his rehearsals and the work on his delivery, Acting Lieutenant Commander Simon Crowe couldn't help but feel that his carefully chosen words were coming out flat and dull. He paused for a second, glancing over the divisions of his new crew, the crew of CSS *Stormshadow*.

He'd known what to expect, mainly from what the personnel files didn't say. Most of the officers were too young or too old for their posts. The older ones were plodders or politically suspect individuals passed over in favor of more zealous colleagues; the younger ones were more varied. None were politically connected, at least not in a positive way. Those with strings to pull pulled them and avoided postings like this one. That left the patrol forces with mediocre or politically unsophisticated officers, and ships like *Stormshadow* with a dangerously weak command crew.

Crowe took a breath and adjusted his black Navy cap. He exchanged a glance with the one person in *Stormshadow's* hold/configurable mission bay that he'd met before, and stifled a grimace. He'd served with Alice Browning when she was an earnest kid fresh off a Political Awareness course. Now she wore the gray of Solomani Security instead of Navy black, with a lieutenant commander's insignia. She wore it with pride as the ship's political officer and "second captain."

Bad enough to have to work with a SolSec goon looking over his shoulder, but it seemed as though she'd developed into a real zealot since Crowe had known her. And to top it all, she was a full lieutenant commander whilst his own promotion was only on an acting basis. He was the captain of the ship but he was outranked by his political officer. Well, there was nothing new there. The political officer always outranked the captain in real terms, no matter what fictions existed to the contrary.

"Gentles," Crowe began again. "We have been entrusted with . . . well, truthfully, we've been handed a very short stick."

A ripple of surprise ran through the divisions, and Browning shot Crowe a hard look from under her cap brim. He went on regardless. "We know the reality of the situation, and I won't tell you polite lies about it. In fact, I'll never lie to you. Most of the fleet budget goes to battle assets to keep the Imperials at bay." That, and politically inspired projects that cost a lot and achieved little, but he wasn't going to say quite so much in public.

"The need to protect our borders—just ten parsecs from here—from renewed Imperial aggression absorbs most of the budget, and I don't have a problem with that. Those ships and bases are preventing another war. We need them. But that means the security and patrol forces get to be Cinderella. That's just how it is. There's nothing at all to be done about it, and complaining won't help. But feel free to grumble anyway; I won't censure a crewmember for speaking the truth.

"Fact is, though, the job needs doing and we're the ones tasked with doing it. We're spread thin, trying to keep the peace on a shoestring, but if we get more ships and people it's at the expense of the battle fleets. Too much of that and our grandkids will be singing hymns to the Sunburst Banner. And that's what it comes down to, gentles. We get the job done somehow, so that our comrades-in-arms can hold the line and keep us free.

"We really can make a difference out here. *Stormshadow* and her sisters are the first of a new wave of patrol vessels. Our task is to make the system work, or show that nobody can so that our planners can try a new approach. And that's how it's going to be, gentles. We have a big job to do and we're part of a very small force. We may fail . . ." Browning gave him another hard look at that, but he went on regardless. "But if we do, it will be because nobody—absolutely nobody—could have

succeeded. So yes, we've been handed a short stick. *Stormshadow* was rushed to completion and we're going to have to contend with all her teething troubles whilst on an operational deployment. What we learn will make life easier for the crews of follow-on vessels."

Crowe found himself approaching the closing passage he'd written, only now it felt better, more sincere. "We set forth this day as pioneers. A new crew in a new ship, the first of her class. What we do will light the path for those who follow. So let us strive honorably and with respect for our ship and for one another. The task is daunting, and there may be those who do not think us able."

Crowe paused for a second, forcing himself not to look at those of his officers whose career thus far suggested that they were not up to the task. "I," he said at last, "am not among them."

With that Crowe stepped down from the podium and nodded to his new first officer. At fifty-six Miranda Carstairs was still a lieutenant yet not retired from the service, which told Crowe much about her. Clearly out of condition, she over-filled her black uniform. All the same it was crisply pressed and spotless.

"We're scheduled to depart dock for trials in two hours," Crowe said quietly. "If you'd care to dismiss the divisions and call an officers' meeting in the wardroom?"

"Aye sir," Carstairs responded, ascending the podium step with a little grunt. As she dismissed the crew to their posts, Crowe headed for the forward end of *Stormshadow*'s multimission bay and the metal staircase up to the command deck. Predictably, Alice Browning fell into step beside him.

At thirty-two, Browning looked about five or even ten years younger whereas Crowe was already going gray at thirty-six. Browning's petite frame seemed constantly bursting with energy. That hadn't changed, but other things had. There was a hardness about her large brown eyes and an intensity to her gaze that Crowe didn't like. She'd been such a nice kid, an innocent really, when they'd served together.

"Captain," Browning said formally as a way to start a conversation.

"Sir," Crowe responded. Their situation was awkward in a way that it would not have been if they were both fleet officers. It was not uncommon for a small ship with a long-serving commander as engineering or gunnery officer to get a new captain who was a mere lieutenant commander. The protocol was simple—they saluted one another and called

one another “sir” since one was of higher rank in the fleet and the other was the captain of the vessel. Crowe and Browning were technically the same rank at the moment, but Crowe’s promotion was temporary, which could be seen as making him junior to his political officer. Better to err on the side of polite formality, especially when dealing with SolSec.

“Captain?” Browning said, halting at the base of the staircase. “There’s something we need to deal with right now.”

A couple of crewmembers hurried past, eager to be out of earshot of whatever the political officer and the captain might be discussing. The general feeling in the fleet was it was safer not to know about these things. As they departed, Crowe made a “do go on” gesture rather than trying to feel his way through the maze of possible protocols that might apply here.

To his surprise, Browning smashed through the walls of the maze. “Simon,” she said. “It’s been a while.”

“It has indeed,” he agreed. “Eventful times for some of us.”

“In different ways. Well, not that different, I suppose. You transferred to the Home Guard while we were suspended, I went to SolSec. And now we’re back.”

“I’m back in the regular Fleet,” Crowe agreed. “But I don’t get seniority for the missing years.”

“I do, so long as I stay in SolSec . . . which suits me. It’s interesting work. Not what I set out to do, but we also serve who wear the wrong colored hat . . .”

Crowe chuckled dutifully at the old fleet joke. “So, what do we need to sort out?”

“The rank thing,” Browning said. “As far as I’m concerned, there isn’t a problem here. Acting or full commander, you’re the captain. My job is to support and advise you.” Her voice caught a little at that, reminding them both of a different time. A time when a very young Lieutenant Crowe asked the advice of his political officer and she had none to give.

“It gives the wrong impression if the captain salutes a political officer of equal rank,” Browning said, with tight control. “And we’ve got a difficult enough task ahead without muddying the waters that way. So let’s get this straight: mutual respect and courtesy, but you are senior in all ways . . . unless I overrule you on political grounds. Or relieve you.”

“Very well,” Crowe said, trying to take Browning’s words at face value. Her file suggested she’d turned into some kind of political zealot, or at least a hard-liner, but she was being sensible and friendly and . . . could it be that she genuinely wanted to support her new captain? That might be too much to ask for.

“With your permission, Captain,” Browning said suddenly. “I have a final report to send before we depart for our trials.”

“Of course,” Crowe said, deliberately informal. Barking “dismissed” seemed inappropriate somehow. He paused for a moment as Browning headed aft, and resumed his progress up to the command deck.

Barsoom System

015-1108

“BEO?” Crowe asked as conversationally as he could manage, forcing himself to remain seated despite his frustration. “What’s our technical status?”

Sublieutenant William Holmes ran a hand through his neatly-trimmed and entirely gray beard. Like the rest of the bridge crew he wore a pressure-tight crewsuit and a peaked Navy cap. His emergency gloves, helmet, and life support belt hung on his duty seat. His cuffs bore a single ring, the only one they’d ever have. Holmes had been promoted twice in a thirty-year fleet career—from cadet to midshipman and midshipman to sublieutenant. He seemed competent, so his lack of progress was probably for one of two other reasons. Maybe both.

“Sir, drive room reports that the coolant leak has been made safe. We do not need to return to port, but Lieutenant Dupuy recommends that we do not undertake full-power maneuvering until a proper repair has been carried out.” Dupuy was little more than half Holmes’s age and his superior . . . and his tone showed how much he liked that.

“Understood,” Crowe replied. “Guns, are we ready?”

Sublieutenant Christian Roebecker responded in his vast bass voice, “A and B batteries report ready sir. X battery is powered down but charging. Q battery is not loaded. Point defense reports ready.” Roebecker’s huge ebony hands covered much of his console, allowing him to make adjustments to his controls with the tiniest of movements. “Q battery is loading practice missiles now, sir.”

“Very well, prepare for live fire test,” Crowe said. “Helm, commence interception of the target drones. Ahead three quarters.”

“Aye sir,” replied the chief pilot, a second class petty officer named Williams. “Commencing intercept run now,”

“All hands, this is the captain,” Crowe announced. “Live fire exercise is recommencing.” From the port wing of the bridge, Alice Browning nodded assent. As with any use of the ship’s weapon systems, a live fire exercise required the consent of the political officer.

“Sir! X battery reports a malfunction,” Roebecker said. His gigantic voice rose a little as he spoke, but Crowe was not unduly concerned. Roebecker was just a kid, newly qualified from the gunnery school on Vantage and apparently still prone to nerves. He’d settle . . . hopefully.

Ignoring Holmes’s exasperated noise, Crowe asked, “What’s the problem?”

Roebecker forced calm. “It’s power feed, sir,” he rumbled. “The safety cutout keeps disabling the charge process.”

Browning was the first to respond. “The power feed is overloaded,” she said confidently. “You should be able to charge all four turrets at once, but slowly, or one or two at full rate, then transfer the feed to the next. It’s slow, but it’ll work. Oh, sorry Captain . . . my apologies.”

“Commander Browning is correct,” Crowe said evenly and with no trace of the annoyance he felt. At least, he hoped not. “Juggle the power feed for now and we’ll make a proper fix when we return to port.” The rest of the bridge crew might be puzzled to hear the political officer suggesting technical solutions to the gunner, but they were not in the least surprised at the breach of protocol. SolSec was the lord of all it surveyed, and moments like this served to remind everyone of that fact.

“Priority signal from Vice Admiral Spencer, CSN, OS, SS with Swords, commanding Carter Naval Base,” *Stormshadow’s* computer voice said. “Compliments of the admiral, respect to captain and crew. You are ordered to stand down from weapons test. New orders to follow imminently.”

Crowe glanced at the orders scrolling up his repeater—and Browning’s too of course. “Mr. Holmes,” he said. “Are we in a condition to jump?”

“Uh . . . yes sir, I believe so,” the bridge engineering officer responded. “We have fuel and power. Lieutenant Dupuy considers the

coolant pipe to be—in her words—‘suspect’ but feels we can enter jump safely.”

“Exec?” Crowe asked.

Lieutenant Miranda Carstairs took a while—far too long—to gather her data and answer, “Sir, we are properly provisioned and all necessary crew are aboard. However, we have no combat missiles; only practice ammunition. We are scheduled for three more days of trials, and already we have a problem with X battery and a non-functional turret in B battery. We are not properly combat ready, but we can transit.”

Crowe looked over the orders again. No reasons had been given, but sending out a ship that was supposed to be on trials to carry out a six-jump patrol with a duration of nine to twelve weeks was something he’d consider only in an emergency. “We can do it—what’s the job?” he muttered with heavy irony, quoting a phrase that fleet personnel used in every propaganda vid he’d ever seen. And occasionally in real life, too.

Stormshadow was not combat-ready, and in truth the defects they’d already found warranted a return to base for repairs. But a ship on station was a priceless asset, and even in her weakened state *Stormshadow* was still a 2000-ton patrol frigate capable of dealing with a range of threats. Was the responsible action to declare the ship unready and ask for the order to be withdrawn, or should they respond like the propaganda vids suggested?

Crowe shot Browning a questioning look. “Captain,” she replied formally. “Political Officer recommends that we overcome our present difficulties en route. Clearly we are needed. We should rise to this challenge.”

Spoken like a true zealot, Crowe thought, resenting the position she’d just put him in. There was nothing for it but to go along with the political decision even if he was unconvinced.

“You have a point, Lieutenant Commander Browning,” Crowe said after a moment’s thought. “*Stormshadow*: make signal. My compliments and so forth to the admiral, orders received and understood. Will comply as soon as we are able. Attach a preliminary report of our trials results.”

Crowe paused for a moment before switching to the shipwide channel. “All hands, this is the captain. We have been ordered to proceed immediately to the Zhongguo system and to carry out a four-jump patrol. Rig for jump. I repeat, rig for jump. This is not a drill.”

As the crew busied themselves with hurried preparations, Crowe stepped across to Browning's station. "You more or less committed my ship to this mission before she's ready. I'd like to know your thinking," he said. "I mean the real reason, without any political rhetoric."

She shrugged. "The reason is obvious, Captain. Your job is to think about the ship, mine is to consider the political situation. We're obviously needed on that patrol route. Maybe a ship's been retasked or there's an incident somewhere. We're not up to speed but we're an armed presence and we can do a lot of good just by being there."

"Hmm," Crowe was unconvinced. "Assuming we can be combat-ready by the time something happens. This is a gamble . . . are you sure it's worth taking?"

"Manifestly, Captain," Browning said with great confidence. "And besides, there's another factor at play here that's worth taking a risk for."

"What's that?" Crowe demanded.

"The honor of the ship and her company, of course," Browning said, and Crowe could find nothing in her tone to suggest that she was anything less than totally sincere.

Barsoom System 015-1108

“BEO . . . what’s our drive status?” Crowe said, trying to emulate the conversational tone one of his old commanding officers had used. He was tense, too tense, and it wouldn’t do for the crew to see it.

This was *Stormshadow*’s first jump. True, the yard personnel had run high-power trials and endless semi-live simulations on the whole system, but ultimately the only way to test a ship’s ability to jump was to jump. It was a test that could have very graphic and final results.

“Drive room reports all systems ready, Captain,” replied Sublieutenant Holmes. “We are fully fuelled for two consecutive two-parsec jumps, plus normal reserve for maneuver and small craft operations. Systems are online and ready.”

“Good. Astrogator?”

“Course for Zhongguo laid in and ready, Captain,” replied Miranda Carstairs from her station. On a small ship, officers wore more than one hat and Carstairs was astrogation officer as well as executive officer. The helm could be handled by a petty officer, but fleet regulations stated that astrogators were all commissioned officers. They were, after all, among the small number of personnel aboard any ship who could destroy it in an instant with a single error.

“Very well, commence jump sequence,” Crowe ordered.

“Jump sequence, aye sir,” Carstairs responded.

“Engineering officer reports fast-burn sequence commenced. System operating within normal parameters,” Holmes said.

The jump drive consumed phenomenal amounts of power as it translated the ship into jumpspace, and a significantly smaller amount to maintain the jump field that protected the vessel there during its week-long transit. If the system failed or fuel ran out . . . well, actually nobody knew exactly what happened then. Crowe had always wondered if it was really necessary to maintain a jump field, but had no inclination to try that particular experiment.

Nobody had reported what happened when a jump field failed, which suggested that the consequences were pretty bad, and an erratic or damaged system was known—from the horrible experiences of personnel involved—to produce highly unpleasant and damaging effects. Curious as he was, Crowe had no intention of finding out what might happen if the field dipped below the known safe threshold.

“Power has reached adequate levels for jump,” Holmes said.

“Go to Ready One,” said Crowe, ordering the officer in charge of initiating jump—normally the astrogator, though it could be done from the drive room—to begin charging the ship’s external jump grid.

“Ready One, aye sir,” Carstairs said. “Ready One Initiated . . . Ready One attained.”

“BEO?” Crowe asked.

“Drive room reports no malfunctions. We can maintain Ready One for at least nine hundred seconds without endangering fuel margins. Drives are ready to jump.”

“Go to Ready Two,” Crowe said, resisting the urge to get out of his seat and pace or to lick his dry lips.

“Ready Two, aye sir,” Carstairs replied. “Ready Two initiated.”

There was a pause of several seconds, then the first officer added, “Ready Two attained. We are ready to jump.”

“Very well. BEO?”

“Engineering reports ready,” Holmes said.

“All hands, this is the captain,” Crowe said into his microphone. “Prepare for imminent jump. Ten seconds. Lieutenant Carstairs, if you please . . . take us into jump.”

“Jump insertion, aye sir,” Carstairs replied formally, flipping the cover off the jump-initiation handle and detaching the safety lock. It responded to her biometrics; only designated officers could operate the jump controls.

“All hands, jump in five seconds,” Crowe said into his headset.

Carstairs twisted the jump initiation handle into position. “Jumping in three, two, one . . .” she said, then pushed the handle all the way home until it locked in the far position. “Jumping.”

Crowe shuddered as an icy wave of what felt like radio static, or electricity, or silent noise, or . . . *something* . . . washed over him, leaving a queasy sensation and a moment of disorientation. He heard Holmes slap the console in front of him, arresting his fall. The BEO must have blacked out for a second; that happened to some people, and not always predictably.

“Urgh, beer is cheaper and more fun,” Holmes said, shaking his head and trying to focus. Crowe laughed despite his own discomfort.

“All stations, report,” Crowe ordered.

“Engineering reports no significant issues. The jump drive is operating normally in sustained mode, fuel usage is within normal limits—Lieutenant Dupuy describes it as ‘encouragingly low’—and we have one minor casualty. A crewman left his station early and fell. Just a scrape, though.” Holmes’s voice firmed up as he read off the report, grogginess already fading.

“Operations division reports no casualties, no damage,” Carstairs said. “Astrogation officer reports that we have entered jump successfully. Drive and course parameters indicate a good entry and a high probability of emergence at the target point.”

“Acknowledged. Guns?” Crowe asked.

“Gunnery department has nothing to report, sir” Roebecker replied. “Security and minor damage sweep will begin in moments.”

“Thank you, guns,” Crowe replied. It was the job of the ship’s gunnery personnel and marines to sweep the ship for anything untoward just after entering jump. The patrols went armed and equipped for damage control, though exactly what threats they might encounter was an open question. Someone somewhere had written a regulation that a security sweep was necessary, so it was done.

In practice the patrols simply made a note of any minor damage from vibration and picked up anything that had not been properly secured. Rarely was there an incident more serious than a cracked coffee pot to deal with. But in theory the patrol might catch stowaways who thought it was safe to emerge from hiding, or spot a serious piece of stress damage before it became fatal.

Crowe suspected that the real reason for the patrols was a combination of giving the marines and gunners something to do—everyone else had an important task during jump entry, but the fighting crewmembers were utterly redundant—and the equivalent of a parent looking in the closet to reassure their child that there were no monsters in there.

Even after centuries of jump travel, it still had an almost superstitious *wrongness* about it that made people nervous. There were those that honestly believed that monsters lurked in jumpspace. Crowe, on the other hand, knew how dangerous jump entry could be if something went wrong, and considered monsters to be a much less serious threat than a misplaced digit in the fuel flow calculations.

Death by monster would probably be more merciful than what Crowe suspected might happen aboard a critically misjumped vessel. There were no indications that he would be finding out today, though, and that was always something to be thankful for.

Jumpspace

015-1108

Crowe glanced around the wardroom at his officers. Most of them were present; Carstairs was on the bridge and the marine commander, Morwood, was filling the officer of the watch slot. At present that meant sitting in the ship's main office waiting for something to happen that required an officer's attention.

The remains of dinner had been cleared away, leaving the command crew to discuss the business of the day over a glass of wine, beer, or whatever else was their preference. Browning drank water; Roebecker liked red wine. Crowe himself had a cup of coffee with a little rum in it, an experiment that wasn't working out all that well. The rum just made his already less than excellent Navy coffee even more bitter and unpleasant.

Holmes nursed half a glass of beer, sitting as far away as he could from his superior, Lieutenant Fiona Dupuy. Dupuy was approaching thirty, which was not young to be engineering officer aboard a frigate; Holmes was nearing sixty, which was very old not to be. Crowe could see why the animosity between them existed, but that did not make it any more useful.

Ironically, both the technical and engineering officers suffered from the same career-stalling flaw. The parts of their files accessible only to the political officer might say more, but even from the hints in the "naval" part of the file it was obvious that both were considered politically suspect. Holmes was openly critical of the Solomani Party that ran the Confederation, while Dupuy's transgression was not obvious nor specifi-

cally listed. It was possibly nothing more than being distantly related to someone arrested for treason years ago, but that was enough to stall an officer's career these days.

The other two officers were totally unlike. Second Lieutenant Piotr Urasnicz of the Confederation Marines was just six weeks out of officer training. He'd retained the incredible standard of fitness that many officer candidates aspired to, hoping that physical prowess might give them an edge in selection and a better berth. It hadn't worked very well in Urasnicz's case; he'd ended up aboard *Stormshadow*.

Lieutenant Thomas Connelly, the ship's doctor, would have done anything to avoid space service. Excessively thin, with a shock of bright red hair and a wispy beard that he must surely have been told to get rid of on many occasions, Connelly had been well on the way to a promising career in neurosurgery when he was drafted into the navy.

Promises of fast-track promotion in the medical branch, funding for his final years of study, and a letter of commendation from the navy when his mandatory four years were up had not mollified Connelly in the slightest. Six months into his stint, he was just beginning to find ways of making himself an effective nuisance without incurring serious censure.

Crowe had met the type before, and he sympathized. His own naval service was a career choice made whilst studying engineering at the Martell Institute on Vantage. He actually wanted to be in uniform and had volunteered. Indeed, rather than leave the service after Santorini he'd transferred to the Home Guard and requested a court-martial. They were going to have to push him out if they wanted rid of him, whereas Connelly would have leaped out the nearest airlock given the chance.

"Very well then," Crowe said over the buzz of conversation. "Dinner is concluded, business may now be discussed. Let's begin with impressions of the day."

"Well, nobody died," offered Connelly flippantly. "That's always good."

"Quite," Crowe said, not sure exactly how much rein to give his medical officer. "Anything specific?"

"We've identified a number of design faults, sir," Dupuy said. "Some of the pipe and conduit routings are . . . suboptimal. Sharp bends are prone to failure when you have high pressure coolant running around them. And some of the piping looks like an afterthought. It protrudes in

places where my crewmembers have to move quickly. We've already had some bangs and scrapes, and in a combat situation it could be a serious impediment—might even cause casualties.”

“We'll compile a thorough defects list,” Crowe agreed, wondering how many routine incidents and minor mistakes Dupuy would blame on the ship design. It was an excellent scapegoat for an officer who thought she needed to deflect criticism. “We'll need your crews to list literally every hazardous bend, protrusion, and badly sited bracket. Run an on-going audit; take a small area each shift and compile as we go. By the time we get back to base we should have quite a catalog . . .”

“If I might offer an outsider's impression?” Browning said. “I stand slightly apart from the crew and I'm not part of any department. I'm not speaking from a political point of view, just what I saw as an observer. Actually, no, this is a political point of view . . .”

“Do go on,” Crowe said.

“Well . . . the jump and maneuver drives function, the weapons test went adequately although some of our weaponry is going to need attention. The crew got their jobs done well enough to respond very promptly to a change in orders. There's plenty that's not as good as it could be, and naval inspectors might or might not be impressed. But we can move and we can shoot. We can crew our vessel well enough to take it out and do the job. The fleet is a political instrument, especially if you consider naval operations to be ultimately an expression of policy.”

“Are you saying you think we're good enough?” Crowe asked.

“Yes and no, sir. I'm saying that this ship is a political instrument and is capable of functioning as one. We have achieved that. Yes, there are many things that can be better, and I really have no idea about how good is going to be good enough. But we can get the job done with what we have. I sensed that during the trials; that's why I recommended we comply with our new orders. We're good enough to get started; we can get better as we go.”

A moment's silence greeted this statement of possible approval from the political officer. Then Crowe spoke up. “About these new orders,” he said.

Crowe waited a moment for the inevitable grumbling to start, and sure enough Holmes and Connelly both had comments to make about being suddenly yanked from a shakedown exercise and sent haring off into the wilderness. Crowe let them get started and then cut them off,

hoping they would get the point without having to be explicitly told how to behave in the wardroom.

“We have been ordered to make a sweep through Zhongguo, Nonsuch, Chinon and Dolor before returning to base via Theseus. Dolor has a small naval base with repair facilities capable of handling ships of our size, so we will spend some time there to repair whatever defects have presented themselves during our cruise. Zhongguo, Nonsuch, and Chinon are short visits, probably two to five days in duration depending on local circumstances. We will spend two to three weeks in the Theseus system, on protection-of-commerce duties, and then return to base, at which point leave will be granted.”

Every officer knew that the duration of a patrol in-system was variable, to prevent hostiles from predicting exactly when a ship would be arriving or leaving. A recommended duration was picked upon arrival by an automated timer to prevent a captain's habits making him predictable, though many officers routinely ignored the timer. Zhongguo, Nonsuch, and Chinon were backwater systems and had thus been assigned short-duration patrols; Theseus was on a major trade route and was worthy of a longer visit.

“We will be making four jumps including this one before reaching the base at Dolor,” Crowe said. “And as usual spending more time in transit than actually in-system. I want to use the time in jump as productively as possible. This redeployment actually means we have longer to go about shaking down the ship, which is good. You don't know a house until you've lived in it for a while, so to speak, and we're getting longer to live in ours. So, I'd like to take the shakedown steadily and be methodical about it.

“My intention is to do a big-issues audit of the ship over the next few days and find anything that requires immediate attention. We'll be working to restore proper function to the armament as a priority, unless we find something more urgent that needs dealing with. The other critical component that needs attention is the crew.”

Crowe held up a hand, stifling the automatic protests and expressions of confidence in the crew. “The crew are obviously competent. As Commander Browning pointed out, we can move and shoot and function as a proper navy warship. I want to start building on that as of today. We'll take a look at watch rosters and working procedures during

this first jump, and run some simple exercises. Nothing complex until we've gained a proper familiarity with the ship.

"My intentions are simply stated," Crowe said with a hint of defiance. "We've been handed a short stick. We've got a barely-completed vessel and a crew that hadn't worked together before they were assigned to *Stormshadow*. Instead of a shakedown we're on an operational deployment. My intention is to return to port with a ship and crew to be proud of, fit to be sent straight out again.

"In short," Crowe said to his officers. "I intend to come back to base with a much better ship than we were given."

Zhongguo System 023-1108

“Signal from Zhongguo Highport, Captain,” *Stormshadow*’s command computer reported within seconds of their emergence from jumpspace. “Emergency band beacon and warning to all vessels. Docking permission is denied for the duration of an unspecified emergency.”

Crowe exchanged looks with Browning, who shrugged slightly. “I have no relevant information, Captain,” said the political officer, then turned to her console and began sifting through all the data she could collate.

“Bridge officers’ situation report,” Crowe said, then added for the benefit of the ship’s computer, “Sound General Quarters and clear for action.” He glanced at the battle plot that flicked into being in front of him. There were two ships in the vicinity of the port; one around eight hundred tons displacement and one that was closer to *Stormshadow*’s own size. A handful of utility craft were also pegged, plus a couple of system defense gunboats farther out. At least nobody seemed to be shooting at one another.

As the klaxon blared there was little movement aboard the vessel. The crew were already at their action stations and suited up for jump emergence. “All hands, this is the captain,” Crowe said on the shipwide channel. “Zhongguo Highport is declaring an emergency and we are proceeding to assist. There is no more information at this time.”

“Sir, engineering reports drives are functional within previously reported limits,” said Sublieutenant Holmes from the bridge engineering officer’s position. “We have sufficient fuel remaining for another jump of

up to two parsecs. Jump drive is offline but will be available in approximately thirty minutes. Chief engineer recommends we do not jump without maintenance and recalibration.”

“Noted,” Crowe confirmed.

“Sir, A and B batteries are charging and will be ready to fire in four minutes,” Roebecker rumbled from the gunnery console. “X battery is charging and will be available in . . . sixty-one minutes at best estimate. Q battery is loading, but have only practice munitions available. Point defense reports ready, but bridge-ventral turret is not responding.”

“Tell X battery to charge one turret and take the others offline.” Crowe kept his tone even, but hearing that his ship still had half her teeth missing was uncomfortable to say the least.

“Sir, we have full helm and comms capabilities. Operations division reports all stations ready,” As first officer, Miranda Carstairs doubled as the head of the operations division, which handled everything from piloting the ship to cleaning it. Gunnery fought and engineering handled technical tasks; ops did everything else.

“Captain, signal from independent merchant vessel *Intrepid Marketeer*. Signal from Imperial liner *Catania Star*.” *Stormshadow*’s computer voice reported. The second was intriguing. An Imperial-registered vessel in a system where the port had just declared an emergency? Unusual, and possibly serious.

“My compliments, greetings, and whatnot to *Marketeer*,” Crowe said. “And ask them to please hold. Greetings to the Imperial, play their message.”

The space normally filled by the battle plot displayed what looked like an up market hotel’s conference suite. It was a second before Crowe realized that he was looking at the liner’s bridge. Smartly uniformed humans and a couple of Vargr sat at what looked like genuine wood-paneled consoles. They wore the red jackets and peaked caps of Tukera Lines, a major Imperial shipping line. *The* major Imperial shipping line, at least according to their marketing people.

The liner’s captain was an old Vargr, with gray around his muzzle and at his throat. The rest of his fur was sandy brown. He wore dual insignia—a civilian captain’s rank and the tabs of an Imperial Navy commander with “retired” bars. “Commander . . . Crowe, isn’t it?” the old Vargr said in oddly accented Galanglic.

“Yes . . . yes, sir,” said Crowe, deciding to be more polite than was strictly necessary. His own Galanglic probably sounded strange to someone from the Imperial Core, a couple of sectors and a major state border away. “Lieutenant Commander Simon Crowe, CSS *Stormshadow*. We’ve just arrived and are assessing the situation.”

The Imperial crew knew all that from their sensors and database, but the statement would be considered courteous. Given the ticklish state of cross-border affairs, it was best for everyone to be as polite as possible. “Captain Jensen Garingerry,” the Vargr said, giving a Galanglicized version of his name as a courtesy to those unfamiliar with Vargr pronunciation. “*Catania Star*, Tukera registry. We have no injuries aboard and do not intend to create an incident out of what just happened. We’re on a trade and goodwill mission, so you’ll understand that the absolute last thing on our agenda is causing trouble.”

“That’s good to hear, Captain Garingerry,” Crowe said guardedly, wondering what was going on to make such a declaration necessary. “Forgive me, I’ve got a signal incoming from the planetary government.”

“Of course, Crowe. When you’ve sorted out your little problem I’d be glad to entertain your officers aboard my ship.”

“Appreciated, *Catania Star*. *Stormshadow* out.” Crowe glanced at Browning, who had been wagging a hand for attention for a few seconds. He nodded in her direction.

“Captain, I’ve got the government on comms. I’m handling it,” Browning reported, making Crowe bite down on a retort. That was presumptuous, but within SolSec’s remit. But then, what was not within their remit? He turned his attention to the merchant vessel instead.

“*Intrepid Marketeer*. This is . . .” Crowe began, but his words were buried under an avalanche of protests, complaints, and threats to go to the navy board from the independent ship’s captain. Somewhere in the middle of the rant, Crowe managed to glean that *Intrepid Marketeer* had been ordered to break off a docking approach and get out of the way as *Catania Star* hurriedly departed the port. Now both ships were stuck in a holding pattern and the port was closed and the incomparably valuable perishable cargo aboard *Marketeer* was spoiling and there were Imperial spies aboard that liner damn-it-all and . . .

Crowe listened for long enough that an board of inquiry would not consider him “lacking in courtesy to civilian commercial vessels” then

broke the connection, leaving the *Intrepid Marketeer*'s skipper in mid-rant. He turned to Browning, trying not to frown.

"Captain, the Minister for Internal Affairs of Zhongguo is requesting Aid to Civil Power," Browning said flatly.

Crowe did not react, not outwardly anyway. Aid to Civil Power was a direct request for military assistance from the Confederation armed forces. Maybe Browning was not being so presumptuous after all—such a request had to go through the political officer of any force or vessel. Crowe swallowed his annoyance and simply said, "Explain?"

"There is serious rioting at the highport and some planetside as well. The latter is contained for now, but the security services at the port have lost control over large parts of the facility. Notably, that includes the docking areas. They can't get troops up from the planetary surface to restore control."

"How did this happen?" Crowe asked, mainly to buy time to think.

"Apparently, someone took exception to the Imperial delegation—the one that came in aboard that liner. The whole place must have been a powder keg though, with some pretty major underlying issues, because the result was instant anarchy. The security forces managed to get the Imperials back to their ship and out of the port, but they're more or less besieged in the control section now, with armed mobs running around the port looting the place and fighting one another."

"One another?" Crowe said.

"I have no information on what they're fighting over, but I could take an educated guess," Browning offered. "If I sift through some intelligence data and recent news reports, get some idea about which factions are dominant . . ."

"We don't care," Crowe broke in. "The highport is a government facility and it's in the hands of rioters. We have been requested to provide assistance. I presume that they want us to retake the docking area so they can bring up their own forces to restore order? Surely they don't think we carry enough troops to subdue the rioting on our own."

"The highport's population is just over eighteen thousand at the most recent estimate," Browning offered. "The world government knows we carry only one platoon of marines. I made sure of that."

"Advise the minister for internal affairs that we intend to recapture and hold part of the docking area," Crowe said after a moment's pause. "Be sure that he understands our forces are very limited and can hold for

only a short time if seriously attacked. And that they're not security trained, they're combat troops. If these rioters attack our people there will be fatalities."

"Yes sir," Browning replied, adding after a moment, "Understood and accepted."

"Then inform the government of Zhongguo that we stand ready to assist them," Crowe said. "Exec? I want a briefing with the marine officers and yourself in the wardroom. Ten minutes."

Zhongguo System

023-1108

Crowe watched the operation unfold on his plot. The early stages went well enough; the two shuttles reached the docking area and took up position a few meters from one of the launch bay doors. They were shut and sealed, of course, but Crowe had planned for that.

The shuttles were carrying a platoon of marines between them, plus a handful of volunteers from among the crew with Lieutenant Carstairs in overall command. As Crowe observed, a vacc-suited squad disembarked from one shuttle and began cutting through a maintenance access hatch, sealing the hole with a flexible boarding lock. Two eight-marine sections then entered the docking area while the third section, along with Carstairs's volunteers, waited in the second shuttle.

The marines were armed for bear. Each trooper carried either a 4.8mm bullpup assault rifle or the slightly longer light support version of the same weapon, using an 80-round drum instead of the 42-round magazine of the rifles. One man in each section had a multirole launcher under the barrel of his rifle, capable of delivering either a breaching charge or an anti-personnel grenade. The rifles were backed up by handguns, grenades and bayonets in case things got really desperate.

The boarding party remained suited as they moved through the maintenance area, despite the fact that atmospheric integrity had not been compromised by their entry. As they reached the docking bay floor the two sections split up; eight marines moving to secure the docking control areas along with the marines' second-in-command, Second Lieu-

tenant Piotr Urasnicz. The other section split into two teams of four and began searching the docking bays for any threat that might emerge.

Crowe split his feed, superimposing the view from Lieutenant Urasnicz's helmet camera on a general situation map that used what he hoped was an up to date schematic of the port. Urasnicz's squad was moving fast, following standard combat zone drills. Marines leapfrogged from one position to another in pairs, those not moving covering those that were. Urasnicz himself was in the middle of the group, his L68A4 rifle tracking possible ambush points.

Now and then a lone civilian or a small knot of portside workers bolted at the sight of the space-suited marines, or stood still with hands clearly visible. Most of them looked scared, caught up in events beyond their control. It was impossible to tell what anyone might do, though, so the marines carefully watched everyone they passed, ordering anyone in the way to stand aside.

Just short of the control area, Urasnicz's squad came across a handful of port workers and civilians. They were tending to a couple of workers and a security guard who seemed to have been roughed up. At the approach of the marines, most looked relieved and a babble of explanations broke out.

"One at a time!" Urasnicz barked. He pointed at an older woman in a Port Authority uniform with supervisor's insignia. "SITREP," he demanded.

The supervisor blinked and fiddled with her forage cap for a moment, trying to collect her thoughts. Then she dragged herself more upright, almost to attention, and spat out a surprisingly concise description of recent events. The gist of it was as expected: A mob of what seemed to be rioters had stormed the docking bay control area, beaten the guards pretty severely and taken their weapons. Now about a dozen people, with at least three firearms, were holed up in the control offices. No shots had been fired.

"What's this all about?" Urasnicz demanded.

The supervisor shrugged. "It came out of nowhere. The Imperial ship had been in dock for about three hours when a mob tried to storm it. Portside security did what they're supposed to and protected the visitors."

She seemed to be looking for vindication, but Urasnicz was not interested in making the port authority feel better about fighting their own people on behalf of Imperials. "Casualties?" he demanded.

"Some, none fatal. Shots were fired."

"And this triggered a widespread riot?" Urasnicz asked.

Crowe's irritation had been growing as he listened to the exchange. Despite his determination not to micromanage his people, he needed to get the mission back on track. "Lieutenant Urasnicz," he said. "Shuttles are lifting off from the downport with government troops aboard. We need the docking area secured immediately."

"Sir!" Urasnicz barked. "All right squad, prepare to move up. Get all noncombatants out of the docking area and assist these casualties." The latter was for the benefit of the port workers. Some of them seemed to be Home Guard members who might be willing to assist the marines, but Urasnicz rightly decided not to trust anyone but his own squad.

The marines resumed their advance, reaching the control area in moments. The approach corridor had been crudely barricaded with office furniture, and there were a couple of civilians hunkered down behind the pile of overturned desks and chairs.

"Confederation marines!" Urasnicz yelled out, stepping into the corridor. Two of his marines flanked him, weapons not quite pointed at the barricade. It might offer some concealment and could possibly stop handgun rounds, but automatic fire from the marines' matte-black 4.8mm assault rifles would slash right through the flimsy cover.

Urasnicz gave the civilians long enough to take a good look at him, then added, "Throw out your weapons and come out with your hands up."

"We're unarmed!" one of the civilians called back, making no attempt to move.

"Come out now!"

"You've got no authority here!" one of the civilians called back.

"We are giving Aid to Civil Power. This is a government-owned facility and we have been ordered to return it to proper control. Interference is a criminal act, and we are empowered to use whatever means are necessary.

"You wouldn't fire on unarmed people!" came the retort, but the other civilian seemed less sure. He spoke urgently and rapidly to his companion.

Crowe finally ran out of patience. “*Mister Urasnicz!*” he snapped into his headset. “Government shuttles are inbound with troops aboard. I told them they would have a place to land. Be so kind as to take care of it, if you will.” He switched channels. “Lieutenant Carstairs?”

“Sir?” came the immediate response from *Stormshadow*’s executive officer, aboard one of the shuttles outside the docking bay.

“Lieutenant Carstairs, is Lieutenant Morwood with you?” Crowe knew she was; his situation plot showed the commander of *Stormshadow*’s marines right beside the executive officer.

“I’m here, Captain,” Morwood responded.

“*Mister Urasnicz* is dragging his feet,” Crowe said with deliberate calm. “You may need to take more direct action. Brief the reserve for an explosive entry to the docking bay and warn the squads inside for depressurization. If Mr. Urasnicz does not have the doors open in six hundred seconds, you will blow them and then cut away sufficient of the debris to permit entry.”

Crowe glanced across at Browning, expecting some comment, but the “second captain” just nodded assent. “I’m talking to the Minister, Captain,” she said. “He’s asking for an update.”

“Tell him we’ve got people aboard and we’re working to secure the docking area. His shuttles are, what, twenty-five minutes out? The bay will be secure for them. Assure him of that.”

“Sir,” Browning acknowledged. They both knew it was a hopeful assurance rather than a certainty, but that was the way things often played out—make a commitment and then try to deliver on it. Usually the navy succeeded; often enough that its promises were considered the equivalent of physical laws in some circles. Mainly by people who did not know what it could cost to deliver on a promise.

Urasnicz was finally moving, leading his squad forward at a determined pace. One of the civilians at the barricade bolted down the corridor. The other hopped smartly over it and sat down on an office desk with a smug sneer on his face.

Crowe bit back the urge to tell Urasnicz what to do. Both of his marine officers were young and inexperienced; they needed to build confidence and yelling orders at them would not help with that. But all the same, Crowe could see what was happening. The civilian was the sort of self-righteous idiot who believed that his cause was The One True Way.

He was right, everyone else was wrong, and because of that nobody was allowed to do anything bad to him.

Two of the marines bodily picked up the civilian and tossed him aside. "You are not under arrest. Go home and stay there until the crisis is over," Urasnicz said as his squad kicked the improvised barricade aside. He turned to follow them through the gap, then stumbled as the civilian grabbed at him. Urasnicz turned, struggling with his outraged, purple-faced attacker.

One of the marines solved that particular problem with a blow of a rifle butt to the kidney area, and a stamp into the back of the knees. The civilian collapsed writhing to the ground, gasping out threats and protests.

"You know," Browning said conversationally, "I'd expect a complaint about that to come in sooner or later, probably through the very government that we're trying to support. People like that are quite willing to use the system when they're not waving placards about how much they hate it. For the record, that marine acted correctly and with great restraint considering the circumstances."

Crowe nodded, adding, "We're acting with a bit too much restraint right now. Urasnicz needs to get moving."

Although the command feed had been off when his captain spoke, Urasnicz began leading his squad at a rapid march to the control room. They rounded the final bend to find a handful of young people, mostly in civilian clothes with yellow-and-blue armbands, blocking the corridor. Urasnicz halted and started talking again, but this time Crowe's patience had run out.

"Lieutenant Morwood, tell Urasnicz to get those people out of the way!" Crowe ordered, and within seconds the order had bounced down the chain of command. Still Urasnicz hesitated, exchanging words with the armband-wearing protestors, rioters, or whatever they were.

"Lieutenant Carstairs," Crowe grated. "Explosive entry is a go. Morwood is to deploy her breaching team immediately and begin emplacing explosives. Detonation is authorized as soon the charges are in place unless directly countermanded by myself. Cut away the debris and enter the docking bay with the utmost dispatch. Secure the docking bay against all hostile forces and await arrival of government troops."

"Acknowledged, sir," Carstairs said nervously. "Sir, Lieutenant Morwood informs me that the squad already in the bay has encountered

civilians who refuse to leave. They are not suited. If we open the docking gates or if we breach them, any unprotected personnel will be killed.”

“I am aware of that, Lieutenant,” Crowe replied. “You have your orders.”

“Sir, I protest!” Carstairs burst out. Crowe wasn’t sure whether she was just covering her ass for the inevitable inquiry or protesting for what might be considered more valid reasons, but he was out of time. He took a second to flick between Urasnicz’s helmet camera feed and the general situation plot. Then, as if accidentally, he switched to the general command frequency that Urasnicz, Morwood, Carstairs and the whole incompetent mob of them could hear.

“All hands, brace for acceleration,” Crowe said. “Pilot. Commence least-time approach on the docking bay areas. Take us close by on an attack vector. Guns. Point defense ready, we may need it. Get bridge-ventral online if you possibly can. A and B batteries will target the docking bay doors. You will fire as you bear, and you will continue firing until there is a gap in the doors wide enough for shuttles to enter through. Political Officer. You concur?”

Crowe turned to glare right at his “second captain.” She flinched a little at the raw fury and frustration she saw; she’d seen it before. Her voice was absolutely even as she responded. “Lieutenant Commander Alice Browning, Political Officer, CSS *Stormshadow*.” Browning paused, looking her captain in the eye with a little fear but an equal amount of resolve. After a slight pause she finished her sentence. “I concur with Commander Crowe’s orders.”

Zhongguo System

024-1108

The wardroom door closed behind Lieutenant Morwood, leaving Browning and Crowe alone for the first time in a whole and very eventful day.

“So,” Crowe said at last. “It might help if our reports match up. The big picture is . . . better than it might have been. Zhongguo Highport is back under government control, with no fatalities. None caused by the Confederation Navy, anyway.”

“I was planning on telling the truth,” Browning retorted, a little sharply. They were both tired and irritable, which could make the usual tension between captain and political officer worse.

“So was I, at least most of it. Some details might be . . . counter-productive.”

Browning nodded at that. “Yes. The fact that you . . . we . . . had to bluff our own officers into thinking we were about to shoot our way into the highport with the ship’s guns? That might not reflect well on them.”

“It wasn’t a bluff, Alice,” Crowe said. “But I would prefer to report that we did that as a backup plan to overcome setbacks than because our own people failed to carry out their orders.”

“The vertical stroke is a myth,” Browning replied. “If some of our people underperformed, it doesn’t necessarily mean censure for the whole chain of command.”

“I know that.” Crowe wasn’t a hundred percent sure, in truth, that a failing in his crew would not attract the dreaded “vertical stroke” from whoever felt distant enough to dump his wrath upon everyone involved

with the incident. It was one way a senior officer could protect himself from the repercussions of a bungled mission. "It's just that our officers do have some promise. If they're crushed now then they'll be worthless."

"Fair enough," Browning said. "From the top then. My impression is that Carstairs is what her file suggests—a plodder who should never have been given a first officer's berth no matter how much seniority she might have. She's a good, steady officer in many ways. The sort that keeps the ship working properly and gets the paperwork done. She's not a fighting officer and she never will be."

"I agree, more or less. As first officer, Carstairs was the only possible choice for forward command of the operation. She not only failed to provide adequate leadership but as far as I can tell she actually stalled Morwood when she was pushing for action. And then she protested instead of acting when we needed to move."

"The protest was . . . in many ways . . . fair enough," Browning said carefully. "But Carstairs may have protested more because she did not want to take responsibility for acting. The marines had warned the locals to clear the dock and they refused. They'd had fair warning and they'd created the situation in the first place. Carstairs's lack of decisive action jeopardized the mission."

"Agreed," Crowe said. "Morwood was stuck in a difficult position, with a subordinate who wasn't getting the job done and an immediate superior who wasn't making things any easier. I fail to see how she had a chance to make much difference, though she should have been leaning on Urasnicz a lot harder and maybe pushing the teams in the bay to be more forceful."

"Urasnicz." Browning said the marine officer's name carefully, as though even mentioning it meant opening a can of worms.

"Both our marine officers suffer from the same problem: inexperience. Morwood should be doing Urasnicz's job, serving out a couple more years as support officer and following simple orders. She's not ready to be the senior marine officer on site, and she doesn't yet understand how much authority she has. Nor is she ready to act as a mentor for Urasnicz."

Browning nodded at Crowe's evaluation. "True. Urasnicz is just a few weeks out of training and this was his first deployment. I got the impression that he allowed the bad guys to stall him mainly because he

was scared to commit himself. Once Morwood started yelling at him he got going and cleared the control area well enough.”

“Well, we’ve established that our marine contingent can bash people with rifle butts to an adequate standard, and that they can win a fight with an approximately equal number of more or less unarmed civilians. That’s about the best we can say about it. This was not our finest hour.” Crowe suddenly chuckled wryly as a thought struck him.

“What is it?” Browning asked.

“What if this *was* our finest hour?” Crowe said. “We suspected, and now we know, that our command personnel are dangerously weak. The next time could be much worse. Question is, do we try to build them up, give them confidence, and hope they’ll rise to the challenge, or do we try to get rid of some of them?”

“Any replacements we’d get will have the same flaws—plodders, over-promoted and inexperienced, politically suspect or some combination of all those. It might be better to work with what we have,” Browning suggested.

“We’ll be giving them a chance to screw up in ever-larger ways,” Crowe said. “But all the same, my feeling is that you’re right. Urasnicz froze, not because he didn’t know what to do, but because he wasn’t willing to take responsibility for doing it. Morwood lacked the confidence to make him act, and Carstairs just never got the habit of making decisions. Maybe they’ll grow into real officers if we let them. Let’s give them a chance.”

“So we write this up in a positive light?” Browning said.

“No, we write the bald truth and let it speak for itself. But we also accept what happened and work on being better next time . . .” Crowe trailed off, lost in thought, and Browning nodded sadly, knowing just what he was thinking.

Santorini System

231-1101

Lieutenant Simon Crowe scratched at the feeble attempt he'd made at the "navy beard" popular among warship captains at present. He'd started growing it the day he'd taken command of the escort corvette CSS *Rosado* and now, three months later, it was still more of an embarrassment than a fashionable accessory to his uniform. He decided he'd shave the damned thing off tonight . . . assuming he still had a ship.

CSS *Rosado* was one of a cluster of escort corvettes assigned to the heavy cruiser *Mackensen*, charged with protecting her as she made a run at the Laputan invasion force's transports. Like many escorts, *Rosado* was commanded by a mere lieutenant and was closely subordinated to the escort group commanding officer—an actual lieutenant commander—and thence to the captain of the vessel she was assigned to protect.

The mission was simple enough: keep fighters, strike boats, and missiles away from *Mackensen* as she made her run at the enemy force. The corvettes formed an inverted cone ahead of their charge, creating a potent crossfire that so far had eliminated every missile sent at the heavy cruiser.

Crowe glanced at his battle plot and smiled grimly. The Laputan main battle fleet was taking a pasting from the regular navy, and with most of their ground forces still aboard the transports it seemed that today's action might bring the bitter Bootes Trade War to an end. Had the Laputan assault succeeded in seizing key cities on Santorini, they could have been used as bargaining chips. But the gamble had failed—

was failing—and the assault would likely not even be launched. With nothing to bargain with, Laputa would be forced to accept a dictated treaty.

“Signal from Rear Admiral Berdinelli, fleet commander. Compliments to all captains and well done to all crews,” said *Rosado’s* computer, “Laputan naval forces have surrendered. All vessels are to assume a defensive stance and await further orders.”

Crowe grinned in satisfaction. “Gunnery Officer,” he said to his vessel’s newest crewmember. “Assume defensive posture. Continue to protect the flagship.”

“Defensive posture, aye sir,” she replied crisply. The new midshipman seemed like a nice kid, just out of the fleet gunnery school at Vantage and on her first posting. Crowe was a little concerned that she’d taken the Political Awareness course as well, and was technically his “political advisor” as well as the corvette’s gunnery chief. Bigger ships got a specialist political officer but corvettes had to make do with whoever had attended the four-week course.

Crowe considered himself lucky not to have a proper political officer looking over his shoulder, but a kid with an over-inflated sense of her importance could be just as much trouble. He spoke to the ship’s computer-controlled communications system. “Signal the flagship, my compliments and suchlike; ask Captain Matthen to confirm our orders if he’d be so kind,” Crowe said.

Before the signal could have been sent, let alone a reply received, a signal came in from the flagship. “All vessels, task force *Mackensen*. Compliments of Captain Matthen to all officers; we are ordered to desist offensive operations and close the Laputan transport fleet. Transports have not surrendered but now have non-combatant status. They are to be escorted out to a suitable jump point and be permitted to depart the Santorini system. We are to fire only in self-defense. Please signal receipt and compliance.”

Crowe started to respond when a second signal came in from the same source. “*Mackensen*. Belay previous order. Form on me and attack!”

“Query that!” Crowe snapped. “Maintain defensive posture.”

“Sir, *Mackensen* has gone to maximum acceleration,” Midshipman Browning reported.

“Stay with her!” Crowe ordered. “And clarify that last order!”

“This is Lieutenant Commander Jorgenssen of Solomani Security, now commanding CSS *Mackensen*. Captain Matthen has been arrested and I have assumed command under Solomani Security emergency protocols. If that force is allowed to withdraw then Laputa and her allies can continue the war. It must be forced to surrender unconditionally or be destroyed. We must attack, for the future of the Confederation! One last push and victory is ours!”

Crowe’s battle plot showed the escort force scattering into disarray. Only his own ship had reacted fast enough to stay with the big cruiser and until the others caught up *Rosado* was the only cover *Mackensen* had. Not that she needed much; the transports were protected only by a handful of second-line destroyers. They were coming about gamely, heading out to meet the attack while the transports attempted to make a run for it.

There were tens of thousands of ground troops aboard those vessels, Crowe knew. A huge military asset whose loss would probably force Laputa to surrender, but also people with homes and families, protected by a condition of their fleet’s surrender. Signals came in with dizzying speed: threats to fire from the transports’ escort force, orders to stand down from fleet command, messages of agreement and support from some ships. One of the distant Laputan cruisers began accelerating toward *Mackensen*, a pointless gesture that drew warning shots from the Confederation fleet.

“Signal from *Mackensen*,” said Rosado’s computer. “Message reads: ‘Knew I could rely on you, Crowe. Glad to have you.’”

“Do not respond!” Crowe barked. “Political Officer! Your advice now if you please.”

The new midshipman unlocked her seat and turned to face her captain. Her brown eyes were wide and bright as she spread her hands. “Sir, I just don’t know . . .”

“You trained for this! What’s your advice?” Crowe pushed, but his political officer had nothing to offer.

“*Mackensen* requests that all escorts detach and pursue the transports. She will deal with the escort force.” *Rosado*’s computer said. “Corvette force is to follow *Rosado*’s lead. Lieutenant Crowe is assigned as officer commanding until further notice.”

“Midshipman!” Crowe barked. “What do you advise?”

“Sir, I . . . I don’t know what to do.”

“Then concentrate on gunnery!” Crowe barked. In the battle plot he saw the short and gallant action unfolding as a handful of old destroyers went to destruction against a heavy cruiser. *Mackensen* swatted them easily, and even had missiles to spare for a strike against the transports.

The gap closed as Crowe’s gaggle of escorts raced in to attack the fleeing transports. *Mackensen*’s missile salvo began to overtake the corvettes, and as the transports opened fire Crowe could see how weak their armament was. Even a few small escorts could destroy all the targets before they reached the jump point, assuming the missile salvo left them any work to do.

Meanwhile signals buzzed in. Fleet command ordered the corvettes to stand down but their immediate superior cheered on their attack. Just for once Crowe found himself longing for a political officer who could unravel the complexities that existed beyond the chain of command and tell him what to do for the best. For now, he was committed; he had been from the moment he’d matched his acceleration with *Mackensen* and become the corvette force’s leader.

Jorgenssen had taken command of the cruiser to do what needed to be done, and he trusted Crowe to make that happen. They were shipmates from *Maestrale*, survivors of the torpedo attack on *Josef Valaki*.

And this was still wrong.

“Guns! Target the missile salvo and engage!” Crowe heard himself saying. “Make signal to corvette force to do likewise. Signal the transports, my compliments and such like, they are clear to run for the jump point. We will cover their withdrawal against rogue fleet elements. Signal fleet command, my compliments, etc. Inform Admiral Mueller that we intend to ensure the safety of surrendered enemy vessels for the honor of the fleet.”

“Captain!” the new midshipman reported. “Most of our consorts are firing on the missile salvo. CSS *Cairolis* is accelerating past us on an attack vector. She’s going for the transports.”

“Signal from *Mackensen*,” *Rosado*’s computer said.

“Ignore it! Order *Cairolis* to break off.”

Crowe watched his sister ship continue on her attack pass for a moment, and knew for certain that her captain had decided to follow *Mackensen*’s lead. The cruiser was firing more missiles, which seemed to

be aimed at the transports rather than her former escorts. That was something, at least.

“Make signal,” Crowe ordered. “My compliments, etc., to *Cairolì* but if she doesn’t break off I’ll fire on her.”

“Captain?” said several voices on the corvette’s tiny bridge at once, but only one mattered. That was the quiet, scared acknowledgement from the gunnery officer that she had a firm solution on their sister ship and was ready to fire.

“Make signal,” Crowe said. “My compliments etc. to corvette group, they are to target the new missile salvo from *Mackensen* and protect the transports. My compliments to Lieutenant Commander Jorgensen, beg to inform him that former hostile vessels have surrendered and fleet command is ordering us to let them go. Query his receipt of that signal and retransmit it from recording for his benefit. And tell *Cairolì* to stand down or we fire on her.”

“Corvette group acknowledges. *Mackensen* orders us to fire on the transports. No response from *Cairolì*,” *Rosado*’s computer reported.

“Very well then,” said Lieutenant Crowe of the Solomani Confederation Navy. “Gunnery Officer, do you have a solution on *Cairolì*?”

“Yes sir.”

“Is she decelerating or breaking off?”

“No sir.”

“Then, Midshipman Browning, I am ordering you to fire on our sister ship. Your protest is noted.”

“I didn’t . . .” she began, then cut herself off. “Aye sir. Firing.”

CONFEDERATION NEWS AGENCY
Carter Naval Base, Barsoom System, 030-1108

News has just arrived of an uprising on the world of Zhongguo. Details are as yet unclear but it appears that the incident began at the highport when an angry crowd attempted to storm a visiting Imperial vessel. The rioters were repelled despite overwhelming numbers, but only after inflicting numerous casualties on the security forces.

Security personnel are said to have acted with admirable restraint under the circumstances, though there have been the usual accusations of excess from among those who attacked those charged with keeping the peace.

Although relations with the Third Imperium are troubled, Imperial vessels are protected by the same laws as Confederation ships when in Confederation space. The Imperial vessel was advised to leave the highport for its own safety, as the port was at that time the scene of violent rioting. Riots also broke out in some areas of Zhongguo, with crowds chanting “Sirius Rising!” and hurling missiles at the security forces.

Although segments of the highport were overrun, order was quickly restored by a force of Solomani Security personnel from the Downport, ably assisted by marines from a visiting Confederation Navy warship. Zhongguo Highport remains on the security watch list and visitors are advised to take extra care, but the situation appears to be under control.

The meaning of the phrase “Sirius Rising” remains unknown. A senior Solomani Security official has announced that an investigation will be conducted as part of a wider examination of the issues surrounding the Zhongguo incident.

Nonsuch System

034-1108

Lieutenant Miranda Carstairs vacated the captain's chair as Crowe entered the frigate's bridge. The plot was already active, showing the dirtball world of Nonsuch and a system pretty much empty of starships. That had caused some concern when they'd arrived; there was supposed to be a task force here. With no reason to suppose otherwise, it seemed most likely that the force had moved on to another system.

An emergence from jump a few minutes ago had summoned Crowe from his bunk, and as he flopped into his bridge chair he called up data on the newcomer. He sucked his teeth, then hid his reaction. This was going to be unpleasant.

Browning and Roebecker entered the bridge and took their stations. The gunnery officer displaced a rating who'd been monitoring the console, but Browning's seat was empty. Nobody but the political officer ever sat there, and most proper black-hat-navy officers would not want to.

"Make signal," Crowe said, trying to keep weary resignation out of his voice. "Greetings to CSS *Lesos*, my compliments and such like to her captain."

"Signal from CSS *Lesos*," said *Stormshadow*'s computer.

"Play it."

The battle plot was replaced with a view of a corvette's bridge, not unlike that of Crowe's first command CSS *Rosado*. Almost exactly the same in fact; *Lesos* was a sister ship of *Rosado*. Her captain was a bit too

senior to still be in corvettes and not be a squadron commander, but both he and Crowe knew why that had happened.

“Crowe,” *Lesos*’s captain said without any of the usual pleasantries.

“Lieutenant Commander Michaelson,” Crowe responded as politely as he could manage. “I’m transmitting our latest SITREP; Task Force *Mikula* has apparently departed the system. No activity here since we arrived.”

“I know *Mikula* isn’t here, Crowe! I’ve just delivered her dispatches to Dolor naval base.”

“I assume that there’s no problem and *Mikula*’s redeployment is routine?”

“Obviously!” Michaelson snapped. “I have no updated orders for you. You can continue your patrol as scheduled. Be advised that you’re pretty much the only ship in the area at present. I’m proceeding in to refuel at Nonsuch starport. *Lesos* out.”

Crowe sat quietly for a while, breathing deeply and gently. Gradually the adrenaline faded a little and he felt able to explain the situation. There were questioning looks from the bridge officers, all except Browning. She needed no explanation of why Michaelson hated Crowe so much; she was the one who’d carried out the order to fire on his ship.

“Commander Michaelson and I have some . . . history,” Crowe said. “If you want details, look up the Santorini Incident. We will not be discussing this matter in the wardroom.”

Most of the officers turned obediently back to their consoles. They knew, of course. They knew that their captain had fired on another Confederation vessel during the confused last moments of the Battle of Santorini. They knew that he’d spent years “on the beach” while an inquiry wrangled over the minutiae of how to deal with the matter, and that he’d been returned to duty after the inquiry collapsed due to political infighting. But until now it had been easy to imagine that it was all in the past.

Now, Crowe’s officers would have to decide what they thought about the whole business, and that might cause friction. Most of them seemed willing to shelve it, but Crowe spotted Roebecker’s quickly-concealed glare. That explained a lot.

Roebecker was generally good company in the wardroom, surprisingly graceful for such a big guy and soft-spoken despite possessing a gigantic bass voice. He’d always seemed a bit reserved though, and

Crowe was beginning to see why. He was one of the many who believed that Michaelson and Jorgenssen were right; that the Laputan force should have been finished off at Santorini. It would certainly have saved lives; other battles might not have been fought.

“You have the bridge, Lieutenant Carstairs,” Crowe said wearily, vacating his chair and heading back to his cabin where he was absolutely sure he would not sleep at all.

Jumpspace 044-1108

Crowe skimmed the data on Chinon, more to pass the time than anything. With a dense but more or less breathable atmosphere and plenty of water, the world was an obvious candidate for settlement during the early expansion out from Terra. Its somewhat isolated location meant that the early colonists were bypassed by many of the great events that shook the region, and the world emerged from the Long Night with a modest mid-tech industrial base.

Chinon progressed since then of course, but it remained a backwater, one of those worlds that lay within the Confederation rather than being an active part of it. Chinon contributed a little to the Confederation economy but mostly looked to its own affairs. Notably, its government had resisted pressure to provide more than token funding to the Loyalty Ships program. Other worlds with a similar economic status had provided a corvette or a frigate, some even a cruiser or a significant part of one. Chinon's contribution would barely have paid for *Storm-shadow's* shuttles.

That could mean one of several things. Most likely it meant that the government of Chinon was not prepared to give in to the blatantly manipulative Loyalty Ships program. It paid its contribution to the navy and other forces of the Confederation, of course. Perhaps the local government thought that was sufficient. Since there were several requests on file for more patrols in the region, Crowe reasoned that Chinon was unwilling to pay for extra warships that would be deployed somewhere else when the same funds could be spent on local defense forces.

Whatever the reason, Chinon pulled its weight and no more, even in a time where the Solomani Party was making a lot of noise about demonstrations of loyalty and the Imperial threat just over the border.

The clock counted down to projected jump emergence as Crowe read. Around him the bridge officers and ratings went about their business, running checks and diagnostics for lack of anything better to do. There was no guarantee that emergence would take place at the projected time. Indeed, with just under fifteen minutes to go Crowe was not yet feeling the strange tension that sometimes preceded emergence. Even the most sensitive crewmembers did not seem to be suffering discomfort yet.

The minutes ticked down, with the crew suited and waiting, helmets ready, in case of a disastrously bad emergence. Of course, a bad emergence rarely happened on time—variance in the duration of a jump was an indicator of a misjump. A few hours in either direction was fairly normal, but most spacers went by the rule: “more than a day and it’s not okay.”

Projected emergence time came and went. Two hours crawled past. There was no suggestion that anything was wrong, but it was tiring for a crew to remain closed up at action stations for emergence. Crowe was relieved rather than surprised when he suddenly realized he had a mild headache. It was followed by a feeling somewhat like pressure in his sinuses and a tingling in his fingers and toes. It didn’t always manifest the same way, but this kind of pre-emergence tension was familiar.

Crowe guessed about five minutes to emergence, based on experience. “All hands,” he said into his headset. “Jump emergence is imminent. Projected destination is one hundred and fifty diameters out from Chinon. Commence emergence drill.”

“Sir, engineering reports solid drive function, no indicators of misjump,” Holmes said from the bridge engineering officer’s station.

“Astrogator reports parameters look good. No indicators of misjump,” Carstairs added from the astrogator’s chair. “Ops reports all stations secure, personnel suited. Ready for emergence.”

“Sir, gunnery reports all launchers unloaded and beam weapons fully discharged. Ready for emergence,” Roebecker added. A ship expecting combat would come out with guns charged and launchers loaded, but that added to the risk of an accident and was not done in peacetime. Laser capacitors had been known to discharge as the jump

field collapsed, damaging the weapon system and its associated power feed. Nobody needed an exploding turret on a routine emergence, however remote the possibility.

“Guns, we’ll be wanting an active sensor sweep as soon as we emerge. Navigational and military sensors. Begin charging point defense first, then one turret per battery in cascade. Weapons tight.”

“Standard navigational and situational sweep, weapons tight. Aye sir,” Roebecker responded. He would have done what Crowe ordered as a matter of standard operating procedure, but a wise captain gave the order anyway, especially with a SolSec officer on the bridge. It would not be prudent to seem lax.

The feeling of pressure and tension suddenly increased enormously, and someone on the bridge retched. Then Crowe’s senses told him simultaneously that the ship was tipping, spinning, and tumbling . . . and that it was perfectly still and solid under him. A violent judder rippled along the length of the ship, from somewhere to somewhere else—Crowe’s senses could not make sense of the input—and then suddenly everything was normal again.

The bridge was in an armored box as deep within the forward compartment of *Stormshadow* as her small hull permitted, with no external viewports. Crowe knew that in those compartments with viewports, the covers were sliding back. There was something necessary about being able to see out of a vessel, even if all there was to look at was empty space. No amount of computer imagery and multispectral cameras or instruments could make up for the ability to, just once in a while, see the stars outside.

Stormshadow opened her eyes. Crewmembers peered out of viewports as sensor data flooded in. The first wave was passive; readings of gravity, solar radiation, light, radio emissions, and other data that could be collected without emitting a signal. It was followed by active data gathered by emitting radio, microwave and laser pulses to see what they reflected from.

Crowe watched the system gravity map form on his display, showing the system’s two stars and their planets, moons, and planetoids. The map became more complex and detailed over the seconds Crowe watched. Colors and intensities varied as gravity fields interacted. Now Crowe could predict where his ship or another could safely jump from,

and where one might emerge—or at least where one would not emerge without suffering critical damage.

“Preliminary sweep complete, Captain.” Carstairs said. “No immediate navigational hazard. Stellar data indicates that we are in the Chinon system as expected. The primary has a distant companion star, too far out to interfere with jump operations in this part of the system.”

“How’s our position?” Crowe asked.

“One hundred and thirty-four diameters from Chinon, with residual momentum toward the mainworld. A powered approach will be required to make orbit, but the course correction is minor,” Carstairs sounded pleased with that, as she had a right to be. It was a good jump, well within acceptable variance, and she had even set up the emergence to facilitate an efficient approach to the mainworld. That was more important to couriers and merchant vessels than a naval patrol vessel, but at least it meant that *Stormshadow* did not need to waste time turning around to run back in.

“Contacts?” Crowe asked.

“Sir, we have several small craft in the vicinity of the mainworld,” Roebecker reported. “Most are running active transponders and I’m getting ghost echoes from a couple of others. Probably security gunships. There’s no highport as such, just a mooring station with minimal facilities. Standard beacon directing craft that can’t land to moor at the station and request refueling shuttles from the downport.”

“Anything else in-system?”

“We’ve got a possible contact. Could be a ship running silent or a planetoid. The vector suggests it’s a ship,” Roebecker said.

Crowe glanced at the tactical plot in front of him. That had better be a ship; if not there was a small planetoid headed into Chinon’s gravity well. She might be another Confederation naval vessel or a system defense craft, but if so she would normally have responded to the transponder ping that went out with *Stormshadow*’s active sensor pulses.

Of course, any legitimate civilian ship would also have responded to the interrogative ping. Automatic systems in merchant ships’ transponders ensured that they answered a naval vessel’s signals with their identity and registry even if the system was set to remain silent in face of civilian signals. That was normally done only in troubled regions where pirates were known to be active, and Chinon was not listed as such.

“... which makes this most definitely a suspect vessel,” Crowe said out loud without realizing it. “Mister Roebecker, ping her again with a forced response code. If she’s legit she’ll have to reply.”

“Hard ping, aye sir,” Roebecker replied.

“*Stormshadow*. Make signal,” Crowe ordered. “To unidentified vessel inbound Chinon—send her location and vector as a hint—compliments of Lieutenant Commander Simon Crowe and so forth, CSS *Stormshadow*. Please activate your transponder and explain your silence.”

The suspect ship’s emissions flared on Crowe’s plot, but there was no reply or transponder signal. Instead she began an erratic series of drive pulses, sending her into a three-axis tumble that caused her to curve a little away from the mainworld. At the same time, an all-spectrum jammer began to emit, flooding the surrounding area with its signal. Crowe’s plot became fuzzy.

“*Stormshadow*. Make signal,” Crowe said. “To unidentified vessel: My compliments and such, but please stop that. We are a Confederation Navy warship. Cancel your tumble and heave to for boarding. We intend to carry out a customs inspection. And please be so good as to identify yourself.”

“Sir, I’ve got a read on her,” Roebecker said. “It’s the *Intrepid Marketeer*. She’s a *Plessey* class small freighter. Eight hundred tons standard displacement, registered out of Dolor. She’s streamlined for planetary landing, no small craft capability. No weaponry as built but four hard-points. *Broughton’s Merchant Ships* lists her as carrying two sandcaster/point defense turrets and no offensive armament at her last inspection.”

“Does *Broughton* mention a military grade jamming suite?” Crowe asked.

“No sir, it doesn’t,” Roebecker replied, then answered Crowe’s next question before he asked it. “Point defense is ready and charged. A, B, and X batteries are still charging; some turrets are ready if independent fire is required. Q battery is unloaded.”

“Splendid, Mr. Roebecker,” Crowe said, more in approval at his question being pre-empted than pleasure at *Stormshadow* not being ready to fire all her guns. “Get me full combat capability as soon as you can. Helm. Set up a pursuit course if you will. Full thrust as soon as you’re ready, and keep after her.”

Crowe saw Browning nod curtly in acknowledgement of his order, and realized that her hand was nowhere near her veto control. Some political officers pretty much sat with their hand on the button and paused before allowing any order through. Browning seemed willing to let him do his job . . . at least until he screwed up.

“All hands,” Crowe said, “this is the captain. Remain at action stations. We have identified a suspect vessel and are in pursuit. Marines to the boats, please. We are expecting to conduct a boarding and search.”

“Permission to accompany the boarding party, sir?” Browning said suddenly.

Crowe blinked. She had the right to just say she was going, so asking permission was unusually polite. “Of course, Commander Browning,” he responded, then added into his headset. “*Stormshadow*. Make signal. My compliments and what-have-you to system defense command. Request assistance in catching suspected smuggler. Signal to *Intrepid Marketeer*. Compliments to her captain but would he please bloody well stop his ship so that we can board it and figure out what he’s up to. You might want to rephrase that last.” Crowe knew the ship’s AI would translate his message into a standard code. It would come out as a polite but strongly-worded request to stop and submit to a search.

“Signal from system defense command,” *Stormshadow* said. “Compliments and greetings from Commodore Durell, Officer Commanding Chinon Home Forces. Signal reads: Welcome, *Stormshadow*! Glad to see you. We have nothing in range to catch the suspect, but the orbital patrol is on alert. We’ll grab her if she gets past you.”

“Acknowledge with my compliments and thanks,” Crowe said, though in fact the system commander had more or less declined to assist the navy unless the problem fell right in his lap. Having served in the Home Forces for several years Crowe had a higher opinion of them than many of his peers in the “proper navy,” but all the same he was not surprised at the lack of cooperation. An interception would cost time, fuel, and paperwork that could all be left to the Confederation Navy. It was a sadly common attitude.

“Any response from *Intrepid Marketeer*?” Crowe asked.

“No sir,” Roebecker replied. “She’s still corkscrewing and still jamming.”

“Very well then,” Crowe said. “We’ll chase her down and make her stop. Helm, close to fifteen thousand kilometers. Guns, lock onto her jamming signal and load Q battery. And get me as much sensor data as you can on her. Something’s wrong here.”

Chinon System

044-1108

“Make signal,” Crowe said. “No compliments this time. Inform the *Intrepid Marketeer* that if she does not stabilize her tumble and kill her drives then we will take appropriate action. Refer her captain to recent events at Zhongguo and remind him that we have the right to fire on a suspect vessel that refuses to heave to.”

This time there was a reply, and it was more or less as Crowe had expected; a confused litany of excuses and vague not-quite-threats. The vessel’s drives were out of control, so her captain claimed, and had just happened to put her into a three-axis tumble that made docking impossible while still accelerating her in a corkscrewing path that would pass close to the mainworld of the system.

Her captain had friends in high places, apparently, and they would want to know why CSS *Stormshadow* was harassing innocent merchant ships instead of defending the Confederation against the Imperial threat. And speaking of which, he’d noted the preferential treatment Crowe had given the Imperial delegation at Zhongguo, so maybe he ought to just jump out before a complaint reached the right ears . . .

“Mister Roebecker,” Crowe said. “Is Q battery ready?”

“Yes sir, but we’ve only got practice warheads aboard.”

“One of which should make an excellent warning shot, don’t you think? Target *Intrepid Marketeer* and make very sure she’s aware of the lock.”

The stream of protests from the merchant ship did not let up, but the tone changed when Crowe ordered Roebecker to fire. “*Storm-*

shadow. Make signal. *Intrepid Marketeer*, we are fully aware that your tumble is intentional. You wish to avoid being boarded. Well, you are *going* to be boarded. Ideally through an airlock opened by your crew, with empty hands clearly visible to my marines. However, I will settle for them climbing in through a hull breach. Be advised that firing on my missile will be considered a hostile act. We will, of course, retaliate.”

Crowe waited impatiently for a response—other, of course, than the baffling wall of excuses and threats that his conscious mind was tuning out. The merchant skipper had a choice, but not much of one—cancel his “dead man’s tumble” and be boarded or allow himself to be hit by what was apparently a live missile. If he activated his point defense he’d—briefly—become target practice for *Stormshadow*’s gun batteries.

The response was what Crowe had expected; *Intrepid Marketeer* ceased tumbling and began accelerating directly toward Chinon under full emergency power, broadcasting RRRR on every channel.

“RRRR—Universal Code for *I am being attacked by a raider*,” Browning said from her console. “This guy thinks he’s funny.”

“Full active sensor sweep, just in case anyone actually buys it and responds,” Crowe ordered. “Continue to broadcast our identity and intention to stop and search the suspect vessel. Standard warning not to interfere.”

“*Sir!*” Roebecker’s bass shout startled everyone on the bridge. “Three vessels on an intercept course! Coming in on the port bow, dispersed gun formation. They’ve just gone active and lit their drives.”

Crowe spared a split-second glance at the battle plot, evaluating everything in an instant. The three ships were corvettes, small warships normally used for patrol and escort work. The plot indicated they were all of roughly the same displacement and hull form, and their emissions suggested they were probably vessels of the old *Dulo* class.

The *Dulo* wasn’t the most attractive ship in space, resembling a pair of mismatched cylinders laid side by side. The main hull held drives, crew spaces, and command stations while the smaller “fighting hull” carried all six of the vessel’s weapons mounts along its outer surface, plus a docking cradle for its launch.

The corvettes were maneuvering under very low power. They must have been sneaking in at the merchant when *Stormshadow* made her interception. No, wait . . . Crowe took a snarling breath as he realized

what was going on. *Intrepid Marketeer*'s tumbling acceleration had been vaguely toward the mainworld, but it could not be coincidence that following her took *Stormshadow* into gun range of the corvettes.

"*Stormshadow*. Make signal. Warn off the newcomers, identify us as a Confederation naval ship. My compliments to the captain of *Intrepid Marketeer*, tell him to run for it and we'll cover him. Request assistance from system defense command."

Crowe knew for certain that *Intrepid Marketeer* was a smuggler or something equally illegal, and she'd led *Stormshadow* into an ambush, but there was no sense revealing that just yet. In all probability system defense command would find some excuse not to have any craft in range to help. Three to one odds weren't all that bad, not when all three hostiles added up to just a little less than *Stormshadow*'s tonnage. But in all probability their weapons worked properly, whereas *Stormshadow* was missing a few teeth.

"Mister Roebecker. Pull our missile off the merchant; self-destruct it at a safe distance. Then set up a secondary fire solution on the lead corvette but do not yet lock weapons onto her. We can't fire first. *Marketeer*'s captain has created enough ambiguity that if we do, they can pretend we were the aggressors in some horrible misunderstanding."

Roebecker shot his captain a frankly hostile glance but began setting up his fire solution.

"SITREP," Crowe ordered. The crew were already at battle stations, and nothing had really changed. All the same, asking for a situation report gave everyone something to do besides run through the tap-drill, checking their suits and equipment for the millionth time.

"Engineering reports drive systems fully functional, no serious problems. We have jump fuel for two parsecs and the jump drive is ready, but uncharged," Sublieutenant William Holmes said from the bridge engineering officer's position.

"A and B batteries ready to fire, captain. Q battery is loaded but we have only practice ammunition. X battery is fully charged and ready to fire, but will be slow to recharge. Point defense is ready, but bridge-ventral is offline," Roebecker's tone was distant, reporting automatically as he watched his own battle plot.

"Operations reports—" Carstairs began, but cut off as the lead corvette rolled and yawed to bring her guns to bear. All six of her turrets fired simultaneously. Her two consorts made the same maneuver a sec-

ond later, guns pulsing. There was no visible beam between the ships, just damage alarms and white-hot fragments of *Stormshadow*'s armor flaking off as the salvo struck her hull.

"Return fire, A and B batteries only!" Crowe barked. "Concentrate on the lead corvette. Mister Roebecker, hand off missile control to Commander Browning. Browning, reconfigure your console and do something useful for a change. Your target is designated Corvette Three. Keep your salvos thin enough that she can stop all of the missiles, and she won't realize they're duds. X battery, hold fire."

As his ship's guns spat back at their foes, Crowe watched the battle plot for evidence of hits. "Come two points to port and one to black, go to flank speed. No evasion," he ordered. "I want a close pass on corvette one. X battery will engage at least distance. And get me a damage report."

Stormshadow heeled to port, her bow dipping to black—"down" on her main axis toward the depths of space where "up" was gold, toward an imaginary sun above her bridge. "We're hit on all decks, Captain," said Holmes. "Mainly superficial. We're leaking fuel, but I'm transferring the rest to the empty tanks. Jump capability is not compromised. Turret A3 is not responding. Damage board is black in that area."

"My compliments to Lieutenant Morwood, request that she send a damage control party under Lieutenant Urasnicz to assess and repair A3," Crowe vaguely heard the acknowledgement as his ship heeled. The turn to port had unmasked all her weapons, allowing *Stormshadow* to engage with all eight—seven—turrets in A and B batteries, but made her a somewhat larger target.

"Mister Roebecker!" Crowe snapped. "There is your target! Why aren't you hitting her?"

"Sir, fire control is erratic. I've registered several hits on the corvette but nothing serious as far as I can tell."

"Then start hurting her!"

"Missiles incoming!" someone shouted. It might have been Crowe himself; he couldn't tell. He did hear his own order. "*Do not evade!* Point defense *only!* Get us *closer!*"

"Point defense active," Roebecker reported. "Two missiles incoming. One's down, one's in the dead spot."

"Brace!" Crowe shouted, as *Stormshadow* bucked under his feet. The plot indicated a proximity detonation rather than an intact warhead

smashing into the hull. A hail of superdense fragments wasn't good, but it was better than an internal explosion.

The plot was resolving better images of the three corvettes now. One and Three were indeed *Dulos*, obsolete vessels armed only with laser turrets. The middle corvette seemed to be a conversion, with four of her six turrets cut away and replaced by crude-looking missile launchers. The decision to close, taken for completely different reasons, would render her main armament ineffective.

"Firing. Hits on corvette one!" Roebecker rumbled, sparing his captain a glance that spoke of angry vindication. Crowe chose to ignore it.

"We're hit! Serious fuel loss, power interruption in main hull aft, some holing," Sublieutenant Holmes said. "Hull punctured in main hull central, cargo hold is open to space."

Stormshadow shuddered as more missiles broke through her weakened point defense. "What was that?" Crowe demanded.

"Direct hit, penetrative detonation in the multimission bay! Holmes told him. "Another in boat bay two; we've lost a shuttle. Proximity detonations along the main hull; main galley is holed, we have casualties. Missile magazine penetrated . . . minor propellant fire. Q1 has critical damage, remainder of Q battery is . . . status unknown; the board is black. A3 is a total loss, and we're reading B1 and B2 offline. Partial power feed loss to A battery. Power feed to X battery is also further impaired."

"Jettison the magazine; they're duds anyway," Crowe ordered. "Assign all remaining marine repair teams to B battery. Mr. Holmes, it's time for the BEO to take the stage. Get me full power to A battery. And do it fast."

The battle plot wasn't looking too promising. The third hostile corvette was still totally defensive, swatting the slow but steady stream of missiles Browning was sending at her. There would be no more once the current flight was expended though, and that meant six more turrets firing at *Stormshadow*.

Corvette one was in a bad way. She had holes and internal fires. Debris streaming away from her hull concealed the extent of her wounds to some extent, but it looked like she was hurt bad. As Crowe watched, corvette one's status indicator changed. Her transponder began displaying a surrender code. "Shift our fire to corvette two," Crowe ordered. "One has surrendered."

The “surrendered” corvette began limping away from the battle, which was technically a violation of the Articles of War. Her captain might argue that he needed to reach a safe port before his systems failed, or that he was trying to get out of the way of stray fire. Either way, he was out of the fight. That left two hostiles, and one of them was armed mostly with missiles that could no longer bear as the range dropped.

“Gun pass on two, then take us at three,” Crowe ordered. “Mr. Roebecker, transfer control of X battery to Commander Browning. Commander, you have one shot and no recharge. Impress me.”

Stormshadow raced past corvette two, firing her weakened A and B batteries at close range. Laser fire raked her hull, but she sped past scarcely hindered. Her hull armor was light, but it offered at least some protection from a corvette’s guns. B battery seemed to be back in action; Roebecker punched the air as his seven remaining turrets fired in unison and corvette two simply disappeared.

After a moment the corvette was replaced on the battle plot by a fuzzy expanse of thermal signatures and radar returns; fragments of white-hot metal spun away from the explosion. A few larger fragments were big enough to give a well-defined radar return. *Stormshadow*’s plot identified and tagged them: a turret and its mountings, most of the ship’s launch, a large chunk of the drive section, and what might be the command area.

“Magazine hit by the look of it. Good shooting, guns,” Crowe said, but his words were drowned out by Roebecker’s huge yell of self-encouragement. The kid might hate his captain, but he was a warrior and right at that moment Crowe needed warriors more than he needed to be liked or admired.

“Corvette two is gone,” Crowe said for the benefit of the bridge recorder as *Stormshadow* smashed through the expanding field of debris and raced at her final target. Hot metal banged from the hull, and Crowe knew there were bodies in amongst it. Something to think about later, if he couldn’t avoid it. For now, Corvette three was accelerating away, headed outsystem perhaps, but her guns were still firing. A yell from the helmsman caused Crowe to pull up an image of the damage board on his plot.

“Lieutenant Carstairs!” Crowe barked. “We’ve lost helm control! Helm is transferred to your position. Can you con us? Carstairs! Can we maneuver?”

After a second, Lieutenant Carstairs's strained voice came back from the emergency conning position that was the executive officer's action station. She was using her suit intercom. "Sir," she said. "We're holed and the reserve helmsman is down. There's a major fire on the other side of the bulkhead I think, and we're cut off. I can hear debris hitting the hull."

"Do you have helm control? *Can you control my ship?*" Crowe was rasping with the effort not to shout. "I'll send a rescue team when I can but right now I need you to take the helm."

"Yes. Yes, of course," Carstairs said, almost fussily. Then her voice firmed up a little. "Sir, I have the con."

"Chase that corvette, stay close to him. Ram him if you can!" Crowe said. The latter was virtually impossible; any ship with working drives could dodge a ramming attempt. The order was more a statement of intent than anything else.

"Yes sir, I understand," Carstairs said somewhat vaguely. *Stormshadow* began to turn, chasing the third corvette, and that was good enough for Crowe.

"Sir, I've lost control of B battery," Roebecker said. "I'm getting no response. The board shows the turrets are powered but I can't control them! I still have most of A battery though."

"Understood," Crowe replied. "Lieutenant Morwood?"

"Sir?" Morwood replied instantly.

"What's your position?"

"I'm in main hull forward, leading damage control efforts."

"I want you to proceed to B battery with all the marines you can muster. If you can return the battery to central fire control then please do so. If not, and in the interim, please be so kind as to man the guns and fight them in the navy way." Crowe was rather pleased with that quote; it would look good at the inquiry about how he got his brand-new ship bushwhacked and shot to ribbons.

Stormshadow bore down on the last corvette, coming in obliquely to allow more of her guns to target the smaller vessel. Return fire punched into the hull, smashing the already malfunctioning bridge-ventral point defense turret and opening the wardroom to space.

"Lieutenant Carstairs, on my mark I want you to bring us beam-on to the hostile and kill the drive. Roebecker, Browning, Morwood, you will have your shot. Ready now."

Crowe counted the seconds, watched the battle plot carefully. His strange analytical ability weighed laser charge times against the ship's velocity, trying to balance damage taken against the need for a crippling salvo. *Stormshadow* could take little more, he knew, but she had to suffer just a moment longer, endure one more salvo, for the chance to win.

"Now!" Crowe barked. "Battle turn, execute! All gunners, fire at your discretion!"

Stormshadow's remaining armament lashed out, two batteries in a concentrated salvo and another in a locally controlled rolling fire that went on and on. The corvette shuddered, shedding debris and fuel, then tried to activate her drive for an emergency jump. That was an act of sheer desperation, Crowe knew, and as his ship's fire poured into the hostile he felt regret for what was about to happen to her crew.

Corvette Three suddenly ceased to exist, her super-powered jump drive overloaded by laser energy hitting her hull grid. One moment she was weakly accelerating, still firing two of her guns, and the next she was a cloud of wreckage.

Silence descended on the bridge of *Stormshadow*, broken after a moment as Crowe said softly. "I need a full damage report. Secure from action stations and commence emergency damage control procedures. Get a rescue crew to the aft conning position and set up a least-time course for Chinon starport."

"Sir," Browning pointed out. "We should send a marine force over to take possession of the surrendered corvette."

"We should, yes," Crowe conceded. "But we need every marine aboard for damage control. Otherwise we might lose the ship." He gestured at the battle plot, which switched from a view of the distant, crippled corvette limping away outsystem to an oversized reproduction of the damage board. Parts of it were amber, but not much. There was far too much red for anyone's liking, but that wasn't the worst of it.

Most of the board was black.

Chinon System

046-1108

Crowe buckled his belt and adjusted it so that sword and sidearm rode more comfortably. He'd not worn full dress uniform since being reinstated as a Confederation Navy officer weeks earlier. Warship captains on some deployments spent more time in full dress than in a crewsuit, visiting world-government dignitaries and dining aboard flagships, but the life of a humble patrol frigate on a forgotten station was less glamorous.

The sword was a regulation naval officer's sword, plain and unadorned except for the delicate engraving on the stainless steel hilt. The blade was long and straight, with no cutting edge. It had an entirely serviceable point, but other than the occasional formal duel naval officers were not expected to fight with their swords.

Nor, in truth, were officers' sidearms all that practical. At some time in the past it had been decreed that the Confederation Navy would arm its command officers with revolvers. The thinking behind that was probably something along the lines of: an officer needed a weapon as a badge of rank, but "combat" weapons were what the rank and file used. An officer's weapons should be a little impractical, to make the point that he was above getting his hands dirty.

Thus the Confederation Navy adopted the revolver, but some perverse logic then came into play. If naval officers were forced to carry a six-shooter, then they would have the very most potent six-shooters in Charted Space. And so the long-barreled 8mm naval service revolver was introduced, firing either a "hot" high-penetration, high-recoil round or a

“cool” low-recoil round that performed rather poorly against body armor but also kicked a lot less.

Crowe’s weapon was loaded, but the ammunition pouch on his belt was empty. It lay better that way, and in truth there was little likelihood of needing a weapon today. This was a diplomatic meeting, albeit one with the potential to be quite unpleasant, and the main danger was likely to be tedium.

Shrugging, Crowe turned and stepped out of his quarters into the corridor. As he made his way aft to one of the surviving shuttle bays, Browning fell in beside him. She wore the gray of Solomani Security, with a rather more practical 9mm personal defense weapon instead of a pistol and sword. The tiny submachinegun offered massive firepower for a very short time, making it ideal for emergency self-defense or sudden murder.

There were other differences, besides the color of their uniforms. Crowe wore his decorations, including the golden cross of the Order of Sol, whereas Browning’s uniform lacked even service ribbons. SolSec did not advertise where its personnel had served, not even in dress uniform.

Their escort was waiting at the shuttle bay, an eight-marine section led by Lieutenant Urasnicz. Six of the marines and Urasnicz himself were armed only with sidearms—practical semi-automatic pistols—but two carried combat shotguns and wore body armor. They would be kept out of sight unless things went horribly wrong, while their lesser-armed brethren acted as an honor guard.

The trip planetside was spent mostly in silence. Crowe was in no mood to talk, not after picking his way through the part-repaired disaster zone that was *Stormshadow*’s least damaged shuttle bay. The view from the ports was heartbreaking; sections of hull ripped open and an entire turret blasted right off its mountings. He had misgivings about leaving Carstairs to oversee the repairs, especially since there was a chance—however small—that the raiders might return.

The world government of Chinon was extending them the courtesy of spares and resupply, so Crowe and his political officer were forced to be polite and accept an invitation to go planetside. They didn’t have to like it, but they had to do it. And so the shuttle descended, not to the main starport but to a private facility serving the governmental center. Ground cars were waiting, staffed by polite but not very friendly junior government officials.

Crowe felt a little naked as the shuttle returned to orbit. He'd decided that it was better to have all his assets concentrated than to leave a shuttle and crew on the ground where it would need protecting. Marines who were guarding the shuttle could not be working at damage control, and right now *Stormshadow* needed every pair of hands. He resented pulling as many marines off repair duty as he had, but something told him that Chinon was not friendly territory.

The motorcade left the spaceport and drove slowly through an area of parkland that formed a safety and security gap between the port and the seat of government. The vegetation outside was thick and lush, but the colors were strange. Something to do with Chinon's atmospheric taint, perhaps. The dense atmosphere felt a little oppressive, but in the filtered environment of the cars it was hard to tell how bad things were outside.

After a surprisingly long time the motorcade entered an underground parking area and halted. Soberly-dressed functionaries stepped forward to open the car doors. That probably amused the marines, Crowe reflected as he alighted. This reception was little more impressive than the one at the spaceport, but at least this time there was clearly someone in charge.

"Commander Crowe. I'm Melissa Greener, naval liaison for the government of Chinon," said their hostess. She was young for the post, late thirties perhaps, but wore a Home Guard commander's insignia as a pin on the lapel of her expensive suit.

Crowe shook hands and forced a professional smile. "May I present Lieutenant Commander Browning of Solomani Security and Lieutenant Urasnicz, commanding my marine escort."

Greener greeted both, then turned back to Crowe. "My instructions are to convey you to a reception where you'll meet some of our officials. I'm afraid your . . . visit . . . caught us by surprise. I hope you'll forgive the lack of a proper reception."

"I'm just grateful for your government's prompt response to my request for spares and equipment," Crowe replied, then added irreverently, "they can throw tomatoes at me if they want."

"Careful what you wish for, Commander," Greener replied cryptically. More formally, she added, "We've prepared . . . actually, are preparing might be more accurate . . . quarters for you and your delega-

tion. You'll probably want to station some of your marines there." She eyed the two shotgun-armed marines as she spoke.

"Yes. Commander Browning and I will attend, and we'll bring one marine each as an honor guard. The others will remain with Lieutenant Urasnicz at our quarters."

"That's fine, Commander. Now, if you'll follow me?"

Chinon

046-1108

The reception turned out to be a rather awkward affair in which a handful of junior government officials spouted some rhetoric about how important the navy was and offered vague thanks for chasing off the mysterious corvette force. Everyone seemed uneasy, and it was with some relief that Crowe, Browning, and Greener settled down on comfortable sofas afterward.

Crowe sipped his drink, some kind of orange-brown cocktail made with rum, fruit, and various other things that he couldn't identify. Greener had one of her own, and seemed to like it, but Crowe couldn't decide if it was pleasant or not . . . which told him all he needed to know about it. Browning drank water.

"I can't really offer you much more than what's in the official report," Crowe said. "We decided to stop and search that merchant and she ran. I strongly suspect that we were deliberately lured onto the guns of those corvettes."

"That's pretty blatant," Greener replied. "And far beyond any trouble we've had in-system for years. A while back there was a series of incidents with suspect ships making rendezvous in the outsystem. Maybe they were pirates or smugglers transferring cargo; we never caught any of them. They were always too far out for our system defense force—such as it is—to reach the area."

"Anything planetside?" Browning asked.

"Some unrest, yes. The big issue at present—as you've heard over and over in the past couple of hours—is a lack of navy patrols in the re-

gion. We're pretty close to the Imperial border and there have been occasional raids; pirates most likely. Until you came through we'd not seen a navy ship for weeks. In fact, the entire presence of the Confederation Navy in system most of the time is sitting on this sofa here." Greener gestured at her own seat. "One powerless and frustrated liaison officer."

"And were you to put on your other hat . . . the gray one . . . what would you say?" Browning put in.

Greener chuckled. "It's an open secret that I also report to SolSec. Is it that obvious?"

Browning shrugged. "You were in my class, Melissa. Political Awareness, back in 1101? Actually, you were the head of my class. Clearly I made little impression."

"Oh," Greener said. "I really don't remember you. But then it was a short course and there were about a hundred of us. Anyway, yes, I went sideways when I got to Lieutenant Commander. I was behind the curve for promotion so I made the smart career move. I aced Political Awareness and got fast-tracked into the main training program. Came out a full commander and political officer aboard a heavy cruiser."

Crowe had heard that story before. There were two kinds of political officers aboard navy warships. Some were transferees from the regular fleet to SolSec, usually individuals who found their careers stalled. They "went sideways" as it was usually called, got an automatic promotion upon graduating as political officers. And then they went aboard navy ships with a chip on their shoulders and the power to make trouble. Many of them wanted to "fix" the navy or to get back at officers who had been promoted via a system that was clearly unfair.

The other sort, career SolSec personnel who'd taken the Navy Conversion Course were . . . not worse as such . . . but bad in different ways. Instead of resenting the navy for perceived injustices, most had no idea how things were done and expected miracles on a daily basis.

"So, you went from the bridge of a cruiser to a backwater—pardon me, but you know what I mean—liaison posting. Was there a reason for that?" Browning asked.

Greener chuckled. "Believe it or not, I thought it was the right thing to do. These backwaters, as you rightly call them, feel isolated and in many cases resent the way the Confederation ignores them. That's how they see it. So I transferred to the Home Guard and got sent here as liaison. We apparently can't spare the ships to conduct proper pa-

trols, so we assign liaison officers to tell the government how to help themselves. We actually do some good . . . sometimes.”

“I’m prepared to believe that,” Crowe said, setting aside his drink. The taste was becoming more unpleasant every time he tried it. “And I concede that the fleet is enormously overstretched. Indeed, we’re part of a new initiative to get more hulls on the patrol routes.”

“That’s encouraging, and long overdue,” Greener said. “But as you’ve seen things aren’t good. In fact . . .” she looked around for a long moment, as if checking whether anyone was listening. “I have suspicions.”

“About our incident?” Crowe asked.

“Bigger than that.”

Browning cocked her head. “And have you passed this on?”

“Of course. I make regular reports and they go to Dolor naval base where I’m sure they’re carefully filed. Nothing actually happens though, and I’m concerned that matters are coming to a head.”

“You mean, something more serious than my ship being ambushed?” Crowe said.

“Much more serious, Commander. That’s one reason why I’m willing to freely admit to being a SolSec intelligence officer. It’s an open secret round here anyway, but all the same it’s not something you talk about. I’ve been tracking ship movements through the system, cargo transfers and the like. It’s not been easy; I’m pretty sure that someone has been putting obstacles in my path. But the picture is disturbing.”

“And what can we do about it?” Crowe asked.

“There will be an inquiry about the action you just fought. There always is. You can use that to present my findings at a high level.”

“I see,” Crowe said. “You want to bypass the usual channels?”

“The usual channels lead to a file labeled ‘ravings of a paranoid lunatic’ as far as I can tell. Something’s going on here, Commander Crowe. Pirates don’t shoot at navy ships, and they don’t station escorts to protect merchant craft from being boarded. Something came in aboard that ship; something important enough to warrant attacking your vessel. And not with converted freighters either; those were naval ships.”

“Yes. The *Dulo* class was sold off years ago, mainly to planetary and Home Guard forces. There were hundreds of them up for disposal as I

recall. All the same, it's not easy to get real navy ships if you're not a proper fleet," Crowe said.

"There's all kinds of accountability involved," Greener replied. "Part of the naval liaison job is helping local governments get the ships they need, which means I have some experience of negotiating that particular maze. The fact that somebody has at least three combat-worthy *Dulos* suggests that there is either a massive hole in the system . . ."

". . . or that those ships belong to a planetary navy or a Home Guard force," Browning put in. "Which means we could be discussing secession or open rebellion. Whoever fired on us is either desperate or extremely confident."

"Or else they have sufficient power in the sackful of cats that is Confederation politics that they think they can get away with something like this. It's happened before—the Bootes Trade War ended up as a straight fight between Laputa and her allies versus some parts of the Confederation fleet."

"We were there," Crowe growled.

"I know, I skimmed your file when you arrived in system," Greener said. "And I didn't mean to rake up old muck. All I'm saying is that Laputa and her allies pretty much took up arms against the Confederation as a whole, but somehow the matter stayed under the threshold to be considered a rebellion. It could happen again."

"We do not want that," Crowe said each word with great emphasis.

"Which is why I'd like you to present my data and associated lunatic ravings at the inquiry," Greener said. "For whatever it's worth, my conclusion as a qualified observer is that you did a good job under difficult circumstances and shouldn't be censured."

"Thank you for that," Crowe said, unsure how much he meant it.

"Now, I'm going to pass you a physical copy of my data as well as forwarding the files to your ship. There's a big meeting scheduled for tomorrow morning. It's officially about how the port authority can help speed up your repairs and unofficially about how helpful the government is being . . . and could they have stepped-up patrols in return please."

Crowe nodded. "I expected that," he said. "Well, we'd probably better get some rest."

"I'll see you to your quarters then," Greener said. "You'll have the data before you leave."

Chinon

047-1108

Crowe was still dressing when the pounding on his door started. His first reaction was irritation; perhaps one of the marine escort had forgotten which room the captain was assigned and was trying to rouse a sluggardly comrade. He started to shrug into his dress uniform jacket as the door slid open.

There was indeed a marine at the door, but he was looking up and down the corridor with his sidearm drawn. Alice Browning ducked through the door, personal defense weapon in her hands. Her gray SolSec hat was askew but her dress uniform was otherwise immaculate.

“Captain! Greener’s dead,” Browning said.

Crowe’s first reaction, somewhat uncharitably perhaps, was almost relief that Browning had not been sent to relieve him of duty. “What happened?” he asked, buckling on his weapon belt.

“Shot. She was still alive when I got to her. Gave me this.” Browning patted a pocket that presumably held a data storage unit. “Comms are down and that can’t be coincidence.”

“You alerted the marines?”

“Of course. They’re securing the corridor.”

Crowe picked up the room’s multifunction handset from its holder. The entertainment system worked, room climate controls worked . . . everything worked as it should in a properly appointed visiting dignitary suite. But nobody answered his calls to his hosts and the external comms connection seemed not to be broadcasting.

“Our personal comms work one-to-one at close range,” Browning said. “But we’re blocked out of the planetwide net.”

“What’s going on? Some general emergency or is this about us?”

“I’m a political officer, not a secret agent!” Browning snapped, and for the first time Crowe saw that she was genuinely scared. “All I know is that Greener offered us her data and someone killed her hours later. Now we’re cut off from the ship.”

“Can’t be coincidence,” Crowe said. “Very well . . . we can’t make any assumptions about who’s behind this but we need to get back to *Stormshadow*.” He tapped his comms and was pleased to see it connect immediately. “Lieutenant Urasnicz? Are your people ready to move?”

“Yes sir, we’ve got the corridor secured and we’re ready to go.”

“We’ll be moving in moments,” Crowe said. “We don’t have a clear picture of the situation, so weapons are tight unless there is an imminent threat.” He grimaced as he broke the contact; he’d just told Urasnicz, of all people, to hesitate.

Crowe and Browning left the suite, their marine escort falling in around them as they hurried along richly carpeted corridors. There was a suspicious lack of people around. Even early in the morning, there should at least have been a handful of domestic staff and a security guard or two.

“We need stairs,” Crowe said. “We’re going straight down to the garage facility. We’ll grab transport and make for the port. If we can’t get a shuttle there then we should at least be able to use the port’s comms to call ours in.”

Distant shouting and the occasional gunshot reached Crowe as two marines forced a service door and led the way down a wide staircase. Crowe resisted the urge to draw his sidearm; he didn’t want to seem nervous and the marines all had their guns ready. No point wishing for more firepower now; they had a few handguns and two combat shotguns, and that was it. It was enough, or it wasn’t.

The marines stacked up at the ground floor doors then burst out into the parking area. They moved in pairs, covering one another, from pillar to pillar as they headed for a row of government limousines at the far end. Crowe moved quickly in the middle of the group, until something hit him from behind and he went down. The heavy body of a marine covered most of him as automatic gunfire ripped across the parking area.

Crowe felt the marine twitch and gasp, and knew she'd been hit. Her pistol was firing though, and she snarled something about staying down. He did, for a moment, looking around to try to get a handle on the situation. There was gunfire coming from the direction of the limousines, from a cluster of civilian-clothed men and women wearing ski masks.

Crowe scrambled out from under the marine and, despite her protests, dragged her upright. He supported her as she hobbled into the cover of a pillar. Blood stained her uniform trousers from a wound just above the hip. Crowe couldn't see how bad it was.

Shots struck the pillar, and the marines returned fire. Crowe pulled his hat down tight, as if it could protect him, and took a longer look around. Another marine was down, unmoving, and Urasnicz was firing one-handed while he covered a minor wound with his left hand. Some of the gunmen were spreading out, looking for a better angle, and it was obvious that the marines' position would soon be untenable.

"Shotgunners!" Crowe barked. "That car! Get it!" He pointed at a limo at the far end of the garage. There seemed to be nobody near it. The two shotgun-armed marines had body armor; they might survive the dash.

One of the gunners set off at a sprint, while the other sprayed his weapon at the gunmen on full-automatic. A couple went down, obviously hit, and others ducked as pellets punched into the cars behind them. Then the second gunner was off and running, other marines covering him with pistol shots. His partner reached a pillar, ducked behind it and then stuck her weapon out to pump covering fire out at the gunmen. The range was a bit long for a shotgun, but volume of fire took care of that. The second shotgunner reached the limo and smashed his way into it with his weapon butt.

Crowe finally drew his sidearm. "Lieutenant Urasnicz, you will escort Commander Browning and the wounded to the spaceport in that car. There, you will either obtain communications equipment and alert *Stormshadow* or commandeer a shuttle and proceed aboard. You will then send a shuttle to pick up myself and the remaining marines from the roof of this building."

"Sir, I . . ." Urasnicz said, and Browning started to protest as well.

"I'll secure comms here. That gives us two chances to alert the ship, and we're not all going to fit in that car. You have your orders."

The diplomatic limo screeched up, doors flung wide. One of the shotgunners jumped out, helping his comrades load the dead marine into the back. Urasnicz was the last man in, offering his captain a quick salute as the car raced off. It attracted the full attention of the surviving gunmen, losing glass but clearing the building still mobile.

While the hostiles were shooting at the car, Crowe led a dash back to the stairs. There, he and his three remaining marines began the long climb up past the accommodation floors and into the conference suite. “Comms is probably on the top floor,” Crowe said breathlessly. “If it’s not then we’ll have to go onto the roof and jack a comm straight into the antenna. Can one of you do that?”

One of the marines grunted something that sounded like an affirmative, just as the four of them ran out of stairs. They’d reached the conference floor, and the service stairs didn’t go any higher. Crowe swore silently; he should have expected that. A staircase directly from an access point to a governmental communications suite defied basic security regulations. Of course there was a break.

One of the marines kicked the doors open and led the way down a corridor, emerging into the conference room they’d used last night. There were a couple of bodies—a security guard and a young man in a dark suit—on the floor, and several figures in civilian clothing and ski masks clustered in the center of the room.

“Engage!” called Crowe needlessly, assuming a two-handed stance and thumb-cocking his revolver. The shotgunner swept the room with a whole magazine, dropping three of the hostiles including Crowe’s target. His own shot was wasted; if it hit at all, it went into someone who was already going down.

The other two marines were firing in neat two-shot patterns, moving smoothly sideways to seek cover as the shotgunner slapped in a new magazine. “Last one!” he called quietly.

Crowe got behind an ornamental table and took aim at one of the hostiles, who was blazing away with a handgun as she ran to the flank. Crowe fired twice then once more. His target ducked out of sight behind a sofa, re-emerging to blast off an entire magazine in Crowe’s direction. He returned fire with a single round as her pistol clicked dry, then ducked again. He had one round left and no reloads. More of the hostiles were down, but the shotgun was empty. Its user transitioned to his sidearm, tossing a magazine to a comrade.

They must all be down to a few rounds, Crowe reasoned. He aimed his last round at the sofa that concealed his opponent and fired as she popped up again to shoot. She flinched but kept firing. Crowe clung to his navy hat with one hand, holding it tight to his head in an instinctive reaction as chips of the table showered him. His comm burst suddenly into life.

“Crowe here. Go!” Crowe snapped.

“Sir, this is Morwood. I’m aboard a shuttle inbound your position, we have another headed to pick up the second party. Situation planet-side is unclear.”

“I need a hot extraction and a route to reach it,” Crowe replied. “My team is under fire.”

There was a pause that went on far too long, but was probably only a few seconds. “I’ve got a camera feed and schematics from your location,” Morwood said. “Government response is on its way but seems strangely confused. You have hostiles to your front and another group coming up the stairs behind you.”

“I need to get to the roof!” Crowe snapped.

“Your obvious route is across the conference room and up the main staircase beyond. There are other hostiles in the building and some government security personnel fighting them. You have no other clear route that I can see.”

“This one’s a lot less than clear!” Crowe said, but his mind was already made up. “We’re going to push through the remaining hostiles and make a run for the stairs. If we’re not on the roof when you arrive, we’ll be somewhere between there and here. Come and find us.”

“Understood sir, and good luck.” Morwood replied.

Crowe hunkered down, taking a few deep breaths, ready for what he had to do. He holstered the empty revolver and drew his remaining weapon; his sword. His dress uniform jacket hung open, torn and nicked by splinters of wood. His trousers were ripped too, and he was bleeding slightly. He had no idea when that had happened.

A quick glance around showed that the marines were still shooting, but carefully and using single shots. The hostiles’ rate of fire had dwindled too, but all they had to do was keep the navy party pinned down until their comrades arrived. Crowe knew his team had to go and it had to be now.

Crowe surged to his feet, just as the hostile who'd been firing at him rushed around the end of the table. She jabbed out her handgun at him, and he instinctively batted it aside with his left hand before plunging his sword right through her torso. The hilt slammed into her chest, throwing her backward and off the blade, and Crowe paused for a second, shocked.

While he was frozen there, someone fired at him, clipping his hat and tipping it back on his head at a crazy angle. He turned, bloody sword pointing at the shooter, as another round whizzed past. The gunman flipped backward, shot in the face by a marine.

Desperate rage fuelled Crowe's sudden rush at the doors, hurdling a body and then the sofa where Greener had sat the evening before. He landed next to a gunman who was working the charging handle of his empty submachinegun, and lashed out, using the stainless steel hilt of his sword as a knuckle duster. Crowe stamped on him as he went down, then ducked as rounds slammed into the wall beside him.

Crowe picked up the empty subgun in his left hand, spotted a magazine that might be full on the downed gunman, and threw both in the direction of the marines rushing to his side. One of them grabbed the weapon as the others kicked open the doors, and all four rushed out into the corridor beyond.

Crowe pounded along between two of his marines as the third, now armed with an automatic weapon, hung back to discourage pursuit. A couple of short bursts bought them time to reach the stairwell, after which the firing stopped.

All four burst out onto the roof moments later, slamming the access doors behind them. As Crowe had hoped there was a landing area for grav craft, but there was no sign of a shuttle from *Stormshadow*. Waves of foul-smelling, warm air assailed them, making Crowe and his team cough and gag. The marines still had the presence of mind to drag their captain into cover and to aim their weapons at the doors.

"Morwood! Where are you?" Crowe demanded between coughs. "We're on the roof!"

"We're almost there, Captain, look to the west, almost directly away from the spaceport!" Morwood replied.

Sure enough, there was a meteor in the atmosphere in that direction, a shining spark catching the early morning sunlight and leaving a

trail of tortured vapor behind it. Morwood was coming in hot; hot enough that the dense atmosphere might damage the shuttle.

Crowe decided that he'd be glad to live long enough to worry about trivialities like that.

CONFEDERATION NEWS AGENCY
Troubridge Naval Base, Dolor System: 051-1108

Naval officials today announced that Troubridge Naval Base is fully up to its designed defensive capability. A force of three entire wings of torpedo-armed strike gunships and their associated fighter contingent has arrived at the station and is beginning operational exercises alongside the forces already assigned.

Officials declined to comment on the origins of these strike craft, citing operational security as the reason. Unofficial sources have indicated that at least two of the strike wings came from reserve carriers due for decommissioning in the near future.

In a possibly related story, the Fleet Gunship Carrier *Hermes* has been transferred to a private concern after decommissioning. It is thought that the vessel will be given a refit and a name change before proceeding rimward to join ongoing exploration missions.

Gunship carriers have previously proven ideal for exploration missions, acting as a mobile base for multiple smaller craft. An anonymous naval official commented that this is a fine way for no longer battleworthy vessels to continue to serve, but would not confirm that exploration was to be the carrier's final fate.

Dolor System 059-1108

“Signal from Troubridge Naval Base traffic control,” *Stormshadow*’s computer announced. “Compliments of base commander; Commodore Alexander Ulysses Finchley, Confederation Navy. Recipient of the Banner of Terra, Order of Sol with Bar, Cross, and Diamonds. Greetings and salutations to CSS *Stormshadow*, her captain and crew. We are cleared to proceed into repair dock.”

“My compliments and so forth to the commodore, acknowledge and indicate that we are beginning our approach,” Crowe replied. The automated communications system would fill in his own rather less impressive decorations and credentials as always. There was a word for officers who insisted on doing it all manually; some even went so far as to reel off all their credentials in urgent communications, or in cases like this where they were really only talking to an automated traffic control system.

Crowe was used to the excessive formality of non-urgent signals of course, but all the same every second’s delay ate at him. His ship was held together mainly by hopes and dreams, and the crew needed to stand down. Throughout a rough jump passage that took nearly ten days, nerves were strained to the breaking point wondering if they’d ever emerge from jumpspace, and if so where they would be.

Now all that remained to do was to explain to Commodore Finchley how he’d got a ship shot out from under him and then been bushwhacked on a supposedly friendly planet. Finchley was perhaps the most friendly audience Crowe could have hoped to tell that story to—

they'd won the Order of Sol the same day, aboard then-Commander Finchley's *Maestrale*. But since then Crowe's career had not been quite as stellar as that of his former captain.

Itching to get it over with, Crowe still had to go through the motions of bringing his ship in and handing her over to the repair crews. Well, at least they were finally in position to make their approach.

A pair of fighters arced in; the usual courtesy escort for a damaged warship returning to port. A cutter from the base would join them presently, with engineers aboard it eyeballing the damage. They would begin planning repairs even before the crippled frigate entered a repair cradle. In the meantime . . .

"Mr. Holmes," Crowe said conversationally. "It is a testament to the skill and hard work of the entire technical and engineering staff that we are here at all, let alone proceeding in to dock under our own power. Regulations require that a qualified pilot be at the controls even during automatic docking, but for preliminary maneuvers we have discretion. Since you were instrumental in ensuring that we got this far . . . would you like to drive the boat?"

Holmes goggled at his captain for a second, then slammed down the professional mask he normally wore over his resentment at a stalled career. "Uh, yes sir. I'd like that," he said as evenly as he could manage.

"Then if you'd be so kind, please relieve the pilot and guide us in. I'm told it's pretty straightforward."

Holmes didn't quite rush to the pilot's chair, but he was quick enough that he had to wait while the petty officer occupying it got out and moved to the backup position. As she began briefing Holmes on the procedures to follow, Crowe glanced idly around the bridge. Browning was . . . not quite glaring in his direction for some reason, while the rest of the bridge crew were nodding in unspoken agreement with Crowe's sentiment.

The phrase "drive the boat" had come down from antiquity, probably from the wet navies of old Terra. Deliberately unprofessional, the phrase made light of the fact that a non-pilot was about to take control of a major warship. The controls were simple enough that anyone could follow a port beacon or preset course under routine conditions once they were shown how, but being invited to drive the boat was an indication of the captain's favor.

Given that Holmes had been instrumental in getting them home, the gesture of approval was appropriate. He'd clearly never received such an honor before, and he was delighted. Browning wasn't though, for reasons Crowe would have to discover later. For now, they were limping in under their own power and that would have to be enough. It was more than he'd have dared hope for a few days previously.

Troubridge Naval Base Dolor System 059-1108

Commander Finchley had always had a habit of pacing about his bridge, which Crowe tried hard not to emulate. *Commodore* Finchley did not pace; he strode from one part of the room to another, gesturing with fierce intensity and turning his gaze from Crowe to Browning, and thence to the sublieutenant who sat as witness and recorder of events.

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” Finchley suddenly barked. Crowe wasn’t sure what he was expecting as an opener, but that wasn’t it. “Well, at least you got your ship home. Looks like it could have been a lot worse.”

Finchley seemed to suddenly realize that Crowe and Browning were standing at attention in front of his desk, while he was almost behind them after a series of rapid strides. “At ease. In fact, sit down. Drink.”

That sounded more like a command than an offer, but it was welcome all the same. The sublieutenant, a great tall skinny kid of about nineteen with staff rather than line rank insignia, produced a whisky decanter and glasses from somewhere and began pouring large measures. Very large measures, Crowe noted.

“I’m on duty, sir,” Browning said. “We both . . .”

“We all are.” Finchley took his glass and sipped from it. “There. I broke regs first. You’re clear to proceed. Now, sit.”

Again, the invitation was barked like a command, and Crowe began to see how exhausted Finchley was. He’d been energetic when Crowe served with him, but in a restrained and elegant way. Now he was almost manic.

Not one to argue with a superior, especially one who did not seem to be trying to cashier him, Crowe unbuckled his dress sword and seated himself on one of the sofas in the “informal” corner of the office. He tried to leave his drink behind, but it somehow arrived on the coffee table in front of him.

“There has to be an inquiry,” Finchley said. “This is it. So talk me through what happened. All of it.”

Crowe blinked a couple of times. “Sir, a formal inquiry requires three command level officers and a representative of Solomani Security.”

“I count two lieutenant commanders and a commodore, and a Sol-Sec representative here in this room,” Finchley said abruptly. “I trust you find my selection of personnel suitable?”

“Eminently,” Crowe agreed quickly, aware that Finchley was bending the rules beyond recognition. As a mere lieutenant commander, and the subject of the inquiry, he didn’t need to worry about that. Finchley was clearly on his side and giving him an out. Or was he? Crowe glanced at his drink, which kept getting fuller. He was obviously expected to keep pace with the commodore, who poured more for his guests every time he took a drink of his own, even if they did not touch theirs in the meantime.

Crowe resigned himself to whatever was going to happen and sampled the whisky. It was good, very good. Genuine lowland single malt scotch if he was any judge, quite possibly all the way from one of the designated Culturally Scottish regions that were permitted to call their product scotch instead of just “Scottish-style Whisky.”

“Another reason for retaking Terra,” Finchley said, gesturing at his glass.

Crowe forced himself to chuckle. “One of the best. Well, Commodore Finchley . . . you’ve seen my preliminary report.”

“Yes. I want the details. Your impressions, your feelings for what might be going on. Anything you got from the liaison officer at Chinon. What happened here is well out of the ordinary. This wasn’t a terrorist attack or a trade war. This was the deliberate ambush of a Confederation Navy ship, and a subsequent attempt to cover up the incident by attacking the command crew on the ground. It’s even possible that elements of the Chinon world government were involved.”

“I would go so far as to say likely, sir,” Browning put in quietly. She had not touched her glass. “I’m sorry, but I don’t drink. I mean no in-

sult by that. But as to government involvement, I'd say it was likely that the government was either stalled from within or actively withheld their response. Nobody could be that slow to react to an attack at a government facility."

"My thoughts too," Finchley said. "Lieutenant Edwards, could you find some fruit juice or . . . something suitable . . . for Commander Browning? My apologies, Commander. I've grown rather used to dealing with a certain kind of officer."

"It's fine, sir," Browning responded. "Anything will do."

"I concur with Commander Browning," Crowe put in. "There's too much coincidence here. We were prevented from boarding that merchant, which was headed for Chinon, and then the world government was very slow to react when we were attacked even though they'd just been making a lot of noise about getting more patrols in the area. I suspect they helped with our repairs mainly to get rid of us as quickly as possible."

"And of course, there's the data collected by the liaison officer at Chinon," Finchley said. "She's been filing reports for years, and I suddenly feel the need to take another look at them. It can't be coincidence that she was murdered just after an incident that might cause High Command to take some notice of her at last."

"She'd have wanted that; to finally get her message through," Browning said.

"Damn shame that it took her getting killed to make anyone take some notice," Finchley muttered. "But you see, here's the problem. We're overstretched to the point where your ship had to be sent out on an active patrol before she was even shaken down properly . . . and everyone is shortstopping replacements meant for others. Nobody has what he needs to get the job done."

Finchley got up and started pacing as he spoke. Crowe realized that his old commanding officer was venting rather than talking to anyone in particular, and the realization was reassuring. The "inquiry" into how *Stormshadow* had been damaged had turned into a bull session about how hard the job had become; Finchley was indeed a sympathetic audience.

"My remit is to protect this base and make sure it can support patrol operations in the surrounding systems, and of course to coordinate those operations. But what actually happens is that I send out a task

force and it gets diverted to some other command within two weeks. Right now I have two fleet couriers, one of which is borrowed, a couple of auxiliaries, and one patrol corvette to my name. One. Plus your ship, Simon. No offence meant but she's not an asset right now."

"I . . ." Crowe began, but fell silent as he realized Finchley had more to say.

"I'm even having to fight to prevent my own defensive assets; my gunship and fighter squadrons, being yanked away by other commands. A while back I lost two fighter squadrons as replacements for the *Mikula* task force. We've made good the loss now but it's only a matter of time before System Defense Command convinces someone higher up that it needs our boats more than we do."

Troubridge Naval Base orbited Raudal Gamma, a rockball moon of the gas giant Raudal. The mainworld of the system, Dolor, had its own defense squadron operated by the world's Home Forces whereas the gunships of the naval base answered to the fleet. Although the two chains of command were deliberately distinct from one another, a government with enough influence could appropriate additional forces for system patrol and defense work, and the base would have to make do with whatever was left.

"So . . ." Finchley said, pausing just long enough in his pacing to refill his glass. "It is the finding of this inquiry that CSS *Stormshadow* and her captain did the best that anyone could expect under very difficult circumstances and it's in nobody's interest to have either out of service for longer than absolutely necessary. An investigation will be launched into the situation at Chinon as soon as resources become available. In the meantime, your exec can look after the ship during repairs?"

"Yes, sir, of course," Crowe answered automatically.

"Good. In that case, I want you to deputize for me at a function over at the highport. Dress uniform, medals and swords. Just say the usual reassuring nothing-much, nod and smile when local politicians bend your ear. And if you get the chance, remind the captains of the *Mikula* task group that this is their base, not Dolor Highport."

"I'm sorry sir?" Crowe fished.

"Commodore Reutens has more or less hijacked some of my main patrol assets. She turned up a few months back aboard *Mikula*, with a set of special orders demanding cooperation from the patrol forces here. She's reassigned three of my vessels to independent patrol and one as an

escort for her flagship. All of which was on a temporary basis which seems to have become permanent.

“The task force is supposed to be based out of Troubridge, but Reutens and her officers seem to prefer the comforts of the highport to their actual base. It started as courtesy visits, like any other port, but now the whole task force just berths there and demands that we ship supplies over. That ties up my shuttles for days on end, and to no useful purpose. Technically it’s not proper procedure, but Reutens is well enough connected to more or less do as she likes.”

“I’ll pass on your comments, sir,” Crowe said as if he did not know it was a pointless task.

“Don’t bother, it’ll just cause friction,” Finchley said wearily. “I’ll just send Reutens a memo or two.”

“Isn’t the *Mikula* task group supposed to be out on patrol?” Browning asked.

“Yes. They arrived back in system yesterday and . . . requested . . . some of my fighter complement to replace losses and craft needing refit. Apparently they had a skirmish with a pirate, and the government of Dolor is throwing them a party to celebrate,” Finchley made a sour face. “Which is presumably keeping Commodore Reutens so busy that she can’t file her reports with me just yet.”

Finchley downed the last of his drink and gazed ruefully at the glass. “I didn’t just say any of that, of course. But as you can see, things are difficult at present and getting worse. Which is why I want *Stormshadow* back in service as quickly as possible. Have you heard of the Singapore Strategy?”

“Singapore Trade Station?” Browning asked.

“No, Singapore on Terra. Back before the Interstellar Wars. One of the great empires had a major fleet base—wet navy that is—at Singapore Island. The plan was that it would help them control that part of the world by being a base of operations for a fleet that in practice was never available. The base was critical to the Singapore Strategy . . . but there was never the money for the ships to operate from it.”

Crowe cocked his head. “So, they built a base they knew they had no ships for?”

“Yes. There was a plan to transfer assets from elsewhere when they were needed. Of course, the plan to defend the base was never implemented. Partly because there was nothing to defend and partly because

there was no money to pay for it. But Singapore was an extremely prestigious possession because it was the crux of the strategy to control that part of the world. So when war broke out it was a target and its loss was a huge blow to the empire's prestige even though it was basically worthless."

"I see," Crowe said. "This base at Singapore became a target because of its importance to a plan that was never implemented. I see a parallel to the Iron Gate doctrine."

"That's my point, yes. We've spent a lot of money on bases along the frontier with the Imperials, and on defenses for them. But where are the ships? Without ships to patrol the frontier systems, Iron Gate is nothing more than a propaganda exercise. Which may have been the point all along." Finchley's tone was sour.

"*Stormshadow* and her sisters are part of Iron Gate," Crowe offered.

"I know. That's why we need you out there as soon as possible. If you like analogies, the bases are nothing more than hinges; starships are the gate and bars that will keep the Imperials out. We've spent a fortune on those hinges but someone, somewhere has forgotten to provide a gate."

Crowe nodded. "I find myself thinking that this system would be more secure if we just closed the base and transferred all its defensive assets across to the highport over Dolor. At present we're just spreading the same resources thinner. But we can't do that, can we? Apart from the political implications, we've got a repair-and-construction yard here. That's a big investment."

"Quite. We have a yard that can build or repair warships up to destroyer size, to support a patrol fleet that may never be built," Finchley said. "It's a huge asset, but it's standing idle most of the time. We can't just close it down because of the fanfare over the Iron Gate strategy. So we need to paper over the cracks and pretend we're doing something useful."

Crowe finished his drink thoughtfully. Finchley's almost manic frustration made sense now. He presided over a more or less empty base that drained funds away from the fleet it was built to support. Local systems clamored for patrols that could not be mounted, and his few assigned assets were being pulled away to other duties.

"I'll have a talk with my exec and see how fast we can get back on station, sir," Crowe said fervently. "I know how much we're needed."

“Be so good as to remind Commodore Reutens that she’s needed too,” Finchley muttered with a gesture in the general direction of the door. Crowe and Browning decided to take that as a sign they were dismissed, and stood to go.

“Crowe,” Finchley said as his subordinates reached the door. “Good to see you back in the right uniform. Home Guard didn’t suit you.”

Troubridge Naval Base Dolor System 059-1108

Lieutenant Roebecker was waiting by the shuttle when Crowe and Browning arrived. In dress uniform he looked even younger than his twenty standard years, and for a moment Crowe wondered if Roebecker had finished growing. If not, then there might be a problem getting him a vacc suit big enough . . . Crowe forced his attention back to the subject at hand.

"I'll only be gone for a few days," he said to Browning. "So I'm not expecting miracles from the yard. But it would be nice."

Browning chuckled. "It's not like the crews have got anything else to work on, and I'm sure Lieutenant Carstairs can keep them at it."

Crowe wasn't so convinced, but left it at that. "Any information on the situation in general?" he asked somewhat cryptically. He still wasn't sure enough of Browning to openly discuss the probable failure of the Iron Gate doctrine, even if Finchley was willing.

"I'm still working through Greener's data, but already I'm seeing indications of a lot of traffic through Chinon that . . . well, you'd have grounds for a stop-and-search at least. Nothing very conclusive, but it could be pirates or smugglers. If so, then they've got their hooks into the world government."

"You don't think it could be an external threat?" Crowe asked.

"The Imperials? Maybe. The Imperials are always a maybe, especially this close to the border. There's nothing to indicate any involvement, though. In fact, the main oddball fact is on our side."

“Explain?”

“We encountered CSS *Lesos* on our patrol, and her captain said she delivered dispatches from the *Mikula* task group here.”

“I recall that,” Crowe said more harshly than he intended.

Browning let that go; she knew why. “Point is, *Lesos* isn’t assigned to this region. She’s part of the patrol force allocated to the base at Jardin. I’d have expected her to be real busy patrolling the Pilgham Cluster and maybe the Miasma-Durgha Link. There’s no reason for her to be this far rimward, and none for her to be carrying dispatches for *Mikula*.”

“Odd. Did she dock here or at the mainworld?” Crowe asked.

“Either way she could have transmitted updates easily enough. But I’ll find out.”

“Please do,” Crowe said.

“There is something else,” Browning said almost conspiratorially.

“What is it?”

“Well, our preliminary survey suggests that we’ve got heavy damage to three turrets from Q battery and the fourth is only borderline repairable at best. The mountings are more or less intact but the external segments were peppered by missile fragments. It’ll take weeks at least to strip the turrets down and replace the damaged wiring and control components, then put it all back together.”

“You have an alternative?” Crowe asked.

“Yes sir, I do,” Browning replied. “But it’s a little . . . controversial.”

“I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“You might, actually. We could dismount the turrets and replace them. The base has the facilities to do a proper repair given time, and in the interim we’d retain some of our weapons capability.”

“Some? How many replacement missile turrets does the base have?” Crowe was puzzled. Replacement turrets were a common enough item and the fittings were standard. A base should have at least four.

“Troubridge has no missile turrets. None. They’re on a very long list of spares and supplies that have been requested but not delivered. Or more likely delivered somewhere else.”

“So, what are you suggesting?”

“Well,” Browning said with a small, apologetic smile. “They do have no less than eleven standard-fitting turrets configured for the WEPOL system.”

“WEPOL? I don’t know it.”

“It’s one of those contrived acronyms,” Browning said. “Wide Envelope Powered Ordnance Launch system. It’s under trials. If it’s adopted they’ll probably give it a dramatic name like Hellseed or Space Raptor.”

Crowe chuckled at that, then sucked his teeth thoughtfully. “This is an experimental system, isn’t it? Another try at a viable combined torpedo/missile launcher.”

“That’s about it, sir. The base has nearly a dozen turrets in storage, plus missiles and torpedoes. We could pop the turrets in within a couple of days, which would give us some offensive capability at least. Then we can swap our old mounts back in when they’re fixed. We have to dismount them for repair anyway.”

“I see,” Crowe said. “What do you think?”

“Truth be told, my gray hat likes the idea,” Browning replied. “It’s a quick fix to get *Stormshadow* combat-worthy again, and it can be done alongside repairs to our beam turrets. My black hat, however . . . the gunnery specialist I used to be . . . hates the whole concept. These things are notoriously unreliable.”

“We have to do it,” Crowe said. “I’m not keen either, but for the small amount of extra work it does make us more capable while we wait for a proper repair. I can see us ending up with the damn things aboard permanently though, and I don’t like that. I’m not keen on explaining why we chose to monkey with the designed armament, either, but under the circumstances . . . yes, do it.”

“Monkey with the armament, aye sir,” Browning replied with genuine humor. “One other piece of last-minute news. That Imperial liner, the *Catalina Star*, just came out of jump near Dolor and headed in to orbit. She’s launched several shuttles in the direction of the downport. Not, you’ll note, the highport.”

“Well, their last experience with Confederation highports was pretty poor,” Crowe replied, but it did seem odd that a foreign ship would be cleared for direct planetary approach rather than going through the highport. “It’s probably some diplomatic nonsense that we’ll never find out about.”

“More than likely, but I’ll keep an eye on it if I can,” Browning said.

Crowe nodded. "In the meantime I have a two-day shuttle flight ahead, and the same back. I can see why Commodore Finchley is sending me instead of going himself."

"Rank hath its privileges," Browning agreed. "Well, good luck Captain. I'll see what I can piece together and I'll brief you when I get back."

"I'll try to stay out of trouble," Crowe said. "We don't need any more incidents."

"I find not talking to politicians or drunks is a good start," Browning offered. "Or is that don't talk to politicians whilst drunk? I forget."

"Good advice either way. In the meantime, take care of my ship."

"I will, sir," Browning replied, and as he walked toward the shuttle Crowe realized that in his heart he had entrusted *Stormshadow* to her and not Carstairs, the proper-black-hat-navy officer who was nominally in charge.

Interesting.

Dolor System

061-1108

The ships of Task Force *Mikula* were distant shapes, dark against the stars. It was hard to make out any details at this distance. Crowe could have dialed up a magnified view on his repeater screen, but he preferred to gaze out of an old-fashioned armored ceramic viewport at the ships and the highport beyond them.

The larger ships were moored rather than docked, which meant little more than lying at rest relative to the highport station. Utility craft buzzed about, carrying supplies and personnel to and from the station. Crowe assumed the three corvettes he knew were assigned to escort *Mikula* were docked in bays at the highport, leaving the four other vessels of the task force out among the stars.

Two were old destroyers, obsolescent but quite capable of dealing with minor threats or “showing the flag” on port visits. *Bainbridge* was much newer, but smaller than *Regolo*. The latter was of an age with Crowe’s old ship *Maestrale*; few of her class now remained in service. They were both built on the tried-and-tested Type 961 hull form used by most destroyer-class vessels. A cylindrical central hull housed most of the ship’s drive and control system, with beam batteries along the dorsal and ventral surfaces. Missile armament was housed in a pair of bulges located amidships, with small craft docking just forward of the flared drive section.

The destroyers flanked the Fleet Support Vessel *Vesikko*, a big transport that carried spares and supplies along with the task force’s marine contingent. Like many ships of her type, *Vesikko*’s hull was a big

rectangular box that maximized internal space. Her only feature of note was the shuttle operations deck located in a spinal bulge that made her look hump-backed and even more ugly than a transport ship had a right to be.

The flagship, *Mikula*, was much the same size as *Vesikko*, at about twelve thousand tons. Like most other ships assigned to patrol duty she was an older design; in this case a light aviation cruiser carrying fighter squadrons and assault shuttles in addition to a destroyer-class main armament. Not by any means a pretty or elegant ship, *Mikula* had a good service record but was surely not far short of her final retirement date.

Crowe gave in to temptation and called up a schematic of *Vesikko*. She was built first and foremost as a cruiser, with a long flared cylindrical hull that carried her main armament on the dorsal surface and flanks. She had no spinal mount, but she was intended more for patrol work than stand-up actions, so that had never been a problem.

Vessels like *Mikula* were intended for security and escort operations, controlling a star system with fighters and gunships launched from the large bay carried under her main hull. It was a separate structure half the length of the main hull, self-contained with its own reactor for power. There were advantages to that; the two halves of the ship could be built in a different yards and then joined together, allowing a large vessel to be built in areas where no suitable shipbuilding facility was available.

Separating the flight and main sections of the ship meant that a disastrous crash in the flight operations section of the ship would not impair operations of the main vessel, but it also created a structural weak point that could be exploited by a determined enemy.

The task force was more than capable of clearing out a pirate base or conducting a sweep of a backwater system, which was presumably what Commodore Reuten had been doing. Sweeps of this sort were supposed to happen frequently, especially close to the Imperial border. In practice they were far too rare, and tended to be launched only after several incidents in a given system. There just weren't enough hulls on patrol, Crowe reasoned.

All the same, it meant that response to a problem usually came too late to save the victims, and as soon as the fleet had moved on, the pirates and smugglers came back. The patrol forces were supposed to be a deterrent, but they more commonly acted as a fire brigade. If Reuten

and her task force were putting fires out then that was all to the good, but concentrating the local patrol assets like this did mean that problems could grow elsewhere.

Missions that put the task force in a system for a week or two tied up a lot of resources for much longer. A week per jump in transit to and from the target point, maintenance and resupply time . . . too few hulls divided by too much time spent in jump getting where they were needed . . . Crowe forced himself to just look at the ships instead of trying to solve an impossible logistics problem in his head.

The shuttle was decelerating, ready to begin its final approach. No craft was ever allowed to proceed directly to a planet or installation—or any point they might occupy in the near future—at speed, so the pilot had followed a close-approach vector and was now swinging around toward the station. As the shuttle rolled, Crowe got a good look at Dolor, which was every bit as unattractive as its name suggested.

Dolor's wisp of an atmosphere was insufficiently thick to conceal its expanses of barren rock. Ice fields here and there broke the monotony, and Crowe's eyes were drawn to a sharply-defined mountain range broken by an immense crater. The only other obvious feature was the irregular splash of light that surrounded the world's downport.

With most of its cities underground, Dolor's surface was largely unchanged since humans came to live there. A few outposts and the small surface segments of the cities were the only sign that what lay below was not a dead world. In fact its population numbered hundreds of millions, which Crowe took as proof that so long as one settler made a home somewhere, sooner or later others would move in next door.

The highport lay ahead, a large and fairly modern installation formed from five linked structures. The central residential and industrial area was by far the largest, with three subsidiary sections housing the system defence command and its flotilla of ships, the port's own utility craft and a segment under construction that looked like it might be an extension of the main industrial zone.

The commercial port lay at one end of the central section, separated from it by a web of gantries and access tubes that allowed the port to be sealed off in an emergency but gave easy access the rest of the time. From its size and the number of landing bays, it seemed that the port saw a fair amount of merchant traffic.

The shuttle had been directed to the system-defence docking area on the far side of the station to the main berthing area, so there was no need to wait in a holding pattern. That was just as well; they were cutting it a little fine to reach the station in time for the function. Crowe smiled tightly at that. Keeping himself presentable during a two-day transit, with only the shuttle's cramped bunks and tiny washroom, had been a challenge. Roebecker had really struggled, knocking his elbows and bashing his head several times. He had spent much of the trip in irate silence, which suited Crowe.

As the shuttle docked, Crowe buckled on his sword and straightened his hat. There was no reception party, just a single petty officer who offered a crisp salute then led Crowe and Roebecker at a brisk pace to a transit center. A couple of changes of elevator left them both somewhat confused about exactly where they were in the station. There was nothing for it but to follow their guide and hope that someone could direct them back afterward.

Crowe fought the urge to sigh as they approached the highport's executive conference suite. The décor, even in the approach corridors, was grand and ostentatious, intended to impress or overawe visitors, trade representatives, and ambassadors. Crowe could see why the task force crews preferred such opulence to the Spartan quarters of a naval base, but more importantly the surroundings spoke of utmost pomposity on the part of the local world government. Which meant that the coming proceedings were going to be something of a trial.

Dolor Highport

061-1108

The conference suite was filled with uniforms, suits, and gowns. Dignitaries and celebrities mixed and mingled with navy and Home Guard officers, chatting and swapping anecdotes. The buzz of conversation was underpinned by a small live orchestra in one corner of the chamber.

In the opposite corner, Commodore Reuten was holding court. She looked somewhat young for her rank, but she was tall and attractive and made a good public-relations figure for the fleet. Even without political connections she had advantages that could accelerate her career.

Reutens was surrounded by a mob of junior officers who vied for her attention and approval. Most of them were Fleet, a handful Home Guard and one or two were from the Merchant Navy. There wasn't a SolSec uniform among them. In fact . . . Crowe made a more detailed sweep of the room. There wasn't a gray uniform to be seen.

"Representing Commodore Finchley of the Confederation Navy, Acting Lieutenant Commander Simon Crowe, recipient of the Order of Sol, and Sublieutenant Christian Roebecker, officers of the frigate *Stormshadow*, Confederation Navy!" the door announcer said into his microphone. His words were repeated just loud enough to be heard by anyone who cared, anywhere in the room.

Crowe allowed himself the luxury of a small sigh. *That's Commanding Officer of the frigate Stormshadow. But you got the "acting" part in, I noticed . . .* he thought as a few heads turned. Most of the people in the room were not interested in a mere acting lieutenant commander nor a

frigate with no reputation. Those that were interested were, for the most part, hostile. They'd be the ones who knew his name.

Roebecker had already steered onto a diverging course, putting some distance between himself and his tainted superior. Crowe let him go, although etiquette expected that they presented themselves together to whoever came to greet them.

Clearly Crowe did not merit the attentions of anyone important; the man who approached him was far too young to be anything but a minor functionary, an aide to a minister perhaps. His smile, greeting, and handshake were impersonal and professional. He did not offer a name, and disengaged as quickly as was decent. Still, having been greeted Crowe was now permitted by etiquette to socialize . . . assuming he could find anyone willing to spend time with him.

Crowe spent more time talking to waiters in the next two hours than navy or world government personnel. Everyone apparently knew everyone else, and those that had never heard of Simon Crowe got a potted version from an acquaintance. After trying to join several conversations and achieving at best a few polite pleasantries, Crowe retreated to a corner of the room away from both orchestra and commodore. He armed himself with another glass of wine, hoping that together they might be able to fend off the utter boredom of the event.

To his surprise, Crowe looked up to see an older man approaching. He wore the three-rings-and-loop of a full commander on his jacket sleeves, and a proper navy beard that clearly had more years' seniority than Crowe himself. Almost white, the beard came down to its owner's medals . . . of which there were a good few.

"Simmonds, *Bainbridge*," the newcomer said in navy shorthand.

"Crowe, *Stormshadow*," Crowe replied, shaking the offered hand. This was odd; a shorthand greeting was more common among enlisted personnel working together ashore, or between officers who simply had no time for a full introduction.

"Robert Simmonds. Bob," the newcomer added, suggesting that he was being informal and friendly rather than curt.

"Simon. Pleased to meet you, Bob."

"You look as bored as me," Simmonds said. "It's like a family reunion in here, and we're not family. Even the people I know are little more than polite." Simmonds hitched his dress sword more comfortably as he spoke.

“That’s not a regulation weapon . . .” Crowe said, mostly just to make conversation.

“No, it’s actually an Imperial Court Sword, believe it or not. Used to belong to Admiral Estriiagaali. He surrendered it with his fleet at Jael in 991 to some distant relative of mine. It’s become a sort of family tradition that the current naval hero gets to have it until someone eclipses him . . . or her.”

“It’s quite a thing of beauty,” Crowe agreed, and as he had hoped Simmonds would not, the commander drew it from its scabbard with a flourish. He passed it to Crowe, who put down his glass to gingerly hold the precious thing in both hands.

Simmonds’s sword was quite similar to Crowe’s own, which was hardly surprising since both derived from the same traditions. The hilt had a small hand guard and a stirrup-like knuckle bow, but where Crowe’s regulation sword was of plain steel, Simmonds’s was inlaid with iridium. There were no gems, however; many purely ceremonial weapons had gems on the hilt where they would be dislodged by an impact. This one had none, suggesting a certain practicality. There was another difference too . . .

“Yes, it’s got an edge,” Simmonds said. That was unusual. Most naval swords were blunt for the whole length of their blade and were not designed to be sharpened. The point was serviceable, as Crowe knew from experience, but partly from tradition and partly because a razor-edged sword was a hazard to an untrained user, blades were never sharp.

Crowe passed the weapon back. “It’s a piece of history,” he said. “You must be very proud of it.”

Simmonds shrugged. “I forget sometimes how old and special it is—to me it’s something that was in the family when I was a child, so it’s got a more personal value. It is a bloody nuisance at times—I’ve almost lost a couple of fingers, and I once did irreparable damage to some very expensive shoes with it.”

Crowe chuckled at the image. “So, you’re not part of the, as you say . . . family . . . here?”

“No, *Bainbridge* was seconded from the patrol flotilla. We got sent off on a wild goose chase all the way to Cicero and back, and rejoined the task force just in time to miss a pretty good skirmish. I hear tell you had one of your own.”

“We did, at that,” Crowe said regretfully. “Followed a suspect merchant and got jumped by corvettes. Milspec vessels, not some cobbled-together pirate jobs.”

“Hmm,” Simmonds said thoughtfully. “Scuttlebutt says there’s a rogue corvette force been sighted in the backwaters. I’d assumed it was Imperial scouts or raiders. They were definitely naval units?”

“*Dulo* class,” Crowe replied, trying to keep his tone neutral. Simmonds was not being hostile or judgmental, and it was slowly dawning on Crowe that he had come to expect everyone in naval uniform he met to have an opinion about the events at Santorini. Maybe there were some who didn’t know or didn’t care about the controversy after all.

“The *Dulos* were sold off en masse a good few years ago. I served aboard one in my pre-beard days,” Simmonds said. “Yes, there was in fact a time when I was young and clean-shaven. Given everything that’s happened since then, maybe some *Dulos* could have been . . . misappropriated.”

“It’s more than the ships,” Crowe said. “They operated as a squadron, like they’d trained together for a while. And it was a good ambush. I’ll admit that we’ve not even finished shakedown and the crew are not the best they can be, not yet, but all the same we weren’t lax.”

“Nobody is suggesting you were,” Simmonds said. “Though I’d be willing to bet that our higher-ups would prefer to believe that a green crew made a mistake—no insult intended—than there’s a serious military force out there in the backwater systems. They might actually have to do something about it if they believed it.”

Crowe nodded slowly, wondering if profound cynicism was endemic under Commodore Finchley’s command, or if things really were that bad throughout the region. His thoughts were interrupted by the approach of another officer, a Home Guard lieutenant by his uniform.

Crowe and Simmonds turned to face the new arrival, who was a little unsteady on his feet. Both started to speak, but they were interrupted. “So, how did you do it?” the newcomer demanded.

“I beg your pardon, *Lieutenant* . . .” Simmonds began, but surprisingly the Home Guard lieutenant ignored him.

“How did you do it, Crowe? How did you get from court-martial to command? How did you get from Home Guard to Fleet, for that matter? Whose golden boy are you? What’s so special about you that you can shoot up a squadron-mate and get promoted for it?”

That's a . . . fascinating . . . interpretation of events, Crowe thought. Six years in limbo awaiting a court-martial that never happened, and an acting promotion at the end of it, for doing what seemed best in a confused situation. If he was someone's golden boy he'd like to think he'd pick a patron that could get him out of trouble a bit quicker. All the same . . .

"Lieutenant!" Simmonds barked, tapping the full commander's rings on his right sleeve with a finger of his left hand. "I do believe you may be drunk. Kindly be somewhere else before I have to speak to the shore patrol."

The lieutenant dragged himself upright and managed a pretty good facsimile of a salute that was not at that point required by regulations. "My sincere apologies, Captain," he said. "I didn't see you there . . ."

"*Commander*. Now why don't you go somewhere and study rank insignia? Somewhere that's not here," Simmonds said slowly and with careful emphasis.

The lieutenant saluted again, badly. Crowe suspected he wasn't as drunk as he was pretending to be, but before he could say or do anything the lieutenant looked him up and down with contempt, then turned back to Simmonds and said. "Yes sir, I'll do that right away. Though I do respectfully submit that the commander's choice of company seems a little questionable."

With that, the Home Guard lieutenant walked away, a good bit less unsteadily than he had approached. Simmonds turned back to Crowe and shrugged. "The boy's a fool, obviously. No wonder he's in Home Guard and not the fleet."

Crowe decided to let that go. It was probably meant kindly, but since Crowe had spent the past few years in a Home Guard squadron it failed to go over that way. No matter, he decided. "Sir . . . Bob, I mean. I think it's best if I find some accommodation and turn in. Before there's an incident."

"Good idea," Simmonds said, glancing around the room. "I think I've done my social duty too. How about I find a berth for you aboard *Bainbridge*? We're short-handed so I can probably scrounge you and your lieutenant a cabin. I'll call my exec and he'll send someone to inform Lieutenant . . .?" he left the question hanging.

"Roebecker. Thanks, Bob," Crowe said. When they got to Simmonds's ship there would be salutes and a side party to welcome the

captain of a friendly warship aboard, permission to board asked and given, and all manner of formalities. But as they walked to the door of the ballroom, Crowe was glad of the informality. Just possibly, he might have made a friend.

CSS Bainbridge
Dolor Highport
062-1108

Crowe tumbled out of his borrowed bunk and scrambled into about half of his dress uniform before answering the door. To his surprise, Bob Simmonds stood there. The destroyer's captain wore a more complete version of dress uniform, and was holding his sword belt in his hands. Crowe blinked at him, confused, then offered a salute.

Simmonds waved a vague response and gestured at Crowe's uniform. "I suppose your internal time is out of kilter with Dolor Standard, but all the same I'd have expected you to be up and about by now. Don't you at least want breakfast?"

"Uh, breakfast is good," Crowe said lamely.

"There isn't time now. I've ordered the steward to send some coffee and such to meet us. Maybe you can eat en route if you've a mind."

Crowe struggled into the rest of his uniform, ran water over his hands at the sink and finger-combed his hair. That would have to do; clearly Simmonds was in a hurry. He jammed his hat on his head and strode to the door then looked questioningly at Simmonds's sword belt and picked up his own. He put his arm through it, allowing his blade to rest on his back.

They walked through the corridors of *CSS Bainbridge*. The ship was obsolete and had clearly been repaired more than once in her long service, but she was spotlessly clean and obviously well cared for. They exchanged salutes with personnel they passed, finally reaching the main airlock where a party of marines stood guard. With the ship docked to

an arm of the highport, marine guards at the lock were mandatory. There were an excessive number of them, though.

Crowe finished surreptitiously straightening his shirt and jacket and buckled on his sword belt, wanting to ask about all the marines, their destination, and a host of other things. Simmonds was moving too fast though, and Crowe's curiosity rose as six of the marines fell in behind them. All wore sidearms and dress uniform; this was an honor guard and security detachment rather than a combat deployment, but other than that Crowe could not say why they were there.

At the end of the docking arm was the main service area for large vessels visiting the highport. It normally handled cargo and supplies moving in and out of freighters, but the area closest to *Bainbridge's* docking arm was more or less empty. Sublieutenant Roebecker stood there in full dress uniform, looking impatient. He saluted as they approached but said nothing.

"It would seem," said Simmonds. "That they're not here. Roebecker?"

"Lieutenant Braithwaite's friends have informed me that they are en route. They will be delayed a little due to a circuitous detour around a shore patrol checkpoint, and they apologize for the wait. No insult is intended." Roebecker's tone and language were excessively formal, and his use of the word "friends" was interesting. In fact it could mean . . .

No. Surely not, Crowe thought. *That would be absurd.*

"Well then, Simon, if you're intent on pursuing this nonsense . . . I suggest you use mine." Simmonds drew his priceless antique sword and offered it hilt-first to Crowe, resting it on his arm.

"I couldn't . . ." Crowe said vaguely, utterly bemused. In the back of his mind, a clear voice was screaming that it knew exactly what was happening, but he ignored it. This could not possibly be what it looked like. It just . . . couldn't.

"If you mean that you cannot countenance using my antique family sword, that's very commendable of you. But will I remind you that it was made for this and it's a very fine weapon. The fact that it's sharp might . . ." Simmonds chuckled at his own unintentional pun, "give you an edge."

"Well . . ." said Crowe.

"On the other hand," said Simmonds, gesturing at the party of half a dozen officers of the Home Guard who were entering the docking

area. They flanked the lieutenant that had approached Crowe the previous evening. He carried a drawn sword. “If you mean that you cannot put a sword into the body of another human being . . . In that case we may have a problem.”

Dolor Highport 062-1108

Crowe ran through a series of light cuts and thrusts with his borrowed sword as Sublieutenant Roebecker conferred with one of the Home Guard officers. Simmonds stood nearby, holding Crowe's own blade. After a moment, Roebecker returned.

"Lieutenant Braithwaite is ready," Roebecker rumbled. "As are his seconds. I am ready. Commander?" he said to Simmonds.

"I'm ready, but I do need to point out that this is madness," Simmonds replied.

"Wait!" Crowe said. "What are we doing here? You're right, this is madness. I wasn't even challenged! Can't we discuss this?"

"The time for discussion is over, I'm afraid." Roebecker didn't look entirely sorry about that. "The principals are armed and on the field of combat. The president is here. We must proceed."

Crowe and the Home Guard officer—Braithwaite, his name was, apparently—glanced sideways to where another party was approaching. Everyone snapped to attention and tried to salute without injuring themselves with the swords they held.

"Gentlemen," said Commodore Reutens, stepping up to a point midway between the duelists. "I have been asked to preside over this duel between brother officers of equal rank in equivalent service, and I have agreed to do so as an impartial observer. I will tell you when to begin and when to stop. You pledge your honor to obey those commands, and you seconds pledge theirs to force you if you do not. My surgeon will attend any injuries. Any questions?"

"No, but I would prefer not to fight," Crowe said heavily. "I wish to apologize to Lieutenant Braithwaite for . . . any and all insults . . . whatever insults . . . I may have offered."

"So you're a coward too!" snapped Braithwaite, making a series of fast circling movements with the point of his sword. It was much the same as Crowe's own, probably mass-produced by the same contractor.

"Acting Commander Crowe," Reutens said testily. "As you well know, apology for an insult can only be offered by the challenged party. You challenged Lieutenant Braithwaite this morning. You were apparently offended by his conduct yesterday evening toward yourself and Commander Simmonds. Since you issued the challenge, you cannot apologize. It does not seem that your opponent is inclined to. Lieutenant, are you prepared to apologize to Acting Commander Crowe?"

Braithwaite made a noise that suggested he was not.

"Very well then," Reuten said. "You will stand here and . . . here. Your seconds will flank you with swords ready, but may only intervene to defend a downed principal or for their own safety. Upon my command you will fight, and upon my command to halt you will step back and desist immediately. I will call a halt if a duelist is disabled or downed, loses his weapon, or in any other circumstance that I feel merits a halt. Are we clear?"

"Yes sir," Crowe said automatically. He was familiar with the standard dueling rules of course. Everyone who graduated naval college was. But that didn't mean the situation felt any more real to him. And what of the challenge? He had issued none, which meant that it had been issued by a "friend" acting on his behalf. One of the seconds most likely. Roebecker or Simmonds? Or both?

Crowe shook his head slightly to banish speculation. He had to fight and win, or fight and lose without getting killed, if it came to that. He saluted his opponent and then Reutens as president of the duel, bringing his sword up to the vertical in front of his face each time.

"Simon? Jacket," Simmonds said softly. Crowe cursed, shrugged clumsily out of his dress uniform jacket, and tossed it to one of Simmonds's marines. He saluted again, seeing the contemptuous sneer on Braithwaite's face the whole time. This couldn't be happening. It just couldn't.

Crowe assumed a standard guard in tierce, sword pointed at his opponent's throat and his unarmed hand held high behind him. He

surreptitiously checked his stance; knees flexed, front foot pointed where he wanted the sword to go, back straight, head up, knuckle bow turned outward to protect his sword hand. He fixed his opponent with what he hoped was a determined and threatening stare.

Braithwaite's expression was blank, unreadable. He had adopted a defensive posture, crouching lower than Crowe with his sword hand high and blade drooping in a hanging guard. His unarmed hand was forward, close to his weapon hand. Crowe nodded slightly. Braithwaite was using the Alten Style, probably intending to fight defensively until Crowe became frustrated and left himself open on a reckless attack.

Crowe stepped forward, into measure, and circled to his right. At this distance he could hit with a lunge and so could his opponent. He tried a probing thrust and aborted it as Braithwaite closed the line with a small movement of his hilt. Altenists were notoriously hard to hit, but then they were limited in how well they could . . .

. . . Braithwaite's point came up to the horizontal as he rolled his hand over, delivering a sharp rap on Crowe's blade as the arm snapped straight and he lunged, driving the point straight at Crowe's face.

Crowe jerked his head to the left and clumsily batted the thrust aside with his unarmed hand, feeling air disturbed by the point on his eyebrow. He scrambled back a pace, struggling to regain his composure, as Braithwaite recovered from his lunge and thrust again. Crowe went back another pace, leaning back to get away from the point. His clumsy parry contacted Braithwaite's sword as it withdrew; far, far too late.

Braithwaite began to circle, his movements no longer the measured pace of the Alten System duelist but a light, aggressive step that sparked with repressed energy. He was grinning now, a cold and frightening expression. "I'm going to kill you, Crowe," he hissed softly.

Crowe forced himself back on guard, mentally and physically, and circled to match Braithwaite's movements. He was rattled, thrown off by the suddenness of Braithwaite's switch from defensive to all-out attack and just as much by his intensity. Crowe opened the distance a little, extending his arm to present the point of his sword. If Braithwaite came in fast again he would impale himself.

Braithwaite returned to his hanging guard, defensive, using less energy than Crowe whose outstretched arm would tire him. A trained fencer would know to wait, Crowe realized, expecting the opponent to return to a lower and less tiring position than Crowe's point-in-line. But

Braithwaite was clearly beyond merely well-trained. He had learned how to exploit his opponent's expectations. By adopting a defensive posture he told his opponent that he did not intend to attack . . . and then launched an all-out assault to take advantage of the surprise he thus gained.

Sure enough, Braithwaite's point swept up as he sought to take Crowe's blade. He planned to push it off line and lunge into the gap . . . but the blades never met. Crowe's sword point described a circle as he avoided Braithwaite's attempt to control it whilst keeping the point aimed at his opponent's face. Braithwaite's blade swept sideways, trying to find Crowe's, but again he deceived it, allowing it to go past and maintaining control of the line of attack. Crowe lunged, and this time it was Braithwaite's turn to bat the thrust aside with his unarmed hand.

Crowe stepped back, seeing bright drops of blood hitting the deck. Braithwaite looked at his hand, surprised, then at Crowe's weapon. Crowe could have attacked him then, but checked himself as he realized Braithwaite was not properly defending himself. A victory won in that manner could lead to censure and might be seen as a breach of dueling regulations that would allow criminal prosecution. As his instructors at Naval College had told him over and over, there was more to dueling than putting the pointy end in the other chap.

Reutens should have called a halt at that point, seeing that Braithwaite was bleeding and not ready to defend. Crowe put aside speculation about why she did not, but he did permit himself a small nod of satisfaction. "It would seem that I have an edge," he said, more evenly than he expected he would manage. "We could stop at this point." He kept his guard up as he spoke, just in case Braithwaite broke convention.

"It's nothing," rumbled a voice just to Crowe's side and rear. Odd that Roebecker would comment on the opposing principal's wound . . . unless of course he wanted the fight to continue. This was starting to make more sense now. Roebecker had issued the challenge, or more likely conspired with Braithwaite to arrange a duel.

Braithwaite had used the defensive hanging guard of the Alten Style to lure Crowe in and gone straight for a kill shot. That suggested that this was no mere incident, it was an attempt at a legal assassination. There were plenty of officers who resented Crowe for his part in the Santorini controversy, but this was taking it very far indeed.

“Yes, it’s nothing,” snapped Braithwaite. “I caught the edge when I off-hand parried. Wasn’t expecting it to be sharp.” His tone was pointed, suggesting that Crowe was somehow cheating by using a non-regulation sword. There was nothing in the dueling regulations to disallow an edge, he knew. Besides, he was fighting an unwanted duel set up especially to kill him. And now his opponent was accusing *him* of cheating?

Any remaining sense of unreality evaporated, leaving Crowe in a clinical, calculating mindset. His opponent was highly skilled but had probably been banking on his surprise move taking Crowe straight out of the fight. Now he was injured and his sucker punch had failed. He’d be rattled; he’d make mistakes.

“Yield or fight!” Crowe snapped in a tone that was somehow both harsh and slightly bored.

Braithwaite glanced around for a moment then exchanged a long look with Commodore Reuten. She raised one eyebrow and waited. After a long, long moment Braithwaite nodded sharply. “Fight!” he said.

“Very well gentlemen. Return to measure . . . and commence!” Reuten commanded.

Now Crowe took the initiative, circling left and right like a predator sizing up a herd. Braithwaite engaged his blade, tried a few probing movements and a disengage, but he seemed half-hearted. Crowe wasn’t fooled. He could feel rage building, screaming at him to smash Braithwaite and anyone else involved in this piece of treachery. He slammed a lid on it, vowing to make no stupid mistakes in anger, and to be very sure of Roebecker’s involvement before he acted.

Braithwaite suddenly lunged, no longer half-hearted but blindingly fast. Crowe parried *contre-tierce*, deflecting the thrust, and launched a direct riposte to the heart. Braithwaite brought his weapon back across his body, making the conventional lateral parry of *quarte*, and began a thrust. Crowe made a similar lateral parry, following with a quick circular parry when he felt no blade contact. That found Braithwaite’s thrust, and Crowe launched a fast riposte back down the line.

That should have ended the matter, but somehow Braithwaite avoided the riposte, pivoting his body aside by moving his back foot across behind his front in a perfect *demi-volte* movement as he thrust at Crowe’s face. Crowe aborted his thrust and scrambled out of reach, aware that someone had just shouted “Yes!” at the display of back-and-

forth blade work and somewhat afraid that it might have been himself. Braithwaite followed up with another thrust, then turned it into a lunge as Crowe scrambled back. The point followed him, never farther than a centimeter from his chest, until Bainbridge ran out of reach. Crowe slashed at his extended arm, forcing his opponent to retract quickly.

Crowe followed up with a thrust that he knew would be parried, batted the riposte aside with his off hand, and raised his sword for an overhead slash. Braithwaite's weapon came up to parry . . . and Crowe kicked him in the chest.

It was a fairly poor kick from an unarmed combat point of view, but it did the job. Braithwaite staggered, wide open, and Crowe rushed in to seize his weapon by the blade. Against an edged sword, it would have been a huge mistake, but the traditional court sword used by the navy was blunt, as Crowe well knew. He twisted the weapon aside, drawing back his own sword for a killing thrust.

At the last second, Crowe's calculating instinct warned him of a new danger. There were irregularities about this duel. None of it was his fault, but a court of inquiry might find that he had killed a man in an improperly-arranged duel, and that could have . . . consequences. Someone wanted him dead, but out of the picture on charges was almost as good. Instead of thrusting he punched his opponent in the teeth with the iridium-inlaid hilt of Simmonds's priceless antique sword.

"It's your lucky day," Crowe grated to Braithwaite, and hit him again.

CONFEDERATION NEWS AGENCY
Carter Naval Base, Barsoom System: 064-1108

Naval analysts have questioned the detachment of several patrol vessels and heavier units from the border forces over recent months. Most of these vessels have been sighted in systems up to ten parsecs from their base, undertaking a range of tasks better suited to couriers and auxiliaries.

Senior naval officers in the Pilgham Cluster patrol forces countered these statements, saying that the detached vessels were undertaking “long range patrols in the surrounding area, showing the flag and reassuring the people of the region that the fleet is out there doing the job.”

As always, a balance must be struck between defending the frontier from the “grand threat” of the Imperial Navy and ensuring the security of commercial traffic within the Confederation’s less well-traveled systems.

Rumors that these vessels are being used to temporarily replace local ships which, for various reasons, are not available, have been denied. Naval authorities have also refuted allegations that these vessels are undertaking a vigorous search for pirate bases or other installations, stating that too much is being made of a routine patrol surge in an area whose world governments have long requested a greater naval presence.

Off Troubridge Naval Base Dolor System 065-1108

“The bridge just confirmed that we’re clear to launch,” Commander Simmonds said as they approached CSS *Bainbridge*’s shuttle bay. “*Vesikko* has entered the transfer dock.”

“That’s good to hear,” Crowe replied. “Now all I have to do is to jump through a few more hoops at the base and I can finally get back aboard *Stormshadow*. With a bit of luck they’ll have her operational by then.”

“Hope so,” Simmonds agreed. “I’ve got orders to wait a couple more days for you then proceed solo if you’re not available. I was kind of looking forward to being a task group commander.”

“We’ll do everything we can,” Crowe said. “There’s a full repair yard here, and they’ve had most of a week. *Stormshadow* might be in better shape than she was before Chinon.”

Simmonds chuckled. “Cling to your illusions and false hopes as long as you can, Simon. One day you’ll be an old cynic like me. On a more serious note, what are you going to do about your lieutenant?”

“I’m not sure. It’s pretty obvious that he issued that challenge on my behalf, and that there was more to it than a random dispute. I was set up. And I’ll say it once more—I’m sorry about abusing your sword like that.”

“Iridium and steel don’t take much damage from teeth,” Simmonds said with a shrug. “It’s a fighting tool and we’d dishonor it by treating it

as anything else. Besides, that Braithwaite fellow was there with no other intention than to kill you. He got what was coming.”

“I wonder what would have happened if I’d just run him through?” Crowe pondered. Merely smashing Braithwaite’s teeth in had resulted in a perfunctory interview with Commodore Reuten, who pronounced the duel fair and proper and closed the matter, then in the next breath told Crowe to get off her station. Technically that was all kinds of wrong; Dolor Highport was not under her command and neither was Acting Lieutenant Commander Crowe, but it made sense to depart quickly.

And so Crowe had hitched a lift aboard *Bainbridge* as she departed the highport and returned to Troubridge Naval Base. At the same time, the destroyer transferred back to Commodore Finchley’s command where she belonged.

Sublieutenant Roebecker had been assigned a berth aboard *Vesikko* for the trip. Actually, Crowe had too but he decided to remain aboard *Bainbridge* as the environment was friendlier there. *Vesikko* was taking on supplies from the naval base ready for the task force’s next deployment. That was a departure from previous practice, which had required the base to transfer supplies by shuttle to the highport, but this was the transport ship could use the bulk transfer dock at the naval base, which would make life simpler for Commodore Finchley.

Crowe and Simmonds shook hands in the corridor and bade one another goodbye as the friends they were becoming. Once in the shuttle bay, there was a second goodbye, but this was a formal affair with a side party and salutes.

Within moments of boarding the shuttle, Crowe was en route to the naval base, gazing out of the viewport at the gas giant Raudal. Fuel shuttles plied back and forth between the base and the giant planet, skimming raw hydrocarbons from the atmosphere to convert into liquid hydrogen fuel. The base maintained enormous reserves in case fleet units had to be refueled unexpectedly, and keeping the tanks topped up was a full-time job.

Somewhere on the far side of the naval base, *Stormshadow* rested in a repair cradle. According to a brief signal from Lieutenant Carstairs, repairs were going well and she would be operational in a day or so. Maybe his youthful hopes and dreams were not unfounded after all, Crowe mused with a chuckle.

Nearer, the ungainly bulk of the Fleet Support Vessel *Vesikko* rested in the bulk transfer dock. Huge arms held her in place as supplies were loaded aboard through her great aft hatches. She was not in any way an attractive ship, but she had given many years of good service as a support asset.

Crowe wondered how he would react if he were offered a support command. A tanker or logistics ship captain was still the master of a major ship, and had a vitally important job to do. But all the same, Crowe was a fighting captain . . . or at least he saw himself as one. Too many propaganda vids as a teenager, maybe. With the Imperial hordes at the gate, the Confederation needed men and women to crew its warships, and officers like the young Simon Crowe wanted to be to lead them into battle. How would it have felt to find there was no battle, just endless resupply runs?

The shuttle curved gracefully toward a bay on the side of the base, past a cluster of point defense turrets and an antenna group. Doors slid closed behind it and by the time the pilots had settled their craft onto the pad, the outside pressure light was green. Crowe picked up his bag, with his sword across the top between the straps, and stepped into the airlock.

He was halfway down the ramp when it registered that there were an unusual number of gray coveralls in the docking bay. Not portside-utility gray; SolSec gray. As he stepped off the ramp, a couple of gray-clad figures slipped around behind him. That was fairly standard procedure when SolSec wanted to “talk” to someone, in case they bolted. All the same it was disconcerting when it was you they were behind, Crowe decided.

Three more sets of gray coveralls—two women and a man—halted a few paces in front of Crowe. “Commander Simon Crowe?” one of the women asked. It wasn’t really a question.

“I’m Crowe,” Crowe replied with a nod. His calculating instinct was—ever so slightly—reassured that the SolSec enforcer used his informal rank title—commander rather than acting lieutenant commander. That was a good sign . . . maybe.

What was definitely not a good sign was the SolSec officer marching toward him across the docking bay. Unlike the enforcers, the officer was in uniform rather than working coveralls, and he wore a personal defense weapon as a sidearm.

Crowe kept his expression neutral as he saluted. The officer returned the salute, which was another good—well, good-ish—sign. “Commander Crowe. We need to discuss a number of matters, not least certain irregularities concerning your recent duel, which left Lieutenant Braithwaite of the Dolor Home Guard in need of medical attention. You are hereby relieved of duty pending investigation. Your sword, please.”

Crowe passed it over without a word, trying to fathom why he was being arrested here and not at the other end of his trip. Commodore Reuten had already proclaimed the duel fair and correct, so what irregularities existed? It might be that there were none. This could be a SolSec setup . . . or maybe the whole thing had been a SolSec sting? No, that was unlikely. If they wanted him they’d just arrest him. SolSec didn’t need to worry about minor details such as proof or even a solid case against someone, not if they were a mere lieutenant commander.

“If you’ll accompany me?” the officer said.

“Of course, sir,” Crowe replied, because when SolSec were polite enough to ask you acted as though you were cooperating by choice. That was how it was done. “I wasn’t aware you were assigned to Troubridge.”

“Of course not,” replied Commander Davide Jorgenssen. “Why would you?”

Troubridge Naval Base Dolor System 065-1108

Commander Jorgenssen's quarters were ever so slightly smaller than those of the base commanding officer. They did not double as his office, however, which gave him significantly more room. He had not troubled to fill it, creating a Spartan atmosphere that fitted his image as a zealot.

The only wall decorations were diplomas, a couple of medal citations, and a propaganda poster that was supposed to motivate and inspire. It showed SolSec and navy officers playing sports, eating, and fighting together in some kind of heroic brotherhood. The reality was somewhat different.

Yet not entirely different, Crowe realized. He sat opposite Jorgenssen at a genuine wood table, with a meal spread between them. It was a fish and smoked cheese salad, with fresh-baked bread and crisp white wine, and Crowe conceded that it was really very good. The only downside was that the wine was being poured by a man on the other side of the largest controversy to wrack the navy in fifteen years, and Crowe could only wait for the hammer to drop.

"Long time since *Maestrale*," Jorgenssen said. "Remember the night before Second Pavel?"

Crowe was taken aback, wondering where Jorgenssen was going with that. "Yes sir, I recall that night rather well. My first time in action; I'd not long joined *Maestrale*'s crew from *Carlo Mirabelle*."

“You did well that day. By which I mean you saved everyone aboard our ship including both of us. We drank this wine at dinner the night before the battle; I break out a bottle once in a while as a reminder.”

“Of what? Sir.”

“Better times, perhaps,” Jorgenssen said. “And also that sometimes your survival hangs on some green kid who might just be a hero. You and I could have worked well together, Crowe. At Santorini, when I took command of *Mackensen*, it was your boat that put herself alongside us. I knew then, dammit, Crowe, I knew . . . and I was wrong.”

Crowe sipped his wine, waiting for the rest of whatever Jorgenssen had to say. After a moment he went on. “I knew I’d found one. An officer I could count on. Someone who could see it, see what needed to be done. I’m career SolSec, Crowe, not a sideways frustrated naval officer. SolSec from my college days. You know why?”

“No, sir.”

“Because it needs doing, Crowe. Because we’re coming apart and the only thing keeping it together is the men and women in gray. We silence the dissenters, plug the intelligence leaks, arrest the traitors, and they hate us for it. They’re scared of us because they have secrets—everyone has secrets—and we root out secrets. We might discover theirs. Or we might arrest them just for the fun of it.”

“Not everyone thinks like that, sir,” Crowe offered.

“No, but that’s the general picture,” Jorgenssen said. “Not that it matters. We’re keeping it together. For now. You know what the big threat is?”

“The Imperial Navy, sir,” Crowe said mechanically, knowing that it was the answer Jorgenssen wanted . . . so that he could say it was the wrong one.

“No, it’s not the Imperial Navy,” Jorgenssen said predictably. “It’s secession. Fragmentation. Look what happened in the Bootes Trade War. We had factions within the Confederation fighting a major war against one another, and actually using the fleet as a tool in their conflict. The fleet should have come down upon Thetis and Laputa and all of the other worlds involved like a righteous hammer from the very gods! Or perhaps SolSec should have headed it off so that nothing ever happened. But instead we had Home Forces units firing on the fleet and getting away with it.”

Crowe couldn't think of much to say to that, so he nodded assent and let Jorgenssen keep talking. After a moment the SolSec officer went on, "Unity, Crowe. That's what the Solomani Party represents. That should be us," he pointed at the propaganda poster. "But you're wondering why we're having this conversation."

Crowe nodded slowly, sensing that the hammer was finally about to drop.

"Well, first of all there is the curious business of your recent duel. By some incredible mischance you managed to pick a fight with the former swordmaster to the Dolor Home Forces. Your post-incident deposition states that you were unaware of the challenge until Commander Simmonds came to escort you to the duel. And strangely enough, although Commodore Reuten has stated that the duel was in all ways proper, she has now requested that you be suspended from duty pending an investigation."

"I have no explanation," Crowe said.

"I assumed as much. I have no choice but to suspend you as requested and launch an investigation. Until such time as it is complete you are confined to the base and are of course relieved of duty."

Crowe tried to let that slide past. In truth it was better than he had expected, but to be beached a second time was crushing.

"I've been there, Crowe. I was suspended after Santorini too, though not for as long as you were," Jorgenssen said with what sounded like genuine sympathy. "But more importantly, I'm moved to wonder just why this has happened. I know that you're the kind of officer who will do what he thinks is right. Your judgment on what that might be differs rather radically from mine, but you have the courage of your convictions. And I recognize a set-up when I see one."

"So you're saying that you think someone wants me out of the way?" Crowe said. "I got the impression that Braithwaite was supposed to kill me. He suckered me in and took a cheap kill shot. That might have just been cold tactics—you said he was a swordmaster, yes? But I wonder if this whole thing wasn't just to get me out of the way. Dead, or arrested for killing Braithwaite."

"You may be flattering yourself, Crowe," Jorgenssen said. "But it does look like someone wants you out of the picture. Much as I dislike you, that does pique my interest. Your Sublieutenant Roebecker arranged the duel without consulting you. At the least that makes him

guilty of breaching the relevant regulations, but he might bear further investigation. Where is he?"

"He came in aboard *Vesikko*. I ordered him to report aboard *Storm-shadow*," Crowe said. "He's probably there by now."

"I'm going to bring him in for questioning," Jorgenssen said. "And we'll see if there are any gaps in his story. Something doesn't add up here, and my remit is to find out what it is. You can go."

For a moment, Crowe just sat there. Then he realized that he had been dismissed and had better make himself scarce. Sending him away in the middle of the unexpected lunch was presumably one of the mind games Jorgenssen liked to play. Well, be that as it may. He was suspended from duty, aboard a naval base with relatively little to do. Hit the gym, maybe, or find a bar.

But first, there was a job to do. Crowe needed to find himself some accommodation and get out of his uniform. He was breaching regs by wandering around dressed as a frigate captain when in truth he was . . . Crowe paused in the corridor.

In truth, he wasn't quite sure what he was at that moment.

Troubridge Naval Base Dolor System 066-1108

Simon Crowe sat with his feet on the coffee table, drinking excessively fizzy beer straight from the can. His other hand flicked between vid channels using the armchair's built-in control.

He'd been assigned some really rather nice quarters, largely because SolSec was currently responsible for him. As a mere frigate captain he would not have merited a three-bedroom apartment in the ambassadorial section, that much was for sure. All the same, the apartment was a cell of sorts.

Crowe was free to come and go as he pleased about the station, but he could do none of the things he considered important. His ship was under repair and he could not assist. He could not even investigate recent events. He had been declined permission to contact his own officers. He was stuck in limbo and he didn't like it at all.

Something on one of the news channels caught Crowe's attention. He scrambled at the control for a moment, seeking whichever it had been. He wasn't sure whether he found the same channel or not; it didn't matter. A few seconds' frantic channel-hopping showed the same report on every station.

Bainbridge was burning.

"... accident aboard CSS *Bainbridge*," the news anchor was saying. "No further information is available at this time."

Crowe was out of his seat, hurling the beer can across the room, before he realized what he was doing. One hand operated his comm, the

other tore open the wardrobe. Trousers, shirt, boots, jacket . . . Crowe threw on his uniform, fumbled open a box on the shelf and pocketed the contents, and hobbled toward the door trying to get his other boot on whilst repeatedly calling the same numbers over and over on his comm.

There was no answer as he rushed through the corridors for the base commander's office. One arm in and one out of his jacket, shirt unbuttoned and hatless, he raced around the last corner to Commodore Finchley's quarters.

The marine guards at the door took one look at him and drew their sidearms, then holstered them as Finchley himself threw the door open. "Thought you'd be along, Crowe, and I'm sorry. No."

"But sir!" Crowe protested as he followed Finchley into his office.

"Suspended is suspended, I can't overrule SolSec or the regs. But I can use your help here."

"I—"

"Stay here and help or I'll have you escorted back to your quarters," Finchley said sharply.

"How can I help, sir?" Crowe said with an effort.

"Use my auxiliary screen, call your . . . former . . . ship and get an update."

Crowe threw himself behind a spare desk and called up a display. Instinct told him the first thing to look at was the tactical situation around the base. *Bainbridge* got his attention first, ringed as she was by orange distress-call indicators. The readout scrolling up the side of the screen said she had experienced an explosion in the drive section and had serious fires in several compartments.

Crowe frowned. Some of the areas showing damage were not connected to the drive or heavy-power systems. How had the fires spread there and not to the compartments in between? In fact, how could this happen at all? The fires were mostly in compartments vital to flying the ship, and the drive explosion had caused massive casualties among the engineering and technical crews who could restore their function.

Bainbridge was out of the fight.

Crowe blinked at that thought. What fight? There was no combat, just a jump emergence a couple of hours ago that the main computer pegged as . . . Crowe grimaced. The corvette *Lesos*. Seven other vessels were closing on the base; *Mikula* and her escorts, plus a couple of Home

Forces corvettes. Odd that they'd be so far off their unofficial station at the highport, but maybe they'd be able to assist *Bainbridge*.

The comm pinged. Crowe answered automatically, earning him a glare from Finchley's aide. The screen lit, showing of all people Lieutenant Carstairs. "Captain!" she said, surprised.

"Complicated," Crowe responded, indicating that questions could wait. "What were you going to say?"

"Sir, I'm in the docking area with a working crew. There are shuttles here and repair personnel. I know one of our ships is in trouble. Can we help?"

"Sir! Commodore Finchley! Crowe barked over his shoulder. "My first officer, former first officer, is offering to round up a rescue team from the yard crews and proceed to *Bainbridge*'s assistance."

Finchley was looking over his aide's shoulder, in increasing alarm, at whatever was on that screen. "Yes, do it," he said.

"Lieutenant Carstairs, Commodore Finchley has authorized your mission. You are to assemble any and all technical personnel and volunteers with damage-control training, take any necessary shuttles or other transportation, and proceed aboard CSS *Bainbridge* to offer assistance. I will inform her commander that you are en route."

Crowe did not wait for acknowledgement, but pulled up the priority channel for *Bainbridge*. Within two seconds he found himself looking at Bob Simmonds, who was half in and half out of his crewsuit.

"*Bainbridge* Actual. Oh, Simon! The ping said it was the Commodore."

"It is. I'm in his office. Assistance is en route. My—former—first officer is assembling a damage control team to assist you. ETA thirty minutes."

"Acknowledged, *Bainbridge* . . ."

"*Bob!*" Crowe said urgently. "Tell me what happened. All of it. It's important."

Simmonds paused for a moment, clearly trying to decide whether to cut the connection and get back to saving his ship. "We had no warning. Some kind of drive malfunction. There was an explosion in the main drive chamber. The whole senior shift is down, and a lot of the specialists. We've got simultaneous fires all over the ship and a lot of casualties. Main fire control is out, and there's a problem with the helm."

"Shoot me the tech data. Just a raw dump."

It took three seconds for Crowe to receive the data and five more to skim it. There it was, clear as day. "You've been sabotaged, Bob," Crowe said. It was not until he spoke the words that the thought that had been forming crystallized. "We're under attack."

Finchley looked up from his aide's screen. "What did you say, Crowe?"

"We're under attack, Commodore. *Bainbridge* has been taken out of action by sabotage. Sir, you need to . . ." Crowe trailed off, then snarled, "You need to scan those extra ships in Commodore Reuten's force, sir. You need to do it now!"

Finchley cocked his head, pausing for a second, then snapped to his aide, "Do it!"

"Sir, we need to launch our fighters and gunships; we're under attack!" Crowe said again.

"Where from? Crowe, *where's the threat?*" Finchley demanded.

"I don't know for certain, but I suspect . . . dammit, I just know. It's Reuten's task force. She's been reinforced by those corvettes I fought, or some others like them. She's . . . she's going to attack the base!"

"Why would she do that?" demanded Finchley.

"Sir, the Home Guard ships in Task Force Reuten?" Finchley's aide broke in. "Their transponders are wrong. Older codes. And they're not any class in service with the Dolor Home Forces. The database thinks they're *Dulo* class vessels."

"There's your threat, Commodore!" Crowe all but shouted.

Whatever Finchley was about to say next was drowned out by the stationwide alarm. His aide silenced it as new data began pouring onto the repeater screens. Fragmentary images for the most part, short sequences showing marines and dock personnel exchanging fire with . . . other marines and dock personnel.

"Sir!" Finchley's aide said. "Gunship control area has gone silent. I had a report of gunfire in the corridors, then they went quiet. The monitors show the launch doors are locked down. We can't launch our gunships!"

"Contact the launch bays direct, find out what's going on," Finchley said. "Crowe, do something about the control room."

"On it, sir," Crowe responded, frantically running through the comms channels. Internal communications were disrupted and the

monitors offered only a partial picture, but it was not hard to figure out what was happening. He called *Stormshadow*.

It was mere seconds before *Stormshadow* replied. The bridge comms image showed Browning in the captain's chair. Crowe did not give her time to ask questions. "What's your status?" he demanded.

"Sir," Browning said automatically, though she certainly knew Crowe was suspended and thus out of the chain of command. "We're crash-starting the power plant. We'll be independent of portside power feed in about twenty minutes. Lieutenant Carstairs is en route to *Bainbridge*, Dupuy is ashore and out of contact, Roebecker is missing. We can have the ship ready for space ten minutes after independent power, but we don't have a proper crew."

"Where are the marines?" Crowe asked.

"Most of them are ashore under Lieutenant Urasnicz." Browning sounded scared, but she was keeping it together for now. "They went to secure Dupuy and the working party. Lieutenant Morwood and one squad are guarding the boarding ramp."

"Don't let anyone aboard," Crowe said. "No one, and especially not Roebecker. You may need to take command of *Stormshadow* and fight her."

Browning's eyes widened, but she nodded sharply.

"I need to talk to Urasnicz," Crowe said. "Can you set up a link?"

"Yes sir . . . done," Browning replied, and the image on the screen changed. Urasnicz and the marines were hunkered down in a docking bay, exchanging fire with what looked like a mix of Home Forces personnel and fleet marines.

"Lieutenant Urasnicz," Crowe said. "I am suspended from duty and not in the chain of command, so this is not an order. Indeed, you can be arrested for even talking to me. Be that as it may, we are going to need launch capability for the station's gunships. The control area is out of contact and possibly in enemy hands. Are you close to it?"

"Yes sir," Urasnicz said. "But there's a lot of hostiles between us and there, and we're short of ammunition. We've retrieved the shore party plus some station personnel, but we have casualties. Lieutenant Dupuy is down, sir."

"Understood. Lieutenant," Crowe shoved the information in a mental box and slammed the lid. "I can't order you to do a damn thing, but we need the gunship launch control room back under our com-

mand, and we need it fast. What you do with that information is your own business.”

“I understand, sir,” Urasnicz said, and the link flicked off.

The doors to Finchley’s office burst open, and Crowe reached for a sidearm that was not there. In the doorway were Commander Jorgensen, a submachinegun in his hand, and five SolSec troopers in body armor behind him. “Finchley! Get a general channel!” Jorgensen snapped. “Do it now!”

Finchley’s aide did it for him, and everyone froze in shock. The screen showed a split image; an office planetside, a warship’s bridge, and what looked like an up market hotel’s conference suite. Crowe knew that room and the man who stood in it; he was looking at the bridge of the Imperial liner *Catania Star*.

“Sirius has risen,” a gray-haired woman in the central, planetside, image was saying. “Dolor hereby declares its secession from the Solomani Confederation. Our Home Forces will disarm Confederation personnel in the system, who will then be repatriated if they desire it. Troubridge Naval Base now lies within Dolor territory and is the property of the Home Forces. Confederation personnel are ordered to stand down and hand over control of the base.”

“I am present on behalf of the Third Imperium,” said the captain of *Catania Star*. “The Imperium hereby offers friendship and support to the newly-independent worlds of Jardin Subsector. We recognize the sovereignty and independence of these worlds, and hope to assist in a smooth transition to full self-governance. The Imperium is here as an observer, not an aggressor. We urge restraint on all sides.”

The third figure finally spoke. “I am Admiral Janice Reuten, of the Dolor Independent Armed Forces and formerly of the Confederation Navy. My marines are already aboard Troubridge naval base and my ships will soon be in gun range. You are advised to surrender the base to me; you can make no effective defense.”

“We’ll see about that!” Finchley thundered, but there was little more to his words than defiance. With the gunships sealed in their launch bays, the station’s weaponry would not be enough to repel an attack. “Status, Crowe!” he demanded.

“Sir, the gunship bays are still locked down. We’ve got crews assembling, and portside personnel are volunteering en masse to fill out any empty berths. Station weapons are manned and ready to fire. Your

marines have managed to contain the incursion around the transfer docks, but *Vesikko* must have been carrying a lot of personnel; pressure is mounting. My own marines . . . that is, a marine force from *Stormshadow* . . . is attempting to retake the gunship launch control rooms. *Stormshadow* herself has inadequate crew but can be ready for space in minutes. No signal from *Bainbridge*.”

Finchley and Jorgenssen exchanged a long look. Finally, Jorgenssen spoke. “We have a duty to resist. If we do not, this will happen elsewhere. A good stand here may deter others from attempting a similar coup.”

“I do not need *you* to tell me that!” Finchley yelled. He might have gone on, but Crowe held up a hand.

“Sir, signal from the CSS *Lesos*. Signal reads, ‘We stand ready to defend Troubridge base. Orders please. Usual compliments and greetings.’ And sir! One of *Mikula*’s escorts is veering off. She’s signaling too.”

“Play it,” Finchley ordered.

“This is Sublieutenant Andrea Oxley, SolSec,” said the holographic image of a very young woman in a gray coverall. She had a gun in her hand. “I am political officer of the corvette CSS *Marasti*, and I have taken control of the vessel. We are loyal and remain under your command.”

Crowe’s attention was diverted to his repeater screen. It showed Lieutenant Urasnicz, looking weary and grim. “Sir,” Urasnicz said. “Regret to inform you that our attempt has failed. Gunship launch control room remains in enemy hands. We have heavy casualties and are almost out of ammunition.”

“Understood, Mister Urasnicz,” Crowe said. “Thank you for trying. I . . .” he trailed off as he realized the marine officer was not paying any attention to what he was saying.

“Marines!” Urasnicz bawled over his shoulder. “If you got any left, share ’em out! Scrounge what you can! Fix bayonets!” He turned back to the screen. “Sir. We can and damned well will take the room, but we can’t keep it long. Send us any help you can. Urasnicz out.”

“Sir!” Crowe burst out, silencing both Finchley and Jorgenssen. “My marines are attempting to storm the gunship control room at bayonet point. They need support. And I . . .”

Crowe ripped the Navy insignia from the collar of his jacket, thrusting his hand into his pocket and coming out with a different patch. “I

hold a commission in the Home Guard. Six years seniority and command experience. Commodore! There's a frigate in your docks that needs a captain!" he held up his old Home Guard lieutenant's tabs as he spoke.

Finchley nodded once and turned to Jorgenssen. "Lieutenant Crowe is volunteering for duty at a most opportune moment," he said in a deceptively light tone. "We would be well advised to accept."

"I concur," Jorgenssen rasped. "Commodore, I am not needed here either. The time for political advice is over. You know what you have to do and I do not doubt that you will do it. I will therefore take my troops and whatever other personnel I can gather and chase the traitors off your station . . . if you will accept the offer of assistance form Sol-Sec?"

"Damn right I will!" Finchley said. "Lieutenant Crowe. You are ordered to proceed aboard CSS *Stormshadow* and take command for the duration of this crisis. You are hereby seconded to the Confederation Navy on my authority and that of Commander Jorgenssen. We're going to need time to launch our boats, and your job is to buy it. By any means necessary."

"Yes sir!" Crowe snapped, heading for the door. He halted for a second as Finchley reached into his desk drawer and produced a service revolver. "It's loaded, Crowe. Now get going."

Crowe snatched the gun from his superior's hand and ran for the door.

Troubridge Naval Base Dolor System 066-1108

Crowe walked briskly through almost deserted corridors. He'd run as far as he could, then jogged, then marched breathlessly, and now struggled to manage even a rapid walk. Maybe Urasnicz had the right idea, keeping in shape as he did . . . but then naval officers were supposed to sit in a big chair and give orders, or perhaps pace deliberately about the bridge. All this rushing about was unexpected and quite disagreeable.

There were few personnel about, and those that Crowe did see rushed past with suspicious glances at one another. There was heavy fighting a couple of decks down, with men and women in the same uniform battling for control of the station. Nobody knew who to trust beyond their immediate circle of acquaintances; a disheveled officer with a torn jacket and a gun in his hand was best avoided.

Ahead was the repair dock, on the opposite side of the station to the main cargo transfer area where Finchley's marines battled to repel the traitors from *Vesikko*. Crowe grimaced as a thought struck him. He had not at any point paused to consider if Reuten had a good reason for her treachery. Was secession the best course? Was independence better than repression by SolSec and the Solomani Party?

No, it wasn't. Period.

The Confederation was imperfect in many ways and downright flawed in others, but Crowe believed in it. SolSec was a necessary evil, as today's events were proving. Perhaps the gray uniforms on the bridge of

warships were a badge of shame, an indicator that the fleet could not be trusted. And maybe it was time to start earning that trust.

Crowe slapped an override panel, which read his biometrics and granted access to the chamber ahead. Acting Lieutenant Commander Crowe, suspended from duty with the Confederation Navy, could not have got past that door until he was reinstated. But Lieutenant Crowe of the Home Forces was on the active list, and the repair bays were not off-limits to him. There was, however, another problem.

“Crowe,” rumbled Roebecker. Crowe’s former gunnery officer was halfway across the access chamber, flanked by two ratings. All of them wore naval uniforms with dark blue armbands, presumably to distinguish them from loyalists. Roebecker held a submachinegun—a SolSec-issue model—casually in his huge hands. One of the ratings was armed with a length of pipe, and the other a nasty-looking wrench.

“Sublieutenant Roebecker,” Crowe said as evenly as he could manage. “I had my suspicions.”

“I’m taking *Stormshadow*,” Roebecker said. “I’ve got men moving into the repair docks right now. She’s clamped in place and dependent on external power. Your pet SolSec goon is going to have to surrender or we’ll just switch her off.”

“There’s nothing you can do with my ship,” Crowe said, wondering if he could raise his weapon and shoot before Roebecker riddled him with bullets.

“Nothing you can do, either, yet here you are,” Roebecker said. “You just won’t die, will you, Crowe? You weaseled your way out of a court-martial into a command, Braithwaite somehow failed to kill you, and here you are, suspended from duty but still able to access the repair bays. Tell me . . . what exactly do you think you can do with that frigate?”

“I can fight traitors,” Crowe said. “You want to tell me why you’re doing this?”

“You really don’t see it, do you, Crowe . . .” Roebecker began. “I . . .”

He never got any further. Crowe ducked sideways and brought up his revolver, snapping off two rapid shots that sparked from the far bulkhead. Getting Roebecker to start talking had bought him enough time to shoot, but he’d missed. And now Roebecker’s weapon was coming up.

Crowe fired again, diving to the floor as Roebecker blasted half a magazine at him. One of the ratings started to rush forward, wrench raised high. Crowe shot him twice, hot-loaded 8mm rounds tearing right through the mutineer's torso. He flopped to the ground. The wrench clanged on the deck plate as it dropped from his fingers.

Roebecker stepped sideways to clear his line of fire as Crowe fired his last shot. He saw Roebecker twitch as the round grazed his ribs, but his submachinegun came back on target. Crowe's dive had taken him to the ground. He was dead in the water, weapon empty, with nothing left but defiance. He gathered himself to make a lunge for the wrench. There was no possible way he could get to it in time, let alone use it, but somehow dying while going for a weapon seemed better than just waiting for it all to end.

Roebecker allowed himself a final sneer as he took aim. "You just don't get it, Crowe, do you?" he said, and pulled the trigger.

The burst went wild as the second rating smashed Roebecker in the legs from behind with a length of pipe. Roebecker went down hard, helped on his way by a second blow across the kidney area. The rating scooped up the submachinegun and kicked Roebecker in the ribs as he strode past, offering Crowe his hand.

"SolSec enforcer?" Crowe asked.

"Monitor," the rating said. "I've got Roebecker. We just needed to see what he was doing, and now we know. I get the impression you're planning to fight the traitors . . . Mister, err, Crowe?"

"Lieutenant Simon Crowe," Crowe said, realizing that his insignia was in his pocket. "And yes, I need to get to my ship."

"Very well. Proceed with your mission, and I'll finish mine." The monitor turned back to Roebecker, who was trying to stand. "Sublieutenant Christian Roebecker, you are under arrest for treason." He delivered a couple more vicious kicks as he spoke, playing to a SolSec stereotype that Crowe knew only too well. To be fair, Roebecker was dangerous and the monitor had no handcuffs, so a brutal subdual was probably necessary. Crowe put it out of his mind as he hurried across the chamber.

Two corridors along, Crowe encountered a party of marines. His first instinct was to look for armbands, but instead he halted and returned their salute as Lieutenant Morwood rushed up behind her troops.

“Captain! We’ve been sent to escort you aboard. The commodore called to say you were assuming command . . .” Morwood glanced up and down the corridor as she spoke. “What’s happening?”

“No time to explain,” Crowe replied. “I’ll make my own way aboard. You have something more important to do. I need you to un-clamp *Stormshadow* by any means necessary. That includes cutting or even blasting the clamps. There are hostiles inbound, who may or may not be identifiable by a dark blue armband. I need my ship free of the clamps at any cost, do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” Morwood replied.

“As soon as you have released the clamps, you will get back aboard and prepare either for damage control or emergency gunnery operations. We will be departing dock as soon as we are able. You know what that means.”

“Yes sir,” Morwood said again. Both of them knew that launching would require opening the docking area gates and exposing the repair cradle to vacuum. Anyone outside without a suit, or with a holed suit, would perish horribly. There was a limit to how long Crowe could wait for Morwood and her troopers if they got pinned down or wounded.

“Let’s make this happen,” Crowe said, returning Morwood’s salute and hurrying off.

The repair cradle was all but empty when Crowe and the marines arrived. Morwood led her troopers away to begin freeing *Stormshadow* while Crowe rushed up the gantry leading to the frigate’s airlock. She looked to be in a terrible state, part-repaired with armor panels off and exposed conduits underneath, but she was what he had to fight with, and as the adage went, when the darkness comes you fight with what you have.

Stormshadow was what Crowe had, and she would either be enough or she would not.

Browning was waiting at the airlock with a party of armed ratings. “Permission to come aboard, sir?” Crowe asked breathlessly, saluting his political officer.

“Permission granted,” Browning replied, returning the salute.

“Lieutenant Simon Crowe, Home Forces, reporting aboard CSS *Stormshadow* on the orders of Commodore Finchley. I am ordered to relieve you, sir, and to assume command of this vessel.”

“Lieutenant Commander Alice Browning, Solomani Security, acting commanding officer of CSS *Stormshadow*. I stand relieved.”

They saluted one another, then turned and walked briskly to the bridge. “SITREP?” Crowe asked.

“Most of the crew are aboard but we’re short of officers. Carstairs is aboard *Bainbridge* leading damage control attempts, sir. Urasnicz is fighting on the station and from what I hear giving the traitors hell. Sir.”

Crowe smiled at the pride he heard in Browning’s voice. There would be—might be—time to congratulate themselves for their faith in their officers later. “Morwood is ashore and Roebecker is missing.”

“Morwood will be along presently, she’s doing a little job for me. Roebecker is in SolSec custody. So, we have most of our officers missing. Very well, you will assume the duties of executive officer and gunnery officer. Holmes will take engineering—it’s about time anyway. I’ll wear the BEO’s hat.”

“Yes sir. But . . . Lieutenant Crowe?” Browning stopped short of the bridge doors. She put her hand on her personal defense weapon. “As political officer I have to ask you . . . what are your intentions?”

Crowe smiled thinly. “I intend do what we all signed up for. I’m going to fight the enemies of the Confederation, within and without. And I’m going to give them hell.”

Browning smiled at hearing her own words come back at her. “In that case ,sir, *Stormshadow* is yours. Political Officer has no advice at this time. We all know what needs doing.”

“Then let’s do it,” Crowe said, and led the way into *Stormshadow*’s bridge.

His bridge.

CSS Stormshadow **Troubridge Naval Base** **066-1108**

Stormshadow lay in one of the naval base's four large-ship bays, lost in a cavernous area designed to take anything up to the size of a light cruiser. Other than a couple of shuttles parked at the far side of the bay, there were no other craft present.

The bay was closed off from the rest of the station by huge doors, with another set protecting the personnel inside from the hard vacuum outside. Both sets of doors were armored, but not so heavily as the main hull of the base. Docking bays were always a weak point, and a favorite target for strike craft.

A clutter of utility vehicles, maintenance robots, tools, and spares were scattered about the bay, mostly where dockside workers had dropped them when the alarms went off. Here and there figures scurried about, dwarfed by the cruiser-grade docking clamps and the structural beams that supported them. Most seemed to be just trying to get under cover, but *Stormshadow's* external pickups relayed the sound of gunfire from somewhere in the bay.

Crowe was trying to run through the pre-launch command checklists while obtaining a tactical feed from the base's battle computer and establishing contact with friendly forces on the ground and in space, all at the same time. He missed the first ready light that came on.

"Forward docking clamp indicator just went to Released," Browning said.

“Acknowledged. Engineering, are we ready for maneuver?” Crowe asked, turning his attention fully to getting his ship out into space.

“Yes sir,” replied Holmes’s voice in Crowe’s earpiece.

“Helm, neutral lift.”

“Neutral lift, aye sir,” the helmsman replied.

“Hold us there. Lieutenant Morwood?”

“Morwood here!”

“What’s the status on the aft clamp?” Crowe asked.

“Sir, we have contact with hostiles close to the clamp. I only have five men; I can’t guarantee reaching it.”

Crowe paused for a second. “If they’ve got personnel in the cradle they’ve probably also got control of the gates. Get your people inside on the double, Morwood. We’re taking the quick way out.”

Browning glanced over her shoulder at Crowe, sensing what he was about to do. “B battery is charged, sir,” she said. Actually, all three laser batteries were charged, but B was the relevant one.

“Which turrets will bear on the clamp?” Crowe asked.

“Only B4 sir.”

“Then commence firing with B4. Burn the clamp.”

“Fire on the docking clamp, aye sir.” Browning repeated the order for form’s sake, but she was already shooting.

“Helm, increase lift as soon as the marines are aboard. Then commence yawing us in place. We’ll snap the clamp off.” *Or rip a hole in our own hull*, Crowe added mentally, then went on, “*Stormshadow*. External speakers and general broadcast.”

Crowe paused a moment, then began his broadcast. “Now hear this! This is CSS *Stormshadow*. Clear the repair cradle immediately. This area will be exposed to vacuum imminently. Clear the cradle!” Crowe let *Stormshadow* start to repeat the message as he checked the status board. Morwood and her marines were back on board.

“Helm, start yawing. Break us free,” Crowe ordered. “Exec, open the launch gate.”

The external pickups relayed the deep rumbling grind of the clamp and the curiously hollow crackling-humming sound the lifters made in atmosphere. In fact, Crowe knew, the lifters were silent but their gravity field caused ionization of the air. Under the right conditions, a ship running its lifters hard might create a spectacular electrical discharge every

few seconds. It was harmless to the ship, but anyone nearby—or anything flammable—was in danger.

“Launch gate is not responding,” Browning said over the creak of the hull. “We’re being overridden from the cradle control office.”

“Understood. Q battery, load torpedoes,” Crowe ordered.

Browning gave him a sharp look but did as ordered. “Torpedoes loaded. Q2 and Q4 report hoist malfunctions; we have no reload capability until it’s repaired.”

“Acknowledged,” Crowe said. “No movement on the gate?”

“No sir.”

“Then target the launch gate with Q battery,”

“Aye sir, targeting the gate.” Three of *Stormshadow*’s missile/torpedo launchers came around atop her hull. “Sir, Q1 is malfunctioning. It won’t traverse,” Browning said.

Crowe resisted the urge to swear. “Morwood!” he barked.

“Yes sir?” came Morwood’s breathless voice.

“Get your people to Q battery. I need traverse on Q1 and the hoists working on Q2, Q4.”

“Yes sir, on it,” Morwood said. He cut off as *Stormshadow* lurched violently. Her hull made a hideous groaning, screeching sound that mixed with the scream of tortured metal as the clamp finally tore free. The helmsman caught the frigate just before she slammed into the cradle wall. The external monitors showed that *Stormshadow*’s fire had weakened the support beam but the clamp was still attached to the hull. Her violent struggles had torn it free of its mounts but they’d be taking it with them into action.

“Aft docking clamp . . . released,” said Browning, which was not, strictly speaking, accurate but conveyed what Crowe needed to know. “Cradle gate is still closed.”

“Very well. Commander Browning, clear us a path. Bracket the gate with torpedoes,” Crowe said. “Helm, as soon as the torpedoes hit you will go full astern. Ram the gates if they’re still there.”

Crowe heard the acknowledgement as Browning fired and the frigate began to accelerate violently.

The torpedoes went to full acceleration as they left the launchers, slamming into the lightly armored gate after a flight of less than a second. Lacking the velocity to punch a hole, they detonated on the surface. Most of the blast went into the gate, twisting it off its mounts at

one side. Fragments of torpedo casing whirled across the docking bay along with one of the weapons' drive section, its exhaust still flaring.

As the torpedo engine corkscrewed into the far wall of the bay and fragments rattled from *Stormshadow's* hull, she lurched across the bay and smashed stern-first into the launch gate. Crewmembers clung to their consoles and Crowe reeled across the bridge before he could grab his seat for support.

For a long second *Stormshadow* came to rest, jammed half in and half out of the launch gate. Then, just as Crowe was about to call out an order to apply yawing thrust, the pilot pre-empted him and began twisting the ship from side to side.

"*Stormshadow!* Make signal!" Crowe ordered as the ship lurched, and with a terrible grinding of metal ripped her way out of the repair yard that had become her prison.

Crowe took a deep breath, spared a glance at the damage board and decided that he'd expected to see more amber and red, and turned his attention for a second to the hail of loose objects, hull debris, tools and workbots that came tumbling out through the breached gates as the atmosphere inside blew out. He glanced away before he saw any bodies; perhaps there were none.

"Signal to all ships, in clear. My compliments and such like," Crowe said in a very cold voice. "Inform all vessels and the base that CSS *Stormshadow* is out. We are loyal, and we're here to fight."

Stormshadow's computer voice acknowledged as Crowe called up the battle plot. "Helm, take us at the traitors. Guns, you are clear to engage at discretion. Weapons free."

The frigate shed debris—her own and parts of the repair cradle—as she came about and lunged at the incoming traitor fleet. Outgunned, outnumbered, and out of options, but very much back in the fight, *Stormshadow* began her attack run.

Off Troubridge Naval Base

066-1108

“Status!” Crowe demanded.

“Sir, A, B, and X batteries are ready to fire,” Browning replied. “All turrets are functional. Point defense is online; Bridge-ventral is not responding. Q battery is partly functional. Q2 and Q4 are experiencing hoist failures but full function has been restored to Q1.”

Crowe gazed at the battle plot for a moment. It was fuzzy and tended to break up, courtesy of the powerful jamming suite aboard *Mikula*. Ship-to-ship communications were degraded too, though powerful burst transmissions were still getting through at close range. Contact with the base itself was lost; this was going to be a captain’s fight rather than a commodore’s neatly controlled action.

The main enemy force was maintaining course for the station, presumably intending to get into gun range before Finchley could launch his strike boats. A stream of missiles was already pounding out from the naval base, hoping to saturate the defenses of Reuten’s flagship.

Mikula and *Regolo* remained in tight formation, each with a corvette as close escort and screened by a mob of fighters. Those few missiles that slipped past the screen were shot down by the escorts’ guns.

Two corvettes had peeled off to engage *Lesos* and *Marasti*. Both appeared to be *Dulo* class vessels, slightly inferior to the more modern ships they fought. That was offset by the way *Marasti* was being handled. She was under the command of her political officer, not a black-hat captain, and possibly had other members of the crew out of action as well. Her movements were erratic and her gunfire was wayward.

Lesos was doing better, scoring hits on her opponent and evading the worst of the return fire. She was trying to cover *Marasti* as best she could, but the engagement could go either way. That was better than the loyalists could have hoped for not long ago.

As Crowe watched his battle plot, he realized what Reuten intended just before she did it. The remaining two corvettes broke away from their charges and swept around, charging at *Lesos* and *Marasti*, while the destroyer *Regolo* accelerated to meet *Stormshadow*. Breaking up the formation like that meant weaker missile defenses, but Reutens had gauged what the base could throw and had clearly decided her ships could take a few hits. Four corvettes would soon overwhelm two, and even an old destroyer massively outgunned *Stormshadow*.

Reutens intended to quickly win the minor actions, then concentrate her force to knock out the base defenses if her marines failed to capture the station. She could withstand missile fire from the station indefinitely, but she would need to silence the guns quickly. Her plan was surely to close in fast and saturate each battery in turn, minimizing the damage her ships took.

Crowe's analytical mind could see how it would play out, and it was obvious that Reutens had won. The firepower equation was heavily loaded in her favor, even if the base's fighters and gunships got into the fight. If they did not, then it was already over. So, the only thing to do was to buy time for the gunships. Drag out the engagement as long as possible and hope that a concentrated small-craft strike could tip the scales.

"Helm," Crowe ordered. "Come about twelve points to starboard, twelve to gold. Flank speed. Guns, engage *Regolo* with whatever missile capability we have."

Stormshadow heeled, turning away from the fight as her puny missile salvo raced toward the destroyer. The destroyer's forward point defense guns created an invisible laser net that swatted the missiles easily, but *Regolo*'s missile armament was also small. As his own missiles' signatures winked out on the battle plot, Crowe saw the flare of gas-propelled cold launches from *Regolo*'s missile bulges, then the white-hot flare of drives as the missiles began their acceleration. It was a ragged salvo, a stream rather than a coordinated saturation strike, which suggested that either *Regolo*'s gunnery systems were inferior or her missile officer was no good. Either way, it improved *Stormshadow*'s chances.

"X battery may engage the missile salvo at optimum range," Crowe said.

"Sir, X battery is still slow to charge. We can keep one turret in action, but battery fire will drain the capacitors and we'll not be able to fire a salvo for . . . too long." Browning shrugged apologetically as she spoke.

"Understood, one turret only. Point defense can handle the rest." Crowe was reasonably sure it could; the missiles were coming in from astern at a slow rate of overtake, allowing plenty of time for the point defense turrets to engage. Both aft turrets were functional.

"Signal from *Lesos*," *Stormshadow*'s computer said.

"Play it," Crowe replied wearily.

Sure enough, the tone was bitter. "*Lesos* to *Stormshadow*. We're fighting, you're running. Seem familiar?"

"Do not reply," Crowe said.

Stormshadow rocked as a missile got through, detonating close to the hull and hurling heavy fragments of its armored casing at the frigate. Had the missile achieved a direct hit, its armor would have allowed it to penetrate deep into the frigate before detonating; a fragmentation hit was much less serious. All the same, amber lights appeared on the damage board.

"Hold this course, flank speed, no evasion," Crowe said. "But be prepared to . . . Belay that! Sixteen-point battle turn *now*! Take us straight at *Regolo*! Guns! Get her attention . . . get it and hold it!"

Again *Stormshadow* heeled, this time with an alarming groan from somewhere. For an instant Crowe wondered if he might snap his ship in half, but then they were around and accelerating in the opposite direction. *Regolo* came beam-on, unmasking her full armament, and laser fire began raking the frigate's hull. Amber lights flared on the damage board, but Crowe could see their own armament scoring too. White-hot armor fragments spun away, along with what might be a point-defense mount. And there was something else, something important.

A tiny blip had appeared for a second on the emissions readout, almost too small to spot. Crowe knew what it was. As an engineering officer he had run that test many, many times. He grinned savagely at what it meant, knowing that the odds had just been evened. It was a drive systems test, and if the drive spiked that way, it meant that . . .

“Sir!” Browning burst out. “*Bainbridge* is under power and coming about. She’s launching missiles. They’re . . .” she hesitated as the gunnery computer predicted velocities. “They’re aimed either at us or *Regolo*. I can’t tell yet.”

“I can,” Crowe said. “Make signal, in clear. Signal reads: ‘Glad you’re back, Bob.’ ”

“*Bainbridge* acknowledges and sends captain’s compliments. Personal signal appended, signal reads: ‘Save some for us!’ ”

Stormshadow rocked, her drive wavering, as laser and missile fire battered her hull. But now *Regolo* was accelerating away from her, back for the protection of *Mikula*. Most of her guns were masked, though she still had enough to pound the frigate hard.

“Stay on her!” Crowe ordered needlessly. “Guns, hand off our targeting data to *Bainbridge* and see if you can’t provide some mid-course guidance to their missiles. And look at your battle plot!”

Out from behind the naval base came a wave of small craft: delta-shaped gunships with torpedoes under their wings, escorted by smaller and more agile single-seat fighters. The station’s missile launchers, which had fallen silent, now spat a concentrated salvo. The strike boats would follow it in, forcing enemy fighters to choose between missile defense or trying to stop the torpedo-armed strike boats. There was no right answer to that equation.

The news was not all good, though. *Marasti* was gone, broken up into a cloud of fragments, and now *Lesos* fought alone against three similar vessels. The fourth traitor ship had veered off, trailing wreckage. “Good fight, Lieutenant Oxley,” Crowe said softly. There was nothing else to say.

A missile plunged into *Lesos*’s hull and for a second there was nothing but static on the battle plot around her position. Then she came out of the blast zone, wounded but firing. A great rent down her port side vented air, flame, and debris into space. Her captain might still be game for a fight, but *Lesos* was in desperate trouble.

“Helm, take us to the assistance of *Lesos*,” Crowe ordered. “Guns, continue to engage *Regolo* until we reach optimum firing range for the enemy corvettes.”

Regolo was slewing now, turning to unmask her whole armament for a salvo, then turning away to accelerate toward *Mikula*. The cruiser was surrounded by a horde of strike boats, torpedoes flashing on her hull,

but she was knocking them down at an alarming rate. Her fighters twisted in and out of the attack formations, trying to get past the loyalist fighters to attack the torpedo boats before they began their launch runs.

Stormshadow reeled again, heavily hit. “Penetrating *and* proximity missile hits along the main hull! Laser hits forward!” Browning said. “Bridge-ventral point defense turret is gone. A battery is heavily hit. We’ve lost A3 and A4 for sure, and A1 is only partially responding. B3 is offline.”

“Q battery! Load torpedoes!” Crowe ordered.

Seconds passed, then Browning replied. “Q1 and Q3 loaded. Ready to fire.”

“Launch!”

The range was short, and *Regolo*’s point defenses were saturated by missiles from *Bainbridge*. The torpedo salvo rippled unevenly from its launchers, but Crowe’s battle plot was suddenly whited out as his ship heeled beneath him. As it cleared, he saw a cloud of debris scattering aft. Impacts rang on the forward hull.

“Torpedo detonation!” Browning shouted, finally losing her cool. “One blew up on the mounts . . . Q1 is gone, and the board is black in the rest of the battery!”

“What are we hitting?” Crowe demanded.

“It’s debris from *Regolo*, sir! Look at her!” Browning was calming down, training reasserting itself, but her tone was excited.

They’d hurt the destroyer, Crowe could see. She had a couple of big rents amidships—a mist of blazing fuel streamed from one of them. There were fires around where one of her laser batteries had been, and debris breaking away from around them. She was firing at *Bainbridge*, ignoring *Stormshadow* as if her captain thought he had taken missile hits from the bigger ship.

As Crowe watched, jets of flame spurted from *Regolo*’s portside missile bulge. The plot registered a minor explosion, followed by a scattering of large fragments. Crowe smiled savagely. *Regolo* had just dumped her magazine to avoid an explosion. *Stormshadow*’s torpedo attack had cost the enemy destroyer half her missile armament, and by the look of it she still had internal fires that might spread to the other bulge.

“Lieutenant Morwood? Morwood?” Crowe said into his headset. There was no response; the board was black in Q battery, which sug-

gested things were very bad indeed. "Doctor Connelly!" Crowe snapped, paging his sole remaining officer.

"Connelly here," came the instant reply. "I have multiple casualties and—"

"Connelly!" Crowe barked. "Send someone to Q battery. Anyone. I need a status report."

"That's not my responsibility, Captain. I have—"

"Doctor, I need this. Just make it happen."

"Aye sir, I'll find a volunteer." The surgeon's tone was abstracted but businesslike. He might resent naval service but like everyone else aboard he understood the basic rule: Save The Ship.

Bainbridge was maneuvering clumsily and at much less than her full acceleration, suggesting that her capabilities had only been partially restored. All the same, she was gaining on *Regolo*, her smaller armament offset by better fire control. The two destroyers were fully focused on one another now, *Stormshadow* forgotten as a mere nuisance where *Bainbridge* was a lethal threat.

"Approaching gun range for the corvettes," Browning reported.

"Switch your fire to target designated corvette three," Crowe said. Three was a *Dulo*, and *Stormshadow*'s instruments indicated that she already had heavy damage. Could she be . . . ?

One of the other traitor corvettes suddenly vanished. Crowe heard people cheering, himself among them. *Lesos* poured fire into the second corvette, hurting her badly, but she'd lost half her armament and was holed in several places.

"Sir, I have a torpedo on Q3's ramp according to the last readout," Browning said suddenly. "I may be able to launch."

"Find out," Crowe said harshly.

Browning knew what he meant, and even as *Lesos* put another salvo into her opponent, *Stormshadow*'s torpedo raced across the narrowing gap between the two ships. The corvette's small hull had no room for point-defenses and she could not evade in time. The torpedo struck home, its armored penetrator head smashing through flimsy hull armor and internal partitions. The warhead detonated deep in the corvette's vitals, flinging its own armored casing in all directions followed by blast and heat that set off the torpedo's remaining fuel in a spectacular piece of overkill. The corvette broke in two, the smaller fighting compartment spinning away as the aft section of the main hull, largely made up of fuel

tanks, burned fiercely for a few seconds then exploded in a silent infrared flare that whited out Crowe's battle plot.

Stormshadow's remaining guns spoke again, and corvette three scattered debris. Her jump grid began to glow, and her transponder code changed.

"Corvette three is striking her colors, Captain." Browning said in a strange tone.

"Is it her?" Crowe demanded.

Browning knew which ship Crowe meant. "Yes sir. ninety-nine-point odd percent match. A and B batteries—what's left of them—are overloaded. Recommend cooling the capacitors before recharging."

"X battery status?" Crowe asked.

"Ready to fire, but recharging will take around thirty minutes."

"Very well then. Take A and B offline, cool and recharge."

"X battery is locked onto target. The hostile is about to jump," Browning said.

"No she isn't," Crowe replied. "Kill her."

All four turrets of X battery fired as one, striking the corvette as she supercharged her jump grid. For a moment *Stormshadow's* instruments whited out, and when they came back up there was no sign of her opponent.

Off Troubridge Naval Base

066-1108

Crowe skimmed over the data from the battle plot and the damage board. Damage all over the ship, casualties everywhere. Drives degraded and fuel spilling out of holed tanks. One turret in A battery functional, three in B. X battery worked but was discharged; *Stormshadow* might be able to bring one turret into action sometime soon. Q battery; status unknown . . . which meant it was inoperable. Point defense was mostly functional; bridge-ventral was gone but it had never worked properly anyway.

Stormshadow could move and shoot, but could do neither very well. The rest of the loyalist force looked to be in similar shape. *Regolo* and *Bainbridge* were pounding one another to extinction, while *Mikula* was chewing her way through the gunship forces at the cost of multiple torpedo hits. *Lesos* . . .

“Signal from *Lesos*,” said *Stormshadow*’s computer voice. “Signal reads: ‘Thanks for the assist.’ ”

Crowe chuckled bitterly, wondering how much pride that had cost to send. According to *Stormshadow*’s instruments *Lesos* was in a terrible state, with more than half her guns out of action and internal fires raging on the accommodation deck. She, too, could move and shoot, but not well enough to make any difference to the battle.

“Make signal to *Lesos*. My compliments and such,” Crowe said, rushing out his next words before he had time to consider them and change his mind. “*Stormshadow* has some guns and we retain torpedo capability. Intend to attack *Mikula*.”

Browning unlocked her chair and spun to face Crowe. "Sir, we don't have torpedo capability! Q battery is dead."

"You and I know that, Lieutenant Commander, but the enemy does not," Crowe said formally. "We will make what looks like a torpedo run and draw the enemy's fire away from the gunships."

Browning's eyes narrowed. "Yes, sir. We can bluff them," she said. "They've seen us use torpedoes so they'll presume we intend to do so again . . . assuming Commodore Reutens is competent."

"She's a traitor, but she's not a fool," Crowe replied. "She'll have pegged us as strike-capable as soon as we fired torpedoes at *Regolo*. And as gunnery school teaches us . . ."

". . . do not allow strike craft to close," Browning agreed. "We may seem like we can deliver a more concentrated strike than any given gunship, so we'll draw the majority of fire. You are aware, of course, that *Mikula* retains very significant missile capability and we have severely impaired forward point defense?"

"Yes, but thank you for reminding me," Crowe said. Browning had to consider the possibility that the captain had forgotten how vulnerable the ship was. She was also quietly offering him a chance to back out of his plan without losing face or risking censure from a SolSec investigation into his actions. Not that it mattered; he knew what needed doing.

"Signal from *Lesos*," broke in *Stormshadow*.

"Play it," Crowe said.

"Signal reads: 'That's lunacy.' No compliments appended."

"Make signal to *Lesos*: 'Fully aware of that. Intend to attack regardless,'" Crowe said. He found himself hoping that his political officer would decide that a frigate was an important asset and not to be thrown away like this and overrule him, but Browning just nodded. What they were doing was more important than any one ship.

"Signal from *Lesos*," said *Stormshadow*.

"Play it."

"Signal reads: 'Intend to support your action. Damn you, Crowe.'"

Crowe smiled thinly. "Helm! Come about. Take us at *Mikula*. Flank speed."

Stormshadow began to accelerate hard, back toward the thinning melee around Reutens's flagship. It was seconds before the first missile launches began, a stream rather than a swarm but still too much for *Stormshadow*'s point defenses to handle.

“Helm, keep us steady,” Crowe said. “Do not evade.” *Stormshadow* didn’t need to survive long enough to launch her weapons; she had none. All she needed to do was look threatening and draw fire. That was working; the frigate was taking laser hits now, as proximity missile bursts raked her hull.

“In fast, strike hard . . .” Crowe said.

“Out is optional,” Browning finished the strike forces’ unofficial motto. As political officer she was supposed to suppress that sort of talk, but it really did not matter at that point. Then she jabbed a finger at the battle plot. “Sir!”

“I see it,” Crowe replied. *Lesos* was overtaking *Stormshadow*, adding her remaining armament to the frigate’s defense. She was saving nothing for herself, seeking only to protect her comrade long enough to make her strike. *Lesos*’s captain did not know the gesture was empty; he was giving his all as Crowe had hoped. And *Mikula* was buying the bluff. She turned every available gun on the two ships charging in from her aft quarter, allowing the gunship force a chance to reform for a new strike.

Crowe finally gave in to the urge to get out of his seat, pacing across the bridge to stand behind Browning’s chair. He walked right through his battle plot, but there was nothing to see really—just a shrinking range indication and a curious gap in the missile stream.

Mikula had ceased firing missiles for a moment, readying a concentrated salvo. The plot showed she had discharged all her remaining launchers at once, and Crowe knew it was all over. He’d done everything he could, drawn fire and given the gunships a fighting chance. If Carstairs were aboard he could perhaps initiate an emergency jump, but even that slim chance was denied. All that remained to do was maintain the bluff as long as possible.

Crowe put his hand on Browning’s shoulder and gave her a faint smile as she glanced up at him. “Captain requests permission to attack,” he said.

Browning had re-routed gunnery control to her own console, but it was still the political officer’s station and retained its normal functions. She nodded slowly before formally responding, “Political officer grants permission to attack, and condones the actions of the captain.” Then she flipped the cover off a rarely used control and slapped it hard.

“Log dump in progress . . . complete. Updates running,” Browning said. *Stormshadow*’s logs had just been transmitted to every vessel in

range—which in this case included the traitors aboard *Mikula*. Updates would stream out until she was destroyed, creating an indelible record of her final action. The galaxy would know that CSS *Stormshadow* and her crew went to their end In the Navy Way, resolute and faithful to the last.

. . .and of course the crew of *Mikula* would know that *Stormshadow* was coming at them with no regard to survival.

The Confederation Navy's battle anthem crashed out over *Stormshadow*'s speakers, making Crowe smile faintly. It was a good piece of theater, and if it was enough to convince *Mikula* that they were still a threat then someone else might strike the killing blow.

The bridge doors slid open, revealing Thomas Connelly. The ship's surgeon wore a bloodstained theater gown rather than a crewsuit. To Crowe's knowledge he had never been on the bridge before. "Captain!" Connelly burst out. "A marine casualty came in from Q battery. Walked in, despite . . . anyway, he made me come tell you because there's absolutely nobody else available . . ."

"Tell me what?" Crowe demanded.

"He said to tell you . . . Q battery is loaded and ready to fire!"

Crowe and Browning shared a look. Had the bluff just become reality? The damage board was still dead, but in theory the weapons might respond to commands from the bridge. With the hoists out of action, Morwood and her marines must have climbed into the shafts and manhandled torpedoes into place by brute force. Doing that with one torpedo was a superhuman feat in the narrow hoist passages. To load a full battery . . .

Incredible.

Crowe glanced at Browning's battle plot. Pity it was for naught; the incoming missile salvo would gut *Stormshadow* before she reached firing range. But what a brave try! Crowe could feel nothing but pride in his crew as the salvo approached.

Lesos lunged forward under emergency power, shaving right under *Stormshadow*'s ragged and wreckage strewn fore section. She turned beam-on, placing herself between the frigate and the salvo, her remaining guns thinning the missiles in a virtuoso display of defensive shooting. Her point defenses got more of them, and her hull took the rest.

Stormshadow reeled as debris smacked into her hull. A few "leakers" came around *Lesos*'s shielding hull and detonated alongside the frigate,

shrapnel tearing through her hull. Air shrieked out as the bridge was holed, and Crowe slammed his helmet faceplate down instinctively.

Doctor Connelly had no suit. He gazed around, panicked, as the air pressure began to drop. Crowe ran toward the surgeon, shoulder-charging him back through the bridge doors as they automatically closed. If the corridor outside had air, Connelly would live. If not . . .

Crowe turned back to the battle plot. Laser fire from *Mikula* raked *Stormshadow*'s hull, but the bigger ship barely noticed her puny reply. The damage board was red and black, then flickering, and finally just black. The bridge lights dimmed and the drive wavered. The helmsman was shouting something about control loss.

Crowe grabbed his seat arm and clung on as *Stormshadow* began to tumble. Loose objects and fragments of hull plate crashed about as the ship turned end for end . . . and then suddenly righted herself and began driving once more at the enemy.

"I have no control!" the pilot shouted. "Someone's using the emergency conn in engineering!"

Crowe scrambled into his seat, fastening the straps and promising himself not to wander about the bridge in any future combat. "Captain!" Browning's voice said in his helmet. "All beam weapons are down, no response from any turret. Aft point defense is functional."

"Torpedo status?"

"Unknown."

"Assume they're live. Prepare to fire."

"Aye sir," Browning replied. "Ready."

Crowe took a last look at the battle plot. *Bainbridge* was limping toward *Mikula*, whose hull was lit by the flashes of gunship-launched torpedoes. *Lesos* was maneuvering and signaling weakly; an all-bands distress call. *Regolo* was dead in space, burning fiercely through rents in her hull. As Crowe watched, her jump grid flared and she vanished in a blue-white flare of gravitic distortion. Crowe shuddered to think what would happen aboard that ship, entering jump space crippled and on fire. Better, perhaps, to stay and die fighting . . .

"Captain! I have helm control!" the pilot called out.

"Maintain torpedo run," Crowe ordered.

The range dropped, and *Stormshadow* shuddered under laser fire. With the damage board totally black there was no way to tell how much

they were suffering. Not that it mattered; there was just one thing to do now . . .

“Lieutenant Commander Browning,” said Crowe. “You may fire when ready.”

Stormshadow’s last torpedo lanced out though the maelstrom of fighters and gunships, striking at the intersection of *Mikula*’s main and flight hulls. A rent opened, scattering bodies and wreckage. Half a fighter spun out of the hole, then the fires went out. *Mikula*’s captain had sealed off the flight section and vented it to space, killing everyone inside who was not already suited up and spilling many who were into space, but probably saving his ship in the process.

Probably winning the battle too, Crowe realized. *Mikula* was maneuvering very gingerly but still retained much of her fighting power. The only serious warship left on the loyalist side was *Bainbridge*, and she was crippled. *Lesos* was a wreck and *Stormshadow* had no weapons left. It was all over.

Unless . . .

“Pilot,” Crowe said almost conversationally. His voice sounded strange over the suit radio. “Emergency flank speed. Your target is *Mikula*. You are to ram her.”

The pilot glanced around, twisting her head in her crewsuit helmet. She started to say something but fell silent as Browning held up her right hand. In it was her Personal Defense Weapon. “Political Officer concurs,” Browning said. “You will ram the enemy flagship. Hail Terra!”

“Hail Terra,” the pilot responded automatically, glancing at Crowe who said nothing. She turned back to her station and took a death-grip on the controls.

“*Stormshadow*, make signal,” Crowe said. “In clear. Message reads, ‘Remember what you see here. Thus ever to traitors. Hail Terra!’ Send and repeat.”

It was a good epitaph, Crowe decided. He’s always hated all that propaganda-vid Hail-Terra business, like most black-hat officers, but right now a gesture was needed and there was no time to come up with any better last words.

And besides . . .

Crowe watched *Mikula* growing larger in his battle plot. He could see part of her hull through the breach in *Stormshadow*’s bridge. She was

getting huge, big enough to see detail on her hull with the naked eye, when her drives suddenly went to full emergency power.

Crowe saw it a full second before the plot began to register it: *Mikula's* flight and main hulls began to separate at the weakened join. The hole made by *Stormshadow's* torpedo was getting larger, cracks spread along *Mikula's* hull.

"*Pilotbreakoff!*" Crowe yelled. "Abort ramming attempt, full astern, emergency turn to starboard and gold! Evade! Evade! Evade!"

The pilot did not wait for confirmation from the political officer, though she hunched down as if she expected to be shot out of hand. *Stormshadow* heeled violently, her hull groaning under the strain as Crowe clung to his command chair.

Under normal circumstances, a ship's political officer sat with one hand on "the veto", a control that only allowed the ship to respond to commands once the political officer released the button. Had Browning had a hand on the veto, the turn would have begun too late.

But Browning's hand was nowhere near her veto; it was on the gunnery controls, savagely and pointlessly spraying point-defense fire at the enemy cruiser because *Stormshadow* had no other weapons left.

Stormshadow passed so close to *Mikula* that her instruments could detect no gap. Then she was past, and behind her the cruiser began to break in two. Her flight and main hulls separated under the strain of evasion, ripping a chunk out of the central hull.

"Captain!" shouted someone on *Stormshadow's* bridge. "*Mikula's* transponder! She's surrendering! She's . . ."

The bridge fell silent as *Mikula* began to break up, shedding pieces of her hull and one of her engines. Then her internal fires reached a magazine and she disintegrated in a hail of white-hot debris. By the time *Stormshadow's* battle plot was readable again, there were no more foes to fight.

The Battle of Troubridge Naval Base was over, and *Stormshadow* had survived.

Off Troubridge Naval Base 066-1108

Stormshadow was in a terrible state, but better than *Lesos*. As they limped toward Troubridge Naval Base the two ships separated, as if out of mutual distaste. *Bainbridge* was already moored to a beacon, her crew conducting their second set of emergency repairs of the day.

The crewman Crowe had sent to tour the ship and collect reports had returned with a preliminary report. It wasn't good. *Stormshadow* had heavy casualties and severe structural damage. Only one beam turret was even repairable; for the time being their only armament was point defense and manually loaded torpedoes. Morwood's exhausted marines promised to reload the mounts a second time if necessary, but Crowe doubted their bodies were up to the task even if their spirits were willing.

With *Mikula* and *Regolo* gone whatever system forces remained at Dolor seemed inclined to stay put. That was just as well, since the Confederation Navy presence in the system was down to three more-or-less wrecks, a handful of torpedo craft and the recaptured *Vesikko*. When your most potent asset is a transport ship, Crowe reasoned, you don't go seeking more combat.

As *Stormshadow* crawled back to base, Crowe managed to get an update on his personnel: Dupuy was critically injured but alive in the base hospital, Carstairs was aboard *Bainbridge* and Urasnicz was en route to *Stormshadow* with a marine damage-control team.

It was a better outcome than might have been expected. Of course, until reinforcements arrived there was the non-trivial problem that

Troubridge Naval Base now lay in hostile territory, and it was going to take some time to sort out who was a traitor and who was not.

Nice problems to have, Crowe decided. *Since we're alive to have to deal with them.*

"Signal from Troubridge Naval Base traffic control," *Stormshadow's* computer announced. "Compliments of base commander; Commodore Alexander Ulysses Finchley, Confederation Navy. Recipient of the Banner of Terra, Order of Sol with Bar, Cross, and Diamonds. Greetings and salutations to CSS *Stormshadow*, her captain and crew. We are cleared to proceed into the transfer dock, which has been converted into an emergency repair facility."

"I'm surprised they're letting us in," Crowe said irreverently. "We left a bit of a mess last time. Acknowledge the signal and offer thanks and compliments to the commodore. Inform him that we intend to be at least marginally combat-worthy within thirty-six hours."

What a thirty-six hours those are going to be, Crowe thought. It had to be done though. Dolor was in open rebellion, and a new attempt to take the station could come at any time. *Like the Samurai of old Terra said: After the battle, tighten your helmet straps! But first . . .*

"We're cleared to proceed in to dock," Crowe said. "And that requires a qualified pilot at the helm. But for preliminary maneuvers, we have discretion. It's normally quite straightforward, I'm told, but today might be more of a challenge. All the same . . . Lieutenant Commander Browning . . ."

Crowe paused for a moment as Browning turned to face him, her expression carefully neutral. Crowe nodded, affirming what she hoped.

"Commander," Crowe said. "Would you like to drive what's left of the boat?"

CONFEDERATION NEWS AGENCY
Carter Naval Base, Barsoom System: 089-1108

The Solomani Confederation Navy and Solomani Security today jointly announced a state of emergency across the Solomani Rim sector. The Sirius Rising movement, thought to be behind unrest and insurrections on a number of worlds, now controls several major fleet units and at least one base. Nine worlds, mostly in Jardin subsector, have declared independence from the Confederation.

Most of these secession attempts were thwarted by vigilant SolSec monitors and security officers, and by prompt action on the part of the fleet and its marines. Several worlds remain in open rebellion, and there are fears of a new flare-up of the Bootes Trade War.

Imperial involvement in the Sirius Rising movement has been confirmed, although this has been confined to financial support and political pressure. In the words of Commissioner Horace Pullinger, acting as spokesman for the Solomani Party, "The Imperial hordes are not about to come pouring across the border, although the fleet has been placed on high alert and patrols are being stepped up. The real problem is internal; secessionists and malcontents who weaken the fabric of our society. We must root out the traitors and stand together in this time of crisis."

Experts have discounted the suggestion that the Solomani Confederation stands on the brink of disintegration as "alarmist propaganda," but there are growing fears that internal conflict may create exactly the opportunity the Third Imperium seeks to renew its campaign of aggres-

sion against the free Solomani people. Vigilance and solidarity are more vital than ever before.

The Solomani Party has sent out this message to all worlds of the Confederation:

Let all loyal Solomani men and women stand shoulder to shoulder against the traitor and the invader. Thus shall our freedom be preserved, and our culture endure. Hail Terra!

Library Data

Court Sword: One of a number of similar weapons often referred to as “foils”, the traditional court sword is a member of the smallsword family. Featuring a long, straight blade with a sharp point but typically no cutting edge, the smallsword has a small hand guard and is relatively easy to carry. It is a standard dueling weapon, with formal rules for encounters.

The court sword is traditionally associated with the Imperial nobility within the Third Imperium and with both the Imperial and the Solomani Confederation Navies. The latter inherited many of its practices from the Imperial Navy at the time of its formation, though over time some of these have been eroded and amended.

The court sword is normally considered to be a dress item rather than a functional weapon, but is perfectly serviceable in skilled hands. There are several “systems” for its use, some of which use radically different bodies of technique due to their unusual guard or starting position.

The Solomani Confederation Navy claims an unbroken lineage in its traditions of swordsmanship all the way back to the great Terran smallsword master Domenico Angelo of the pre-starflight era. Thus the phrase “fencing as God and Angelo intended” is still used in some naval circles. It is rarely heard in the Imperium, however.

The Solomani and the Imperium: Encroachment by the First Imperium, or Vilani Imperium, upon Terran territory led to a series of interstellar wars that ultimately toppled the decaying First Imperium and replaced it with the Second Imperium, or the Rule of Man. Despite strenuous efforts, the corruption within the former First Imperium was too great and its remnants collapsed into what became known as the Long Night.

After the end of the Long Night, the region around Terra was one of the few to have retained strong trade links and a high level of interstellar traffic, and thus became a hub for the redevelopment of the region. Contact with the emergent Third Imperium led to trade and support by the worlds of the Terra region, enabling the Imperium to grow into a major interstellar power whose borders expanded out to meet those of the Terran region.

In 588, Terra and her sister worlds joined the Imperium. Such was their power that the Solomani, as the people of the Terra region became known, rapidly rose to dominate the affairs of the Imperial court. However, although the Third Imperium derived its legitimacy from a claim of being a continuation of the Second Imperium, it had apparently inherited the self-destructive tendencies of the First. Once again, Terran influence was not quite enough to prevent disaster.

This time it was not total collapse, but the Imperium did suffer many years of civil war that wrecked the economy and almost caused the breakup of the Imperium. Salvation came in the form of the Solomani Cause, an alliance of disparate groups linked by their Solomani heritage, which provided stability and economic growth in the troubled years after the Civil War.

Once the crisis was over, the Imperials turned away from Solomani influences and restored many Vilani practices dating from the collapsed First Imperium. Naturally, this placed the Imperium on a path to destruction and caused the Solomani people to rethink their support for the Imperium.

The Solomani-dominated worlds around Terra became an autonomous region within the Imperium, still supporting the Imperium despite its flaws but able to distance itself from the worst mistakes being made to coreward. This was satisfactory for a time, but questionable Imperial

practices and a habit of interfering in Solomani affairs led to the Solomani region withdrawing its support from the Imperium and charting its own path.

The Imperials accepted the situation for many decades, but eventually became jealous of the success of the Solomani. After many years of encroachment and several Imperial-engineered incidents intended to weaken the Solomani, in 940 the Imperials attempted to annex Terra and the surrounding area.

Despite issuing what amounted to a declaration of war when they announced the annexation, the Imperials proved incapable of doing anything for fifty more years, until finally in 990 they launched an unprovoked assault into Solomani space. Despite being caught by surprise, the Solomani fleets were able to stem the Imperial advance and even pushed the invaders back.

The War of Solomani Liberty raged from 990 to 1002. For the first three years, Solomani fleets repeatedly defeated superior Imperial forces and countered every thrust into Solomani territory. However, a combination of internal divisions and the vast Imperial might arrayed against the Solomani fleets meant that the balance eventually shifted.

From 993, the tide gradually turned until by 998 it was only the heroism of Solomani naval and military personnel that held back overwhelming Imperial might. The invaders finally broke through in 998, and even then they were checked several times as the Imperial steamroller bore down on Terra. It was not until 1002 that the Imperials were able to successfully invade the Solomani homeworld.

The Battle of Terra has become known as “The Storm” in numerous historical dramas. It ended with an Imperial victory and the occupation of the Solomani homeworld, but such was the price exacted from the invaders that they were unable to drive farther into Solomani space. The survival of the Solomani Confederation was bought with sacrifices made at Terra.

The Imperials remain unable to admit that they lack the means to advance further, and are resistant to Solomani overtures for an honorable peace. However, the armistice that began after the Battle of Terra has remained in place ever since, and relations with the Imperials have gradually normalized.

Today’s Solomani Confederation stands constantly in the shadow of The Storm, threatened by Imperial aggression. The Imperials have

never given any sign of willingness to abandon their aggressive intentions in Solomani space, and are openly committed to the annexation of all Solomani space, including those regions never part of any Imperium.

The Iron Gate Doctrine: The Iron Gate strategy was formulated in the 1101 Solomani Confederation Naval Review. Dedicated to improving the strength and unity of the coreward border region by creating several new naval bases (hinges) and patrol flotillas (gates) to deter and defend against low-level Imperial encroachment.

The Iron Gate Doctrine is intended to place more patrol ships in systems that are threatened by Imperial influences and associated lawlessness. In time of war, the “hinge” bases will serve as forward bases from which to defend, and strongpoints upon which the fleet can fall back in the event of losses.

The Iron Gate region is roughly ten parsecs deep, and sufficiently well patrolled that Imperial scouts and raiders cannot readily pass through to harass shipping or obtain intelligence deeper in Solomani space. The strategy has been accompanied by the creation of several new warship designs, mostly tailored to patrol work within the Iron Gate region.

Loyalty Ships: The 1101 Naval Review showed a requirement for more light and medium combatants to undertake patrol and escort work as well as dealing with raiders. The Loyalty Ships program was implemented soon afterward to address budget constraints preventing sufficient ship numbers from being deployed.

The Loyalty Ships program included new escort corvette, destroyer, and cruiser designs. All are simple-but-sure vessels intended to be crewed by personnel not quite trained to Confederation Navy standards. Member worlds were then invited to show their loyalty to the Confederation by funding the construction of a corvette, destroyer, or cruiser, or part-funding one in the case of small economies. Corporations and other groups were also invited to provide funding.

The Loyalty Ships are assigned to the Confederation Navy Reserve, serving alongside regular and Home Guard vessels. Some have been formed into task forces comprised entirely of Loyalty Ships, though

most augment local patrol squadrons or Home Guard forces defending their home systems.

Loyalty Ships all follow a standard naming convention, with the first vessel of any given class funded by a particular source having the same name and an origin identifier. Multi-source funded vessels have their own naming conventions. It is thus possible to see the loyalty of any given world or institution by the names of the ships it has provided.

For example, the first cruiser funded by the world Vantage is named Vantage Loyalty. The first funded by Home is Home Loyalty. The third funded by Home is Home Bastion, and so forth.

The Naval Duel: The Solomani Confederation Navy uses a fairly standard form of the traditional duel to settle disputes. A challenge is made by individuals (referred to as “friends”) acting on behalf of the injured party, and addressed to the friends of the offender. No contact is made between the principals of the duel until they meet to fight.

Under naval regulations, duels between personnel in the same chain of command are not permitted, and normally only officers and senior non-commissioned officers will duel. Duels are not allowed in time of war, nor between commissioned and non-commissioned officers, and SolSec officers cannot be challenged. They can issue challenges, however.

The duel is overseen by an impartial individual referred to as the president, and each principal has two seconds charged with restraining their principal if his conduct becomes unacceptable. They are armed, and may defend themselves if attacked. Seconds can also defend a downed principal, which has occasionally led to an escalation of a formal duel into a six-man brawl. Such conduct is considered reprehensible.

Suitable medical assistance must be available, and every effort is made to ensure the safety of injured principals. However, no charges can be brought against an individual who wounds, disables or even kills his opponent in a properly conducted duel. The president is required to halt the proceedings when a wound is inflicted, but unless “first blood” has been agreed beforehand, a wounded duelist is permitted to continue fighting if he wishes to do so. Surrender is considered honorable in the event that a duelist has a significant wound, though those who yield at the first scratch are considered cowardly in some circles.

Various fencing styles and systems exist within the Confederation Navy. Most are based on a fairly generic sword drill that is also effective in open combat should an officer ever have to use his sword. There are, however, a number of specialist dueling styles that focus on drawing out an engagement until an opportunity arises to deliver a surrender-worthy but non-fatal injury. These are not taught by Naval College swordmasters, but private instruction is often sought out by those with a mind to issue a challenge.

Private sword instruction is sometimes available from brother officers within the navy, but is more commonly sourced from the civilian “dueling circuit” of swordmasters who conduct exhibition bouts or teach prospective duelists for a fee.

Bootes Trade War: The Bootes Trade War was a complex “war-like situation” arising from a dispute over control of the lucrative trade routes through the Near Bootes Cluster. It pitted the powerful worlds of Thetis and Laputa against one another at times, and jointly against other rivals at others.

Characterized by shifting alliances and political fallout across the entire Solomani Sphere, the Bootes Trade War drew in elements of the Solomani Confederation Navy. Although the fleet was engaged by various factions, political wrangling prevented a formal response on the part of the Confederation and created a highly complex situation in which it was difficult for naval commanders to determine a clear course of action.

A turning point in the war was the Battle of Santorini in 1101. A lunge by Laputan forces almost succeeded in capturing key cities of the world of Santorini. Engagement of regular Confederation naval and military forces stationed in the Santorini system triggered a robust response by the Confederation military, leading to the surrender of the Laputan fleet.

The surrender agreement included a provision to allow the unengaged Laputan ground force transports to withdraw from the system, and remains controversial to this day. Preservation of these ground forces permitted Laputa to continue prosecuting the war and it has been suggested that the resulting casualties ran into the tens or even hundreds of thousands, plus the loss of a great many naval vessels.

The Battle of Santorini remains a sensitive subject in naval circles, and has caused deep divisions between those who supported the decision to allow the Laputans to withdraw and those who believe that these forces should have been forced to also surrender.

The Near Bootes region remains troubled and is heavily patrolled. Notably, its worlds have on average contributed less than half the average donation to the Loyalty Ships program, but do retain significant Home Forces.

Torpedoes and Missiles: All navies make use of missiles for long-range combat. The ability of a missile to maneuver during the terminal attack phase enables it to hit an evading craft even at very long ranges. By coasting most of the way to the general target vicinity, missiles permit an engagement at extremely long ranges. However, the need to carry sufficient fuel to reach a high transit velocity limits the size of warhead that can be carried.

Some navies, including the Solomani Confederation Navy, make use of heavy, short-range, missile-like weapons referred to as torpedoes. Torpedoes are designed to accelerate extremely fast and maneuver hard, almost the complete opposite of a missile that is designed for fuel efficiency in its transit phase.

Torpedoes are able to carry a heavier warhead and are more solidly constructed than missiles. This enables them to survive point defense fire more effectively and also to penetrate deeper into an armored target before detonating. They are not compatible with standard missile launchers, although a project aimed at creating a combined missile/torpedo launcher system is currently under testing.

Torpedoes are short-range weapons and are normally used by vessels designed for the strike role. Strike vessels are generally equipped with a powerful armament for their size, relying on speed and evasion to get close enough for a killing salvo. Handicapped in a long-range duel, such vessels can overwhelm a major warship if they can get close enough.

The traditions of the Solomani Confederation Navy strike forces go back to the desperate defense of Terra during the interstellar wars, and strike forces are still handled with the same level of aggression and fighting spirit. The official motto of the strike forces is: *In Fast, Strike Hard*,

but most personnel use the unofficial version, which appends the phrase *Out is Optional* on the end.

Use of this motto is discouraged by Solomani Security and the Office of Morale and Psychological Warfare. It is, however, in almost universal use aboard strike boats, corvettes, and destroyers armed with torpedoes, and has recently become prevalent among battle cruiser crews.

About the Author

Martin J Dougherty has published dozens of books on subjects as diverse as self-defense, military history and space travel in addition to his work for Traveller and other game systems. He teaches the smallsword and military saber as part of the Society for the Study of Swordsmanship and is excessively fond of single-malt scotch whisky.

An Excerpt from
TRAVELLER
Fate of the Kinunir

Robert E. Vardeman

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 wardrobe to the bridge. He dodged several of his command deck crew along the way as they scrambled to general quarters, then agilely spun around 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. And the habit he'd acquired in childhood, of writing first with an old-fashioned pen into a paper notebook, wasn't helping this time.

Laurel Franks glanced over her shoulder. The panicked expression on her face turned Telson colder than the vacuum outside their hull.

"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 that could undermine Franks's standing with the crew. But he didn't care. Assuring Rolland he didn't need constant supervision from the XO mattered more than pleasing Franks.

Telson had objected to Commander Franks replacing his former XO, but the woman had powerful friends at the Imperial Navy base on Regina. The captain had yet to find out who her patron was, 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 had been shut down and *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 wavelength 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.

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.

Available Now

E-book ISBN 978-1-55878-001-9

Print Edition ISBN 978-1-55878-029-3

An Excerpt from
TRAVELLER
Priority: Hyperion

Erik Scott de Bie

Tenalphi

Smoke rose from more than one building out the forward observation windows of the *Hyperion*, painting the pre-dawn sky. Commander Leda Kargatane didn't even need the shortwave to tell trouble was coming, and the trader had overstayed its welcome. She'd always had an instinct for these things.

Kargatane bunched up her fist and drummed it on the console. "He's late."

"You expected different?" At the helm, Mysisann Moon frowned in disgust, then moderated her tone when Kargatane looked at her sharply. "sir?"

"Indeed." The *Hyperion* tech officer Norris Nolley configured the pre-takeoff sequence. "One might remind Commander Kargatane to consider it fortunate Captain Benedict answered the hail at all. Local time on this planet is only 0400 hours."

"Probably just finishing up at the local whorehouse," Missy said under her breath.

“Enough, Lieutenant.” Kargatane rounded on the pilot, who merely shrugged.

Back at the computer, Barton and Dogson chuckled, while Norris himself looked perplexed. He asked for clarification, indicating that he was asking a question in his usual way. “Query: What amuses?”

“Pay it no mind, Norris,” Kargatane said.

As much as the man knew about interstellar anatomies—he served as the *Hyperion*’s medic at need—he could be remarkably dense about their use.

The levity was a relief. Kargatane knew they were all more than a little worried, since the captain had taken Ensign Westing with him. The captain could handle himself fine in a scrape, but Westing was just a boy, and if anything happened to him . . . Well, best not to dwell on it.

Kargatane couldn’t dispute Missy’s speculation either, knowing the captain’s proclivities. The man tossed himself at everything that moved and was at least vaguely humanoid. He seemed willing to compromise on one or both of these requirements if alcohol was involved. She found it distasteful, but he was a good captain other than this small vice—and all the others.

She really deserved a raise one of these days.

“Come on,” she said under her breath. “Finish up.”

Kargatane turned up the battered shortwave radio the crew of the *Hyperion* kept on the bridge. “Incident at the governor’s mansion . . . reports still coming in,” it buzzed. “Imperial peacekeepers saying single assassin but releasing no further details. There are widespread reports of rioting in the streets, and the government is moving to shut down all transit from the planet—wait.” There was a loud thump over the waves and loud, assertive voices. “You can’t come in here! You can’t—*huhh!*” Then the transmission became static.

Wonderful. Now the Imperium was cracking down on the news outlets. It must really be bad.

Kargatane looked over her shoulder. “Barton, Dogson,” she said. “Report to the turrets. If they try to ground us, we may have to blast our way out of here. Where’s Jetta?”

“Gunnery Chief Douglass reports the forward turret is primed and in working order,” Norris said.

Kargatane nodded. Jetta lived in that turret sometimes. “Tell her to stand by.”

“If Commander Kargatane pleases,” Norris said. “One might remind her that if the *Hyperion* charges her guns . . .”

“Then we’ll definitely have to use them,” Kargatane said. “No harm in being prepared, though.”

She cast a look at Missy, who looked even more irked than usual to be out of her bunk before the 0600 muster. At that moment, the pilot looked like a woman who wanted a firefight.

“Commander Kargatane should know that the proximity sensors detect movement,” Norris said.

“About damn time,” Kargatane said under her breath. “On screen.”

The display crackled into fuzzy blue life, the sensors having shifted to low-light pickup. Sure enough, three forms huddled against the early morning chill stood outside the ship, signaling for the access ramp. The lead figure held up a hand and offered the pre-arranged series of signals to show that he was a friend, not a would-be intruder. The second figure shivered uncontrollably while the third, a young woman by her shape, glanced nervously over her shoulder.

“Does Commander Kargatane wish this one to lower the access ramp?” Norris asked.

Kargatane considered leaving the captain out in the cold, but it wouldn’t be fair to the others with him. “Give me thirty seconds,” she said.

She headed aft and down from the bridge and made it to the catwalk overlooking the cargo hold just as the ramp lowered. “Ha ha!” a loud voice bellowed. “Permission to come aboard?”

Yes, it was him.

Captain Tiberius Benedict—T.B. to his crew—was larger than life. His rugged good looks and easy smile had managed to charm his way thus far through a life filled with much love and little competence. He even had a little goatee that he claimed (particularly when Kargatane asked him not to) his various lovers liked to caress at intimate moments. Something Kargatane did not like to consider. He strode onto the ship with two people behind him hidden in heavy coats to keep off the rain.

“Well?” T.B. threw his arms wide and called up to her. “Am I a genius, or am I a genius?”

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Kargatane said. "All I see is a half empty cargo hold."

"Tenalphi wasn't good to us financially, it's true," said T.B. "But who can deny that the shore leave was good for the body and spirit?" He stretched.

"I wouldn't know, sir, you left me in charge on the bridge."

"Quite right, quite right." T.B. smiled that insufferable smile. "All part of my master plan, you see. I had to make sure at least one of us kept us honest. And who better for the job than humorless Leda Kargatane?"

The commander did not appreciate the joke. She strode down the steps into the cargo bay, arms crossed. "The city is in a panic," Kargatane said. "What business could have been so important you'd risk a beating from Imperial troops or subject your entire ship to lockdown?"

T.B. grinned. "Making someone a man, of course!" He swatted one of his companions on the back, which put the boy to one knee, coughing. "You should have seen him. Fortitude to make the *Hyperion* proud. And stamina—*whew!*"

His hood jarred loose and Kargatane recognized the drawn features. "Ensign Westing."

"Reporting for duty, sir." Westing coughed and clutched at his stomach.

The kid looked exhausted. Kargatane had a soft spot for the boy, owing to his late mother, as did most of the crew. Her frown deepened. "Ensign, you are relieved of duty until morning. Go to your quarters and wait for Norris. He'll take a look at you."

"Tosh, tosh." T.B. waved his hand to supplement the dismissive phrase from his obscure homeworld. Sometimes, Kargatane could swear he made those up. "He'll be fine for duty. Just needs a little fluid in him. Used it all up on the hired hands. Or was it another part of them?"

Westing covered his mouth as though he would be violently ill, and hurried past Kargatane in the direction of his bunk. Kargatane glared at T.B., who smiled ingratiatingly.

"I can understand wanting to stare at me for a while longer," the captain said. "But we have a jump to make. I trust all is ready?"

"The *Hyperion* will launch at your command, Captain," she said. "Preferably immediately, before the port authority cancels our departure clearance."

“Immediately it is, then.” His whimsical attitude turned serious—for as much as Kargatane disparaged his carefree attitude, when the time came for action, he proved his worth every time. “Guns at the ready? All present and accounted for?”

Kargatane nodded. “Including your passengers, confined to quarters until I can interview them. All four of them.”

“Five.” He raised his hand to indicate his second companion, the woman. She was pretty, blonde, and light blue, if one liked that sort of thing. “This is Trill, a former employee of the Madam Two-Swords escort service. She’ll be riding to Zaibon with us. Personal arrangement. You’ll get to interview her, just like the others. Only on a schedule.”

“Much pleasure,” she said in the way of a native of Tenalphi, and kissed Kargatane’s hand. “I look forward to our interview, lovely one.” Then she headed up the steps after Ensign Westing.

“Likewise,” Kargatane whispered after her. Mentally, Kargatane added Trill to the list of reasons to regret that T.B. hadn’t granted her shore leave. “The *Hyperion*’s already at capacity as it is, sir. Unless you have some other plan for Trill’s accommodations during the trip?”

“I’m sure some great idea will arise,” T.B. said.

“I’m sure.”

It was a game they played virtually every time the *Hyperion* made berth. Inevitably, T.B. would win the heart or at least body of some local prince or princess, or the governor’s only child, or in some cases a gold-hearted Imperial officer who only wanted to experience real love. And inevitably, said paramour would stow away aboard the *Hyperion*, marking them for the wrath of one governmental body or other. And the whole mess would fall to Kargatane, as first officer, to clean up.

At least this one seemed relatively normal. Kargatane hoped she wasn’t a mobster or an Imperial assassin, like the one everyone seemed to be looking for.

“You’ll get to interview her, don’t worry,” T.B. said. “I’m not going to keep her all to myself. *Ahem*.” He eyed her pointedly. “You want to maybe join—”

“No, sir,” she said. “Again.”

“Durn durn,” he said. “Well, had to try. Carry on, Commander.”

Kargatane sighed. “Captain.”

He headed up the ramp, and Kargatane was about to follow him when she felt tingling static in her head and the skin stretched tight at

the back of her neck. She couldn't credit the familiar feeling, but it always seemed to happen when abrupt violence was on its way. With the honed instincts of a trained soldier, she immediately took cover behind one of the hydraulic lifters. She'd left her carbine in her quarters, so she drew her sidearm instead and prayed she wouldn't need to use it.

Half a dozen Imperial Marines flooded into the hangar bay. They were well provisioned—with heavy machine guns and ablative body armor—against Kargatane and her six-round pistol. They leveled their guns at her and shouted, though she couldn't make out their words over the *Hyperion's* warming engines.

Their commanding officer, however, really drew Kargatane's attention. The statuesque woman wore a fully articulated suit of battle dress, its servos whirring slightly as she strode forward with the easy grace of a hunting wolf. She wore the insignia of a captain. Kargatane could make out her dark skin and a strong chiseled nose through the red faceplate of her helmet.

"Attention, Free Trader *Hyperion*," she said, her voice amplified. "In the name of the invincible Imperium, you are instructed to abort your launch, stand down, and submit to boarding and search."

The ship gave a lurch, and Kargatane heard the engines finish spooling up. "Unlikely, Captain," she said, though there was no way the woman could have heard.

The armored captain waved to her men, who hurriedly opened up a massive case that produced a portable laser cannon they started hooking to a tripod mount. Damn. That could put a hole in the *Hyperion* and cut their departure short. If she ordered Barton and Dogson to fire the ship's guns, the Marines would have to chase them. Nor did she want to kill anyone she didn't have to. That part of her life was done now.

She looked through the steam flowing down from the engines. An idea occurred to her.

Kargatane leveled her pistol away from the Marines and at the mostly empty fuel tanks. She took her time and lined up her shot, then squeezed the trigger.

Her bullet put a hole in the fuel cell with a *plink*. It didn't explode, but then it didn't need to. The hangar sensors detected explosive gas and immediately started blaring a warning klaxon. Then the emergency sprinklers came on, filling the room with rain and steam where it hit the power plant's heat exchangers.

The water shorted out their laser cannon, making the weapon nothing but an oversized paperweight. The Marines waved their guns around wildly, looking for the threat, but the captain saw through the distraction. She just stood there, water dripping off her helmet, and looked Kargatane right in the eye. Was she smiling?

Kargatane rode the ramp back up into the *Hyperion*.

[: :]

After checking in on the bridge, Tiberius Benedict retired to his sumptuous quarters and busied himself dimming the lights. He set his favorite mood music playing—a soft piece from the lone planet in the distant Sagittarian subsector. T.B. brewed two cups of tea, then stretched and eased himself into his plush armchair, which immediately molded itself around his body and warmed to soothe his aching muscles. The chair had cost a small fortune on Persephone, but it'd been worth every credit. Kargatane had questioned the choice, of course, but then, that was what he paid her for.

Leda Kargatane was many things: former military, a capable commander, and a damn effective administrator. Also, she seemed completely immune to his charms. Even now, he couldn't decide if he'd taken her as first mate because he wanted to sleep with her, or because it intrigued him to be around a woman he couldn't sleep with. It was certainly a novel experience for him.

By contrast, the captain himself had never served in anyone's military or even worked more than a few hours in his life. The idle son of a wealthy merchant on a core world, he'd taken to sailing the stars because it spoke to him. His was a traveler's soul, driven by wanderlust to see as much of the universe as he could—and enjoy its various delights. Such as—

The red indicator light above his door flickered and a low note chimed. Right on time.

"Come in," he said.

The light changed from red to green and the door slid open. Trill stepped through, the soft lighting picking up the blue sheen of her skin. She wore her thick black coat, still damp from the rain, and her makeup

was slightly smeared. Exactly the way T.B. liked it. She said nothing, only stared at him with furious intensity.

“Wail well,” he said. “That coat looks fine on you, but it’d look finer on my floor.”

Slowly, Trill opened her coat to reveal scanty red lingerie that set off her skin extremely well. Without taking her eyes from him, she revealed one sharp blue shoulder, then paused. She stared at him, unmoving, a slight frown on her lips.

This reaction was not unknown, but T.B. still found it a little odd. He usually didn’t evoke quite this reaction in the men or women he entertained. “Wail well?” he said. “What’s going—*nnrrrk*.”

A sharp pressure built in his head, almost like static but without the sound. His thoughts blurred, melting into blobs of nothing, and then a crushing headache hit him.

“What—?” He felt at his nose, and his fingers came away bloody.

Trill was still staring at him. Then she smiled.

The headache hit T.B. again, ten times harder. He couldn’t speak—couldn’t think. He reached for his sidearm, but his fingers could only spasm and grip the arm of his chair. He tried to get up and succeeded only in collapsing to the floor. There he lay, shuddering and staring up at Trill, able to vocalize nothing beyond “*Nnnrrrh*.”

Trill’s smile widened as she knelt over T.B., and the captain briefly wondered if this was some sort of erotic game. Not one that he liked, but a game.

Then she coughed, and coughed again, and wretched as though vomiting. Definitely not a game he liked.

Trill’s face swelled, and her neck tightened with the strain. Her whole body stretched taut, and she retched over and over, trying to vomit. Red lines of blood shot through her eyes, and she looked terrified. Then her face split open, and *it* emerged.

T.B. couldn’t even scream.

Available Now

E-book ISBN 978-1-55878-015-6

Print Edition ISBN 978-1-55878-020-0
